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Katie Fitzpatrick
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What is This?

Ethno graphy

Stop playing up!: Physical education, racialization and resistance

Katie Fitzpatrick
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract
Situated in the southern suburbs of New Zealand's largest city, South Auckland is known for poverty, crime and cultural diversity. It is home to large numbers of indigenous Maori and migrant Pasifika (Pacific Island) youth. Based on a year-long critical ethnography of a multiethnic high school, this article explores the place of physical education in the lives of young people in one school. Both a source of concern and a space of hope for diverse youth, physical education holds a unique place in their lives. On the one hand, physical education is implicated with narrow body norms while on the other hand it provides a space for relationship building, play and critical resistance. This article explores the complex potential for physical education as both a key site of learning for Pasifika and Maori youth, and one also politically fraught, given its close association with racialized and gendered body discourses.

Keywords
critical ethnography, physical education, ethnicity, race, culture, Pasifika, Maori

Dan is standing in the middle of the 'turf', the outdoor space where physical education (PE) classes meet their teachers. Without speaking, he beckons the students into a circle. 'What's happening today sir?' asks Sione. Dan pauses, looks mischievous, 'what do you think we should learn about Sione?' 'Games sir, we should play games', after a pause Sione adds, hamming it up, 'and we should work on our social responsibility'. 'Come on guys', yells Sepela to some students still wandering over, 'hurry up, we want to play!'

Dan has a rugby ball, some cones and several coloured bands. With little explanation he hands the gear over, simply saying, 'this game is like soccer but with a rugby ball, you set up goals and teams'. He leaves the students to it, and sits down by the fence. The students mill around for a while, before someone asks, with a

Corresponding author:
Katie Fitzpatrick, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Email: k.fitzpatrick@auckland.ac.nz

tone of frustration, 'what are we doing?' Tracey responds by dividing the partici-pants into teams and the game begins. The egg-shaped rugby ball proves difficult to control, and the game doesn't go well. Most students persist but a few sit down or just stand at one end of the turf and watch. After several minutes Dan walks to the centre of the court and again quietly beckons the students.

'What's happening?' he asks.

'Your game sucks sir!' William laughs, then 'sorry sir, I'm not dissing [disre-specting] your idea, it's just hard to play.'

'You're right Willie, so what's going wrong?'

A conversation about leadership results in which Dan openly reflects about his style of leadership and the sparse instructions and set up.

'You acted like you didn't care about us sir', ventures Tracey; 'you just went and sat down, but you usually play.'

The group discuss the role of a leader and Dan encourages the students to reflect on the responsibility of the leader to ensure everyone is included. Various games are devised and tested throughout the subsequent PE lesson and the students reflect on those that are more or less inclusive. The atmosphere is convivial and students joke with each other, add new rules and laugh together when someone adds their own rule without telling the others. Dan laughs at Sione's antics in the game when he tries to do a fancy soccer kick and trips over his baggy pants. Sione stops short, pulls his shoulders up and puffs out his chest to look tough, he pouts, looking down his chin at Dan: 'Wha? wha? You laughin' at me' cause I'm brown?' before he dissolves into laughter. When I drop the ball in the game – I have been playing throughout – Sepela sighs loudly; William seizes the moment: 'Oh Pela, don't pick on her . . . just because she's a Palagi (white)!'

This account comes from my personal experiences with a physical education (PE) class at Kikorangi High,[1] a school in the southern suburbs of New Zealand's largest city, Auckland. I taught health and physical education at Kikorangi from 1999 to 2003 and returned there in 2007 to undertake a critical ethnographic study of students' educational experiences, and their thoughts about issues affecting their community. One of the poorest urban communities in New Zealand, South Auckland frequently attracts media attention around gang violence, poverty and crime. But it is also a dynamic and culturally rich place.

The students at Kikorangi are predominantly from two key pan-ethnic groups in New Zealand, both disproportionately located in the lowest socioeconomic eche-lons of New Zealand society – Maori (New Zealand's indigenous people[2]) and Pasifika (those migrant communities in New Zealand from various Pacific Island nations[3]). This mix of Maori and Pasifika students at Kikorangi High is rare; even in South Auckland, most schools also have significant numbers of European and/or Asian students.

The ethnographic account presented here focuses on Dan's class of 16 young people, with whom I spent over 150 hours in both health and physical education lessons[4] and on school camp. This article reports on my discussions and experi-ences with Dan and his class, and aims to explore physical education as both a key

site of learning for Pasifika and Maori youth, and one that is also fraught, given its close association with a range of narrow and racialized conceptions of the body and physicality. I examine physical education in the lives of South Auckland youth in four parts. First, I provide an overview of the critical ethnographic approach employed and a brief discussion of associated issues. South Auckland, the geographical and political context for this ethnography, impacts directly on the lives of its young inhabitants. The second part of this article, therefore, provides a brief discussion of South Auckland's sociopolitical history and introduces its significance for Maori and Pasifika youth in education. The third part analyses physical education as a space of freedom and playfulness for these young people, highlighting the subject's potential for critical analysis and resistance to gendered and racialized discourses. Part four then explores the contradictions resulting for young people when physical education is conflated with two societal norms: the privileging of thin white bodies, and the devaluing of the physical in opposition to the intellectual. I begin with a brief account of the approach used in this critical ethnography, including a discussion of how students engage physical education and its context for building relationships.

A critical ethnography: Power, process and connection

Critical ethnographic accounts of schooling have an established place within wider ethnography, beginning with Paul Willis's study of working-class boys in England (Willis, 1977) and continuing with many subsequent international studies (for example, see Fine, 1991; McLaren, 1980, 2003; Yon, 2000). Three such New Zealand studies have focused on cultural difference (Jones, 1991), social class (Thrupp, 1999) and language education (May, 1994). Defined by Thomas (1993) as 'conventional ethnography with a political purpose', critical ethnography aims to expose power relationships through in-depth and sustained involvement in a research setting. Such involvement has ethical implications, especially when cultural differences frame the research (Madison, 2005). Ethical issues in this project include the consideration of ethnicity and cultural difference, power relationships involved in teaching and research, the politics of representation, and protection of a school and community subject to hierarchical power structures in society. Although space limits preclude an in-depth exploration of all these issues, I will return to a discussion about the importance of forming trusting relationships with students.

