

## **Embodying health: Physical Education teachers' work as biocitizens in a performative health culture**

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### **Background**

In the current climate of health surveillance, both governmental regulation and a focus on individual responsibility for risk are prevalent in school contexts within western countries such as the USA and UK (Gard & Kirk, 2007; Halse, 2009; Rich & Evans, 2009b; Wright & Harwood, 2009). Whilst various authors have considered the consequences of this health surveillance on the lives and bodies of young people (Azzarito, 2007; Evans, Rich, Davies & Allwood, 2008; Wright & Burrows, 2004) there is limited research focusing on the importance of teachers in receiving these policies, the health messages that they communicate to students and the ways in which they embody these messages in their own lives (Rich & Evans, 2009b). This research attempted to bridge this gap by exploring how physical education teachers' work is an integral part of the processes of health surveillance.

Physical education is a particularly relevant context for the transmission and surveillance of health messages because the topic of study is the human body and health, teachers work with and on students bodies to create the conditions for a healthy, active lifestyle, and teachers use their own 'healthy' body as a tool of their work (Webb, Quennerstedt & Öhman, 2008). Physical education can thus be seen as an important location through which health and healthy bodies are constructed and surveilled (Azzarito, 2007; Evans et al., 2008; Gard, 2004; Webb et al., 2008; Wright & Burrows, 2004). Physical education teachers therefore are crucial conduits for the ebb and flow of health messages from governments, and society more broadly, into their own lives and into the lives of their students.

### **Research Questions**

The importance of physical education and the pivotal position of physical education teachers in a climate of health surveillance, leads to a series of questions about this specific schooling milieu. What are the health messages portrayed by physical education teachers in what they say, what they do and the bodies that they have? If physical education teachers should be 'role models' of good health, skilfulness and fitness, how do physical education teachers experience these expectations in terms of health messages in their own lives?

### **Methods**

This research is part of an ongoing study on physical education teachers' work, lives and careers, framed within a qualitative paradigm. The participants were eight female and eight male physical educators in seven urban high schools in California. Data were collected through teacher interviews across a four year period and field visits to the schools provided contextual data sources (Webb & Macdonald, 2007b). The data were analysed using several techniques appropriate to the qualitative research paradigm - an inductive approach using theme coding, constant comparison, and discourse analysis (Knobel, 1999; Lupton, 1992; Wright, 2000). This presentation outlines examples of the production and reproduction of health messages in and through six teachers from the wider research project on teachers' work, lives and careers.

### **Frame**

In risk society there is an increased presence of uncertainty and insecurity connected to global risks related to health and well-being. These socially constructed and perceived risks generate a range of health imperatives and associated surveillance measures, including self-surveillance (Beck, 1992,

1999; Foucault, 1980). One particular area of health risk that is receiving unprecedented attention is obesity. The panic about obesity is accompanied by a proliferation of policies geared towards measuring and defining young people's bodies and has led to increasingly widespread health surveillance measures in schools, such as policing school lunchboxes and measuring pupils weight. This has been described as a performative health culture (Rich & Evans, 2009b).

The result of health surveillance within the context described above has been described by Halse (2009) as bio-citizenship, which operates through a multi-faceted combination of both governmental regulation and a focus on individual responsibility for risk. Halse describes bio-citizenship as the imperative to not only surveil one's own health but also the health of others for the good of the society: "what counts as virtuous, moral actions are those that serve the interests of the individual and all others in any society" ...thus, for the bio-citizen, failure to control one's weight and the weight of those under your responsibility "makes one a 'bad' citizen by ignoring the interests of the common good needed for a well-ordered society" (2009, p. 51).

### **Research findings**

The results showed that in the work, lives and careers of these participants, various risk discourses were influential in their everyday experiences. The comments of these six participants, exemplify the desire for physical education teachers to "embody health" and to be the embodiment of the physicality of the subject area. They also show the complexities of different aspects of health that need to be navigated by physical education teachers, especially as they age and/or face injury.

In relation to health surveillance in risk society (Beck, 1992, 1999), we would argue that physical education could be seen as an example of the surveillance, responsibility, management and governance of health risks in contemporary society. In these processes the physical education teachers are both part of the health surveillance as well as surveilled themselves, and in this way they uphold healthism in their own embodiment and as role models of good physical education practice.

In our study the physical education teachers as healthy, virtuous role models embody health by not being overweight, old, unfit or injured. Instead, we would argue, it is about looking good, performing well and being a socially desirable person who embodies discourses of biomedicine, discourses of sport performance as well as discourses of the young, fit, beautiful body. Physical education teachers embody 'what to learn' in physical education and also 'how to look'. In this way, physical education teachers are not only at risk as an individual, but also at risk as a role model of health. Their embodiment of health reproduces the students' ideas of healthy bodies. In these ways, physical education teachers are both the embodiment of bio-citizens and part of the mechanisms of (re)producing bio-citizens.