   My interests in physical education are twofold. At Kikorangi High, more students choose physical education than any other optional subject in the senior high school. Clearly, the subject means something to them. Coupled with high student numbers, the practical and personal nature of health and physical education (explained below) allowed me to interact with and form relationships with students. Second, the PE programmes at Kikorangi are based on the critical philosophy of New Zealand's health and PE curriculum documents (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1999, 2007). The critical nature of these curricula,[5] still a rarity among

PE policy internationally, allow students the opportunity to study topics such as sport cultures and politics, racism, gender, and sexuality. As such, programmes based on these documents potentially connect with the lives of culturally diverse youth (Burrows, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2005).[6]

Forming relationships with Kikorangi students was the single most important part of my research project. Fine (1994) and Madison (2005) argue that human relationships are the key to addressing equity and building mutually respectful relationships in research settings. This approach is not only ethical, it is also more culturally appropriate for me, a Palagi (European), working with Maori and Pasifika students (Anae et al., 2001; Bishop and Glynn, 1999), and makes for better, more human, research (Tobin and Kincheloe, 2006). Dan's health and PE classes, which are the focus of this article, are interactive and he encourages critical discussion. As exemplified in the opening story, Dan's lessons are fun, playful and physically challenging. These classes helped me to form relationships with students, who included me in teams, discussions and activities from the start.

Even so, interaction with students and gaining trust were challenging because of my previous role in the school. While I had not been employed at Kikorangi for over three years, I was previously the Head of Department of Health and Physical Education, and some of the senior students still remembered me in this role. I, therefore, needed to mitigate the student–teacher power relationship and grapple with my power as a researcher. I worked hard to dismantle my 'teacher' self by dressing casually, carrying a backpack and ambling along with the class; I was often mistaken for a student. The first day I joined a health class, one girl caught my eye, beckoned and said quietly 'come and sit with us'. It was an invitation to a 'new student'. This happened frequently at the beginning because, apart from obviously being Palagi (European), I look young and could pass for a school student. I resisted the school's offer of keys and I 'hung out' with students at lunchtimes and intervals. I did, however, experience some role ambivalence. I regularly talked with friends on staff, and I soon realized what a miserable place a school is on a rainy day with nowhere for students to go except cold corridors; I escaped periodically into the staffroom to get a hot cup of coffee. Students often asked me to help them with essays and assignments, and I offered advice about university courses. While I resisted being a teacher, I was clearly not a student. When classmates asked me for a note out of class, I laughed and said I didn't have the authority. I always introduced myself as 'Katie' and resisted the title of 'Miss' (the title Kikorangi students apply to all female teachers/adults). Sione, a student from Dan's class, announced that he would call me 'Miss' anyway, as he wanted to maintain a point of difference.

The terms 'insider' and 'outsider' are often used in ethnographic work to identify the researcher's status in a community. Some ethnographers argue that the researcher needs to acquire 'insider status' in order to gain 'authentic' accounts (Hammersley, 1992; Tedlock, 2000). However, this notion suggests a degree of double agency and implies that the researcher should go undercover (like an informer) and act like a local. But all ethnography is framed by power relationships

(Jordan and Yeomans, 1995; Lather, 1986) and I preferred, therefore, to focus on building ongoing relationships, gaining trust, and forming connections (Fine et al., 2000). By forming relationships, I hoped to mitigate cultural, age and educational barriers between me and the students and, therefore, minimize the negative effects of researcher power, at least to the degree possible.

As indicated earlier, I participated in health and PE classes along with the students (not in a teaching role). I completed all set activities and participated in the practical games and physical skill development tasks. I contributed carefully to class and small group discussions (I didn't want to come across as an authority or influence students to look to me for the answers). I also participated in the off-task activities of students, such as joking around, chatting about school events, about the weekend, writing notes during class and sharing stories. Early in the year, I also attended a five-day camp with Dan and his class, at an outdoor education centre in the bush. We slept in bunkrooms, cooked together and participated in a high ropes course, an overnight hike and bushcraft activities. The relationships we built during camp were significant and greatly influenced later conversations I had with students. Those who attended camp were much more likely to confide in me and initiate conversations.

During the year, I kept a reflective journal about my experiences and observations. Wanting to avoid interviews, with their associated power differentials and interrogative nature (Fine, 1994; Oakley, 1981), I attempted to set up open, flowing research conversations, which I recorded. These conversations touched on gender, gangs, the community, health and physical education, culture, friendships, racism, among other topics. They took place in empty classrooms, away from other students or teachers (and so were confidential). I proposed topics and asked some questions to initiate discussions. Despite my efforts to challenge the hierarchy of interviews, students continued to refer to these discussions as 'interviews', to which they attributed esteem. Reflecting afterward, I sensed that they felt being 'interviewed' meant their ideas were more worthy.

The place, South Auckland, was a recurrent theme in student-led conversations. South Auckland provides the background to their lives. It is both a culturally rich and diverse place and an area associated with poverty and crime. The young people in this study frequently talked about the difference between their experiences of the community and outside representations. Given its significance in their lives, a brief sociopolitical history of South Auckland is required. The following section canvasses this history and the related positioning of Maori and Pasifika youth in New Zealand education.

Being a 'South Auckland kid': The importance of context

It is Wednesday lunchtime at Kikorangi. Sofia is talking passionately about the local community and school. Although she lives in Otara, the suburb of South Auckland where Kikorangi is situated, Sofia attended an elite girls' school in Auckland city for the first two years of high school. She transferred to

Kikorangi the previous year because she was tired of travelling into the central city each day. Despite choosing to attend the local school, she isn't sure Otara is a good place to live: 'I reckon if people were given a choice they wouldn't choose to live [here]...if they were given a way out they wouldn't choose this place'. Sofia easily passes assessments at school and readily engages in class discussions, but she'd rather be working and wishes she could leave school. She is frustrated by teachers who constantly talk about assessment for national qualifications instead of 'really teaching us'. She imitates a teacher sarcastically: 'this is worth three credits[7] and you'll go to university' before asking, 'who says everyone in our class wants to go to university, who says they even care?' I ask her if gaining credits is solely for university. She replies:

> it's about passing school and making your parents happy, otherwise I would be work-ing. If I had the choice, I'd probably be working and making money. I've had a lot of people talk to me [though], like my boss [at the cafe where she works part-time], she's so cool, she told me...about her life and how hard it was for her, but [she] got to do things [she] wanted...'cause she stayed at school and got her qualifications. As the years go on...you're going to have to be more qualified and stuff even to waitress. (individual conversation)

I ask what she wants to do when she leaves school. She shrugs and replies 'I dunno, I want to be rich, as everyone wants to, visit other countries...my sister got to ride an elephant, even her kids got to ride an elephant, and what am I riding? I'm riding the bus!'

Sofia is intensely aware of her local environment, she is frustrated that she can't start her life and leave school, travel and have money. She feels restricted in Otara and at school. Unlike most other Kikorangi students I talked to, Sofia is almost sure she'll leave Otara in the future and move somewhere else. As a geographical and social place, Otara was a recurring topic of conversa-tion among students and many expressed concern about how outsiders view the community.

The suburb of Otara is situated in the southern parts of New Zealand's biggest city, Auckland, and is known as part of South Auckland. Inhabitants of the whole city total about 1.4 million people and, like most other metropolises, Auckland's suburbs are divided along class and ethnic lines. The demographics of Otara – as with all residential areas – are inherently social, economic and political. Between 1960 and the late 1990s, successive New Zealand governments invited migrants from the Pacific Islands to work in New Zealand, particularly in the manufactur-ing/industrial plants in South Auckland. With promises of a 'better life' in a devel-oped country, but with little financial, social or language support, these communities of migrants ended up living in the dormitory suburbs of South Auckland, attracted partly by the low cost housing. The patterns of migration from the Pacific make Auckland the largest Pasifika city in the world, with over 50 percent of New Zealand Pacific Islanders now resident there. In the 1960s,

Pasifika people made up less than 1.6 percent of New Zealand's population; in 2006 this stood at 6.9 percent (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

A political shift towards the right in New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s saw a turn away from a welfare state to a more individualistic, market-driven economy. This turn precipitated higher unemployment, particularly in South Auckland. As a result of deregulation, many factories closed, with companies moving offshore, especially to Asia, in order to produce cheaper goods. In this economic environment, South Auckland developed a wider reputation in New Zealand for poverty, gang violence, drug consumption and crime. The New Zealand media still regularly portray the area as dangerous (Binning, 2006; Fisher, 2007; Loto et al., 2006; Watkin, 2003). During 2007 and 2008, South Auckland frequently appeared in news bulletins about gangs and crime. Newspaper and television reports of robberies, attacks on shop owners and street fights most often cited youth as the perpetrators (for example, see New Zealand Press Association, 2008). While attracting media attention, South Auckland is also the focus of political discussions. In the lead up to the 2008 national New Zealand election, the conservative leader of the then opposition party, John Key, made a speech about the 'underclass' in New Zealand, referring to streets, suburbs and schools where 'helplessness has become ingrained... where rungs on the ladder of opportunity have been broken' (Key, 2007). Although Key didn't single out South Auckland specifically, he discussed gangs, violence and poverty as targets of his campaign. Key has since been elected New Zealand's Prime Minister and his new conservative government is focusing on crime, promising to install 300 more police officers in South Auckland (Collins, 2008) and following up interventions against gangs (Tapaleao, 2008).

Media representations of South Auckland often assume, incorrectly, a socioeconomic and cultural homogeneity, despite demographics showing a diversity of peoples. Parts of South Auckland closer to Auckland city, such as Onehunga, have gentrified due to housing shortages and high prices in its more affluent neighbouring suburbs. As a result, some parts of South Auckland are middle-class or socioeconomically mixed. In media representations of violence and poverty, however, 'South Auckland' usually refers to the predominantly working-class suburbs of Otara, Mangere and Manurewa. Otara, where this study is situated, is, indeed, a distinct suburb, known as one of the poorest areas in South Auckland. Many of the newspaper reports which headline South Auckland go on to discuss incidents occurring in Otara, including local schools such as Kikorangi High.

Notwithstanding this ongoing negative perception, Otara also attracts cultural tourists. A weekly market draws visitors from across the city to purchase cultural goods such as hand woven mats, bags, carvings and Pacific-inspired fabrics and food. Auckland's white middle classes allegedly buy marijuana and other drugs from local 'tinny houses' (New Zealand Press Association, 2007). Wider South Auckland is also known for nurturing Pasifika and Maori artists, musicians and actors. Aspects of popular youth culture in the area, such as graffiti, hip hop and rap music, offer young people local interpretations of international cultures

(Lynch, 1998; Shute, 2004). Some South Auckland gangs have adopted the names of Los Angeles' (in)famous 'Bloods' and 'Crips'. The local youth cultures conjoin international, often American-inspired, black cultures with local Pacific forms. South Auckland artists are very familiar with the negative stereotypes of their community; Pacific-inspired plays and television programmes parody racism, poverty and other experiences of South Auckland youth.

While media reports about South Auckland place Maori and Pacific youth in relation to discourses of violence, gangs and crime, they are also reported as educational underachievers. Compared with their European and Asian middle-class contemporaries, Maori and Pacific youth achieve low school results. In 2007, only 18 percent of Maori and 20 percent of Pasifika school leavers were qualified to attend university. This compares with 40 percent of European school leavers in the same year (Stock, 2008). In fact, statistically, few students in years 12 and 13 (the final two years of high school) at Kikorangi will finish school or achieve high-level school qualifications, much less attend university (Loader and Dalgety, 2006; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2006, 2007, 2009). Indeed, many South Auckland students drop out of school before Year 12. I taught health and physical education in two different schools in South Auckland over seven years. During this time, I saw whole cohorts leave school without completing national school qualifications[8] and only a tiny minority entered university. The barriers associated with money and poverty were evident and seemed to deny even high achieving students access to the professions. Willis (1977) and others (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) have observed the strong reproductive tendencies of class structures in our societies and the role education plays in preserving stratification. Researchers in New Zealand continue to debate the causes of Maori and Pasifika student underachievement (Bishop and Berryman, 2006; Bishop and Glynn, 1999; Jones, 1991; May, 1994; Nash, 1993; Smith, 1999; Thrupp, 1999). As a body, this New Zealand research links underachievement among Maori and Pasifika youth to class, cultural differences and/or racism. Coupled with the media commentary discussed earlier, the education system often positions South Auckland youth as delinquent and 'disadvantaged'. They are underachievers and cultural 'others', migrants, and brown in 'colonial' New Zealand. Still, the youth in this study believe their parents came to New Zealand primarily to secure for them a good education. Kikorangi students regularly discuss the sacrifices made by their parents or grandparents and evince gratitude. As one Year 13 student stated during a discussion about goals: 'I want to do well at school because my parents came here [from Samoa] for a better life, I don't want to let them down.' Many students expressed a view that South Auckland and Otara are good places, places of hope.

Within this wider context then, these students often enthusiastically engaged with physical education. As we shall see, the subject presents Maori and Pasifika students with opportunities not necessarily afforded to them in other subject areas. However, it also poses some key contradictions. Before attending to the latter, the following section discusses physical education as a space of friendship, playfulness, and critical engagement for Maori and Pasifika youth.

Physical education: Friendship, play and space to move

Dan's class spill into the gym though three different doors. Many are already changing. As they walk across the gym floor they shed layers, revealing shorts and t-shirts below their uniforms. Others strip off school shirts in the middle of the floor, flex their muscles, laugh and then pull t-shirts over their heads. The atmosphere is noisy and the students are ready to play, the room is buzzing. Dan beckons students into the middle of the gym and they sit in a circle. He starts a discussion about leadership by asking: 'why are we sitting like this?' Harriet offers 'so we can all see each other'; Sione follows with, 'so we are all on the same level sir'. 'Yeah, so what difference does that make?' asks Dan, now getting up, 'how do things change when I talk to you from up here?' 'You're talking to us like you're all that and we're nothing sir, it makes you, like, not one of us.'

Led by Dan, the students proceed to discuss how teachers and leaders affect class atmosphere, even with their body language. The first activity is a game of 'crash', a simple two-team game where points are scored by placing a ball on a big crash mat at the end of the gym. Dan changes the game, adding new rules during natural pauses in the game. First, only students wearing certain coloured shirts are allowed to touch the ball, then boys and then girls. The students get angry when they're left out of play. The class ends with discussion of how some students dominate games while others are left out and how teachers' choices of activities and rules affect participation. Dan reminds his class that soon they will be teaching junior students and, as leaders, they are powerful and responsible for including everyone.

The class I describe is typical of Dan's approach to teaching. Students in his class attend physical education eight hours a week and Dan regularly draws their attention to issues of power. As a result, his classes are a key site of learning and engagement in three key areas: relationships, playfulness and space. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Relationship building

A shared understanding of South Auckland and its culture/s bonds students at Kikorangi. Deeper interpersonal relationships, however, don't automatically form without conscious and ongoing interaction. Opportunities for such interaction occur in any number of school-based activities, but physical education is an especially powerful site for relationship building. Ben, a student from Dan's class, commented repeatedly during discussions that physical education 'helps us to get to know each other . . . we didn't know anyone before, but now we're tight'. At moments like these, one of the others would usually add triumphantly, 'like undies [underwear], we're tight like undies!' Physical education academics argue that their discipline is concerned with more than learning physical skills or the scientific analysis of the moving body (anatomy, physiology, etc.). Advocates of interpersonal skills, for example, suggest that physical education provides a unique context

for learning communication and conflict resolution skills, as well as caring for others (Hellison, 2003). Team problem-solving activities, sport and games can provide a platform for students to learn assertiveness, feedback and negotiation skills and team cohesion (Siedentop et al., 2004). Dan draws on these theories of learning in his classes and the notion that, through physical activity, students can build relationships with others while challenging themselves and learning new skills (Arnold, 1979; Gillespie, 2003).

Ben and his classmates at Kikorangi High identify physical education as the reason they are so 'tight' because they feel the environment actively facilitates relationship building. Dan focuses explicitly on building relationships among class members by setting problem-solving tasks that require a group approach and by explicitly discussing relationship dynamics. Harriet told me that the willingness of students at Kikorangi to relate to others is 'part of our culture'. She went on to explain that, 'even if we don't know, or like someone, we don't want them to feel left out . . . it's not our way'. Harriet later attributed this behaviour to Maori and Pasifika values and experiences, saying that people with 'brown skin' knew what it was like to be discriminated against and, therefore, had more empathy with others. The practical and physical context of classes and camp also helped the formation of relationships. Participating in games, competitions and team challenges with the students required me to take risks by 'performing' in front of others. At the beginning of the year, I felt self-conscious and wondered if class members thought my skills poor. Dan's activities also required us to talk with others in our team, negotiate solutions to problems and plan strategies. Dan expected students to discuss, question and contribute. His approach enabled us to acknowledge others, while, for example, marking them in a game or listening to their ideas about how to solve a team problem. But such an environment in PE classes depends on teachers like Dan, who value inclusive, interactive and team-based physical education, rather than performance-based individual and highly competitive tasks. As I will discuss below, Dan brings an explicitly critical approach to his teaching and structures lessons to maximize student participation (not only for the highly physically skilled). He uses questioning techniques to highlight power and equity considerations during classes and willingly hands responsibility over to students during lessons to lead discussions, change the activities, and decide when a task has run its course.

Playfulness

Building relationships and a safe, challenging, learning environment in physical education is achieved partly by explicitly valuing playfulness. Experimentation, games without rigid structure, input from all of the class, and a lot of laughter and pastiche, are hallmarks of Dan's lessons. Lugones (1994) defines playfulness as intentional activity open to uncertainty and surprise. Playfulness is, she explains, partly 'an openness to being a fool' (p. 636). Such openness combines 'not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and

finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight' (Lugones, 1994: 636). Noting that different cultural worlds have different values and boundaries, Lugones (1994) argues that an ability to be playful is a signal of an embracing world. People exhibit playfulness when they are fully part of the society and community. Palagi (European) New Zealand does not yet fully embrace Maori and Pasifika cultural values and, therefore, these youth have less opportunity and less potential for playfulness. In short, one consequence of racism and Eurocentric cultural values is less playfulness.

A focus on the playful in physical education classes depends on the milieu created by teachers and the interactions between students and teachers. The level of competition is key: the more competitive the environment, the less likely is playfulness. Dan constantly provides comic relief for his classes; he joins in games and often 'acts out' amusing and ironic moves. He rejects the staunch male PE teacher stereotype, and the students take his lead. William, for example, is an elite rugby player with outstanding coordination, confidence and competence. He rarely plays aggressively during classes or with a serious competitiveness. This isn't to suggest that he doesn't play to win, it's just that winning is almost never the focus of classes. At the end of vigorous and energetic games, no one seems to know the score, and there's never a referee. William plays with a mischievous, rather than a competitive, attitude; he 'plays around' with the rules and extends the boundaries of games. Running with the ball, he catches people's eye, makes a face, invites them to laugh, and makes a joke about his finesse or his mistakes. He performs exaggerated, almost comic, side steps, rolls on the ground to lob a 'miracle ball' pass under his legs to a team-mate. William takes his performance seriously but it is not serious. I played often on William's team during games and observed his playfulness; his attitude and approach encouraged me and reduced my anxieties about my skill level. Although William was a far superior player, I never felt left out or embarrassed about dropping the ball or making mistakes during play. William and Ben both commented in later discussions about PE classes that 'we just wanna have fun at school, be able to play and be physical'. 'Play', in this sense, means both participation in games and playfulness. Playfulness was more important than winning, especially because it encouraged laughter and closer relationships. Playfulness is, indeed, the opposite of antagonism (Lugones, 2003).

Playing with gender

Playfulness in Dan's classes extends to exposing gendered and racialized social constructions. He regularly engages students in discussions about gender and sexuality, challenging students to think about gender stereotypes. Questions such as 'boys don't cry do they, aren't they supposed to be tough?' (in a mocking tone) and personal statements like, 'I'm not really very masculine … I've never been in a fight and I don't lift weights' are aimed at making students stop and think. Dan sometimes dresses in pink and talks about gender expectations and stereotypes, encouraging students to observe the influence of gender on participation in their classes.

The ability to play with gender, to expose the social construction of gendered behaviours and challenge them, is a direct political consequence of allowing playfulness.

Many of the girls in this class are highly physically competent and perform confidently; they play with gender also, again taking Dan's lead. They pose for photos with exaggerated pouts, plaiting their hair and attending to their appearance, and a few minutes later tackle the boys, pushing and shoving in playful ways and swearing in deep voices. They are only marginally tolerant of what they call 'prissiness'. One girl in the class, for example, wears lipstick and mascara, but the others are unsure. They view makeup as a racialized pursuit. As Malia, one of the Pasifika girls, commented, 'that's what those prissy Palagis (white girls) do'.

Dan provides the space for these students to engage with the representation of gender and sexuality in fashion magazines. He brings images, such as advertisements for beauty products, to class and encourages students to ask questions about the messages conveyed and the ultimate aims of the marketing. Invariably, the 'beautiful' people in the magazines are white and this fact does not escape the students: 'she looks nice, I wish I had pale skin like that, I'm dark, my sister is pale' or 'she looks fake, I wouldn't want to look like that, all prissy and stuck up, like those white girls'. The boys are especially critical of the magazine images, particularly the ones with white male models. I asked Sione how he felt about such pictures and he explained 'it makes [me] think of all the people in [my] tradition and . . . culture who don't look like the people in the magazines and it makes [me] feel proud to be who [I am]. . . you don't see any Samoan people in those magazines and [I'm] just like every other Samoan'.

Spaces to be

In addition to facilitating relationships and allowing space for playfulness, physical education classes are less restricted than others in the school. Spaces to escape discipline and authority are vital for students to survive at school and PE classes provide a release for many. I spent a lot of time in the gym and on the courts and turf at Kikorangi; often I saw students eagerly run to PE classes. Of course, this wasn't true for all students, and didn't happen all of the time, but the gym area seemed to possess its own aura of excitement and freedom. Ben confided in me during camp that 'sometimes I just come to school for PE'. He said this with a guilty grin because he meant both that physical education motivated him to come to school, and that some days he only attended physical education, and skipped all other classes. Dan's students talked frequently about being *let out* of the classroom, being *released* from the constraints of rooms filled with chairs and desks, with no space to move: 'we don't like sitting around . . . we like playing physical . . . it [PE] gets us through the day 'cause we don't like doing work' (William).

The opportunity to play is clearly a part of the attraction of physical education, but Ben and most of his classmates are old enough to legally leave school; they could 'play' outside of school grounds. Although affording them space, physical

education also requires written tasks, reflection, discussion and planning. Students have to complete assignments and tests, and Dan constantly questions them about the learning objectives of each lesson. The sense of freedom they experience in physical education is clearly not just related to a lack of writing or 'school work'.

Ben's comment above about attendance is especially prescient in light of the high truancy rates in South Auckland. The staff noticeboard at Kikorangi records weekly attendance rates for each year group. The patterns are unmistakeable: absences rise with age. It was not unusual during 2007 for up to 30 percent of Year 12 students to be absent at any one time. Without seeking to explain the complexity of truancy rates in a community marked by poverty, attendance must in part be attributable to school environments. How engaged students feel with lesson content and how much they feel they're actually gaining from their efforts affects their motivation to continue attending school. Critics charge contemporary schooling with being too far-removed from today's youth and out of touch with global, technological and social conditions, especially at the high school level, which some say has barely changed since the 19th century (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). Add to this a low statistical chance of success for the Maori and Pasifika students who predominate at Kikorangi, and the truancy rates should not surprise.

Dan's classes provide a reason to come to school. Students value the opportunity to play in a physical sense and also to be playful, the opportunity to form relationships, and the space to express themselves. These conditions facilitate motivation. Interestingly, demanding written tasks, assessment and planning don't dissuade students from attending physical education classes. Dan provides meaningful subject content and a playful and inclusive context. Collectively, these engage the students in his class.

Students' perceptions of physical education, however, continued to be conflated with narrow conceptions of the body and influenced by the subject's low status. In the next section, I explore the contradictions in students' perceptions of physical education with regard to body ideals in society and the attendant devaluing of the physical.

Physical education: Body ideals and devaluing the physical

Although the world of physical education, discussed above, provides spaces of freedom, opportunities for playfulness and to build relationships, it is also caught in an identity and credibility crisis. While academics and teachers attempt to give physical education a critical bent (consistent with the New Zealand curriculum, see above; see also Wright et al., 2004), the subject more often aligns with two other views of physicality and movement. The first concerns oppressive body and beauty norms privileging thinness and whiteness. This discourse positions physical education as a tool to control bodies. The second locates physical bodies in a separate and lower order beneath the 'intellectual' mind. Physical education is commonly viewed as non-academic and, therefore, ranks lowly in the hierarchy of school subjects. The conflation of physical education with these two

views has racialized effects for Maori and Pasifika youth. The next subsections explore these contradictions.

Thin white bodies: Physical education and body control

Thin white bodies are highly valued in Western societies, at least in recent historical terms.[9] Read as attractive and sexy, the slender form in particular is privileged in popular media, the fashion, fitness and beauty industries, and internalized by a wide range of groups and cultures as inherently desirable (Garrett, 2004). In addition, moral panic about the increase of fatness in Western countries, termed the 'obesity epidemic' in popular and media discourse, has created a frenzy of body awareness and policy. Health professionals and government agencies in New Zealand (like those in other Western countries) consider obesity an 'epidemic' and, therefore, a pressing national health problem. The notion that the population is getting fatter is generally accepted, as are the plethora of physical activity and nutrition-related initiatives aimed at reducing people's weight. Critical analysis of this discourse is largely ignored (Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005) and many of the policy initiatives directly impact schools in the form of imposed restrictions on canteen foods and increased physical activity and sports programmes for students. The girls in Dan's class discuss 'healthy' food and categorize food as unhealthy or healthy, bad or good. Unsurprisingly, given the widespread public discourses mentioned above, fat content is the basis of these divisions. Admissions such as 'I like these, but I know they're bad' accompany the consumption of meat pies. Bread rolls filled with salad, on the other hand, are 'healthy and good for me'. Students acknowledge fruit as the healthiest of all food, even though it's 'quite boring'. Such attitudes to food, alongside increasing social awareness of body size and shape are ironic in a community where many struggle financially. Dan is very aware that not all his students have regular access to food. During the year, about every two weeks, Dan brought lunch for the class, paid with from his own money. Students greatly appreciated this and reference to 'Sir's healthy food' became an ongoing class joke as Dan would bring 'low fat' cheese slices with lettuce, tomato and ham-filled rolls. The students laughed about the cheese making them skinny and how 'low fat' was 'Palagi food'.

   The overt focus on body size and shape in obesity discourses encourages the view that there is a correct and 'healthy' type of body, one linked directly to physical size and weight (Gard, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005) and usually related to a white ideal. Maori and Pasifika peoples and South Auckland routinely appear in media releases dealing with national obesity statistics and are blamed for contributing to the 'problem'. For young people, in the midst of development, body norms are highly problematic, especially when conflated with the aggressive promotion of unrealistically slim white bodies as desirable (Burrows and Wright, 2004a, 2004b; Oliver and Lalik, 2004). Although not directly questioning messages about the so-called 'obesity epidemic', students' discussions about food show acceptance of, and resistance to, the discourse. Students' jokes about Dan's 'low

fat Palagi food' highlight the cultural location of food. Such jokes also acknowledge the Eurocentricity of the obesity discourses, enabling students to distance themselves from such messages. The New Zealand health and PE curriculum allows for a critical examination of the obesity epidemic (as well as the beauty and fitness industries and media representations of the body) and Dan provides such opportunities in his classes, as mentioned above. Although students articulated resistance to body ideals the girls, particularly, also actively compared themselves to the highly stylized white women in fashion magazines. Despite the absence in Dan's classes of fitness-related activities, some of the girls also cited weight loss and body control as key reasons to participate in physical education. Tracey and Emily, for example, expressed gratitude that: 'physical education keeps us thin' and 'it's lucky we take PE, so we don't end up fat'. While participating in games, Sofia laughed about her 'Island thighs' and, at camp, Tracey commented that she expected to 'lose weight' over the week. In addition, physical education is widely perceived as a non-academic, lower-order subject. I explore this next.

The physical as lower order and devalued

Physical education is frequently elided with sport and charged with producing elite athletes, or judged simply as 'play time' or 'time out' from classes. As a training ground for sport and the maintenance of the body, and as a relief from 'work', rather than a discipline of study, physical education is presumed to be non-academic and relegated in school subject hierarchies far beneath ostensibly 'elite' subjects such as mathematics, science and languages. The hierarchy, of course, extends outside of schools: play and leisure are dichotomized with work, physical jobs rank more lowly than professions, and sport is viewed as neither a job nor a serious activity at a non-elite level (Shivers and deLisle, 1997).

The students in this study often concurred with these wider social constructions. William and Ben explained that they chose the subject because 'physical education is easy' and 'we like running around and being physical, not just writing'. Their perception stands in direct contrast to the activities they actually complete in Dan's classes. Many of their formal assessments are written tasks, involving complex analysis of the body in movement, critical examination of the fitness industry, and demonstration and reflection on theories of leadership. Nor do the students always pass these assessments. Yet, they continue to maintain that physical education is easier than other subjects. William and Ben do not resist classroom-based work in physical education, they see it as an extension of practical sessions and a necessary ends to passing assessments. Ben focuses during written work; he responds to Dan's questions and is rarely distracted. This is not to suggest he always completes his work, but when I asked about his engagement in other classes he explained that he usually completed few set tasks, commenting that 'it's just so much writing'.

Several students in Dan's class see physical education as part of their personal journey into elite sport. Sepela's goal is to play sport at a professional level, a

difficult challenge for a young woman involved in the (amateur, at least for women) sports of basketball, touch rugby and (women's) rugby in New Zealand. She states that 'PE helps me train and learn about my body, I can use that in my sport'. Physical education as a training ground for elite athletes has historically been a justification of programmes in schools and in the formation of elite sporting academies (Pope, 2002), a phenomenon Kikorangi has managed to resist thus far. The argument that schools can train athletes and fill up sports teams for the greater good of the nation and national identity is evidence of the assumption that sport is a national good (Laidlaw, 1999). New Zealand's top Maori and Pasifika athletes are held up as role models and charged with the responsibility to inspire young people. Success in sport and physical education makes the students in Dan's class proud of their affinity with sports stars. They routinely joked about being 'All Blacks' (New Zealand national men's rugby team)[10] and commentated their performance in games: 'he runs, he dodges, oh, it's a try!' Sport for South Auckland youth is touted as 'a way out' of poverty and an antidote to educational failure, much like basketball among African Americans in the United States. The Kikorangi boy's top rugby team (several in Dan's class are members) compete in the premier Auckland competition, have a high profile in the school and are well funded. Attendance at games is high and the school's Principal closely follows the team's progress. Scores are publicized, especially when the team wins against a wealthy (invariably, predominantly white) Auckland school. Sporting victories, in the absence of academic scholarships and other achievements, are Kikorangi's answer to class hierarchies among schools.

A racialized perception exists in New Zealand that Maori and Pasifika youth are 'naturally' talented athletes. Sport commentators, television personalities and people from a range of cultures continually reinforce this position (Bruce et al., 2007). The 'natural talent' label has two specific effects. The first is the perception that success in sport requires little effort on the part of brown athletes; it is not the product of hard work, training and commitment. While white athletes are praised for their discipline, stamina and determination, Maori and Pasifika (like many black athletes) are noted for their 'flair' and instinct (Palmer, 2007). The boys in Dan's class reinforce this when asked why they chose physical education as a curriculum option: 'we're just good at sport . . . we're physical'. Success in sport reinforces the social Darwinian view of the brown body as 'naturally physical' and, so, lower order and inherently anti-intellectual (Banton, 1998).

The second effect of this assumption is that Maori and Pasifika youth expect themselves and each other to be 'naturally' talented at sport and physical activity. This expectation is sometimes self-fulfilling, in that participation rates are high from a young age, and sport is a valued family and social event in South Auckland. Family teams fill local parks all summer, playing touch rugby and participation in cultural performance groups is almost an expectation, especially in Pasifika families. Consequently, Kikorangi High students as a group appear to be highly skilled performers.

The assumption that Maori and Pasifika students are 'naturally' physically talented (Hokowhitu, 2008) implies they are not naturally academically talented and reinforces the Cartesian notion of the duality of the mind and body. This dualism is hierarchical, with the lower-order, instinctual and anti-intellectual human traits defined as physical and positioned in the body, while higher-order, academic and spiritual development are mental, and inhabit the mind (Arnold, 1979; Descartes, 1988). Physical education's relegation to the former category reinforces the social Darwinian racial hierarchy in relation to South Auckland youth. Although students highly value their physical skills and performance, they are aware that others reinforce the hierarchy. Ben, for example, is very proud of his physical competence and views physicality as integrated with other aspects of well-being: 'sport and PE keeps me active because it's all good. It keeps me mentally active and physically active and [when I'm active then] spiritually I'm all good and [I] feel like that's all [I] need.' He explained, however, that his parents hoped he would obtain an office job in the future, which they viewed as more prestigious than the kind of 'physical' job he wanted. For those not interested, or successful in, physical activity, the presumption of 'natural talent' becomes an impossible norm to which they never measure up. These students avoid physical education and align themselves to intellectual pursuits in other subjects, such as science and mathematics. Clara, a senior student, explained that 'PE just isn't for me, I don't like it'. There is a discomfort for students like Clara. When asked why they don't take physical education, they are apologetic about disengaging with the physical.

The devaluing of the physical and the conflation of physical education with body norms is problematic for Maori and Pasifika youth, especially because the space afforded by physical education allows them to develop relationships and playfulness, and engage in critical analysis. In lieu of a conclusion, in the final section I return to Dan, in the hope of highlighting that, despite the contradictions that abound in physical education, a commitment to critical practice in teaching does offer a useful way forward.

Playing up, playing against

It is half way through the school year at Kikorangi. It is raining in South Auckland, and wet, muddy students run to the final class of the day. Dan walks into his Year 12 lesson and is greeted with, 'Hey, sir', 'wasup?' and 'Nice shirt, sir!' The shirt in question is pale pink and teamed with a thick fuchsia tie and jeans roughly cut off below the knees. While collecting some papers together and smiling at the students, Dan asks, 'Is gender an act?' Silence from the class then, 'What do you mean, sir?' asks Ben.

'Well, let's start with this. When I walked into the room just now, if you didn't know me, what would you say I was?'

'Palagi.'

'Yip, what else?'

'A guy...and young sir, you could be mistaken for a student.'

'You could be gay, sir, with that pink shirt, ahh.'

'Ok, good, so you're able to make instant judgements about me based on the way I look.'

The students nod and Malia exclaims, 'Dat's how it is, man; how we know who's who.'

'OK, in pairs write a list of all the ways you can tell someone is male. Make a separate list for female.'

As the class progresses, the students change their lists to define masculine and feminine traits and Dan challenges them to question how these expressions link to a person's gender and to their sexuality. He defines the terms 'sex', 'gender', 'femininity', 'masculinity' and 'sexual orientation'. He asks again, 'Is gender an act?' Sione answers: 'Yip, it can be. People have to act in certain ways to fit in, sir, otherwise people jus' think you're a queer.'

A discussion takes place during which students challenge this idea and discuss examples of people who don't fit stereotypes. Harriet adds, 'I reckon some guys just think they have to act all tough and that, so they won't get mocked.'

Near the end of the lesson, the students gather at the back of the room and arrange themselves around a giant grid on the floor. Each student has a collection of children's toys: a plastic hammer, dress-up shoes, a fairy wand, a ball. The students are asked to place their items on the grid in relation to the two key axes, stretching from *very masculine* to *not masculine* and *very feminine* to *not feminine*. They have to explain their placement choice and how they think this toy might affect the type of play engaged in by a child.

As this example and others above demonstrate, Dan's teaching at Kikorangi High explicitly allows for critical examination of issues affecting young people. He is unafraid to challenge norms associated with gender, ethnicity and body, and he engages students with critical ideas in fun and innovative ways. The critical ethnographic approach I've used here has allowed me to experience a critical practice in health and physical education, use this as a reference point for critical discussions and also to be part of spontaneous conversations about how students grapple with issues of power, gender and racialization. Significantly, this approach has also enabled me to form strong, trusting and ongoing relationships with Kikorangi students, an essential element of respectful and reciprocal research. I am still in touch with many from the study and two of Dan's students have since begun study at my university. New Zealand society positions these South Auckland Maori and Pasifika youth as poor, brown educational underachievers. They live with societal norms that privilege thin white bodies and that devalue and racialize physical competence. Physical education itself is conflated with these narrow conceptions of the body and movement.

Despite these contradictions, Dan encourages the students in his classes to play with and 'play up' against societal expectations of movement, gender and culture. In turn, these young people form their own resistant positions, while also taking up

many of the narrow discourses of body and beauty. Admittedly, there is still a long way to go before marginalized youth, such as Pasifika and Maori youth in South Auckland, can 'play up' in ways that actually change and/or make a difference to wider racialized and socioeconomic discourses. However, Dan at least provides a (safe) space for these students to begin to critique and resist such norms, while also facilitating social cohesion and playfulness in ways that affirm their cultural and social identities. Such a possibility provides a way forward for critical conceptions of physical education pedagogy and practice and highlights the need for a renewed critical approach to schooling.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The school name has been changed to ensure anonymity. Kikorangi is a Year 9–13 (ages 13 through 18) secondary school. Years 12 and 13 (17–18-year-olds) were the focus of this study.
2. Maori, though ostensibly a relatively homogeneous group, identify on the basis of self-ascription, and, as with any ethnic group, include complex combinations with other ethnicities, including European and Pasifika.
3. Pasifika is the now commonly accepted term for Pacific migrants who have settled in New Zealand, principally from the islands of Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and Tuvalu. As with Maori, this broad grouping exhibit complex, multiple combinations of Pasifika and other identities; see, for example, MacPherson et al. (2000) and Spoonley et al. (2004).
4. Although separate school subjects, health education and physical education appear together in curriculum policy in New Zealand. Dan taught his class for both subjects. In this article, I draw on content from both subjects but focus more on physical education.
5. For discussion of the critical orientation of this document and debate about cultural content, see Burrows and Wright (2004c); Culpan (1996/1997); Penney and Harris (2004); Salter (2000); Tasker (1996/1997); Tinning (2000).
6. As with the teaching of any curriculum area, teachers at Kikorangi High vary in their application of critical principles to physical education. However, Dan exemplifies the possibilities that inhere in an overtly critical approach to teaching the subject. Worth noting here too is the strong influence of assessment and school qualifications in senior high school programmes in New Zealand schools. Although not within the scope of this article, the school qualifications also influence the critical content of these programmes in New Zealand and are themselves highly contentious (see Fitzpatrick and Locke, 2008; Locke, 2007).
7. The New Zealand qualifications system, the NCEA (National Certificate in Educational Achievement), is a standards-based system that requires students to accumulate credits which add towards a qualification at each level.

8. The norm-referenced assessment system at the time – the predecessor to the current NCEA system – prevented many students from passing qualifications because their grades were scaled to fit a normative curve of distribution, which inevitably privileged socially advantaged students (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

9. Although almost a universal measure of beauty in Western societies now, slimness was not always regarded as such a beauty ideal (Spelman, 1988).

10. Rugby is regarded as the pre-eminent sport in New Zealand and the 'national game'. Although both men's and women's teams are among the best in the world, men's rugby has particularly high status.

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Katie Fitzpatrick is a research fellow in the school of Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Her research interests include health and physical education, critical pedagogy, intersections of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and culture, youth perspectives and critical ethnography.