

## **Transformative pedagogies for challenging body culture in physical education**

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### **Abstract**

Advocacies for forms of critical pedagogy in and through physical education appeared in the 1970s and steadily gained momentum through the 1980s and 1990s, but the translation of this early advocacy into practice that could lead to social change was not easily attained. We provide a brief account of the historical context for this topic, in which we note some of the main theoretical approaches to conceptualising the body, its social construction and the experience of embodiment in physical education. We also consider issues in work on the body in physical education since the 1980s with a particular emphasis on more recent trends. We focus, in particular, on the emerging line of research centred on activist approaches to working with girls in physical education as an example of the successful translation of advocacy into practice that includes pedagogies of embodiment as integral to new forms of physical education. We conclude that the example of activist work with girls in physical education shows how a focus on embodiment as integral to a transformative pedagogy requires a radical reconstruction of physical education.

### **Introduction**

The boys say that we are dumb, stupid and wouldn't last five seconds [in sports]..and that you're a woman and you need to stay in your place... We can bring all the firth grade girls in and interview them and ask them how they feel when boys say different things to them. I believe it will help, because it's not fair for us girls—Maggee May, 10 years old (Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010, p. 43-44).

According to Ukpokodu (2009), transformative pedagogy is a form of activist pedagogy that places the learner at the centre of educational processes and is concerned to foster both critical consciousness and agency. Tinning (in this volume) has noted there is a range of socially-critical discourses in the physical education research literature which relate to the concept of transformative pedagogy. Advocacies for forms of critical pedagogy in and through physical education appeared in the 1970s and steadily gained momentum through the 1980s and 1990s (Devis-Devis, 2006). But the translation of this early advocacy into practice that could lead to social change was not easily attained. O'Sullivan et al (1992) criticised advocates of critical pedagogy for failing to show what they labelled 'radical' physical

education would look like at the level of school programs. This criticism echoed Dewey's (1938) observation that progressive educators face a more difficult task than traditional educators to develop programs since they cannot fall back on existing practices, but must create genuinely new and alternatives pedagogical forms.

We suggest that this challenge to realise advocacy in the practice of transformative physical education pedagogies has continued to the present, with some exceptions that we will outline later in this chapter. The task is even more difficult when we consider pedagogies that challenge body culture in physical education. This is because conceptualisations of the body and associated terminology vary both with advocates' purposes and with the theoretical perspectives they employ. There is no settled or dominant conceptualisation, no well-developed theoretical position, and no widely accepted methodology for studying and practicing transformative pedagogy that challenges body culture in physical education. There have however been developments in train since the late 1990s, particularly associated with activist approaches to working with girls in physical education, that may provide guidance on how further work in this area can proceed.

We begin the chapter with a brief account of the historical context for this topic, in which we note some of the main theoretical approaches to conceptualising the body, its social construction and the experience of embodiment in physical education. Next, we consider issues in work on the body in physical education since the 1980s with a particular emphasis on more recent trends, as we elaborate in further detail the theoretical discussions and advocacies for challenging body culture. In the final sections, we focus on the emerging line of research centred on activist approaches to working with girls in physical education as an example of the successful translation of advocacy into practice that includes pedagogies of embodiment as integral to new forms of physical education. We use this example to guide our thinking on some future directions for what might genuinely be regarded as transformative

pedagogies in physical education that have potential to make a difference for the better in the lives of young people.

### **Historical context and theoretical frameworks for challenging body culture in physical education**

Despite recognition of physical education as arguably the most body-focused (Armour, 1999) topic in the school curriculum, prior to the 2000s pedagogical and socio-critical accounts of the body in the literature are rare and random. This is not to discount the valuable tradition of movement education from the 1950s which was rooted in the Arts and aesthetic experience (see eg. Foster, 1976). This tradition was constituted by a number of pedagogical approaches to movement and the moving body, though these approaches rarely explored embodiment beyond individual experience, which limited them as forms of transformative pedagogy.

From the 1980s, there was a growing literature concerned with the body in culture and physical education's part in the social construction of bodies, much of it constituting a critique of the part played by traditional forms of physical education in making and legitimating hegemonic masculinities and femininities. Broekhoff's (1972) paper mapped the emergence of systems of gymnastics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of a process of the reification of the human body. Tinning (1985) provided an insightful and influential account of physical education and the cult of slenderness, while (John) Hargreaves' (1986) neo-Marxist analysis dissected the 'physical education ritual' as a process of schooling the body. Feminist authors Gilroy (1989) and Theberge (1991) made valuable contributions to sociological understanding of the body in physical activity and sport building on (Jennifer) Hargreaves (1982) and Scraton's (1986) earlier work on the marginalisation of women in sport and physical education. Shilling's (1991) application of Bourdieu's sociology introduced into the literature concepts such as physical capital, while Kirk (1993/1998) drew on Foucault to

explore in some detail forms of physical education as pedagogies of social regulation and normalisation. Fitzclarence (1991) applied Connell's (1983) ground breaking work on the social construction of male bodies and hegemonic masculinities in and through sport to argue that physical education could be viewed as a form of 'social violence' that normalised masculine domination.

A wide range of theoretical perspectives have been deployed in this literature on embodiment and physical education, which have shaped the ways in which the core concepts (such as 'the body', 'embodiment' and so on) are conceptualised. Versions of Marxist theory have been used, various forms of feminist theory, and the work of key thinkers such as Bourdieu, Connell and Foucault. Authors have used theories and methods from philosophy, sociology and history. As we will show in the sections that follow, other theoretical frameworks such as Black and Chicana feminisms, critical literacy, critical pedagogies and poststructural feminisms, as well as phenomenology, and social psychological theories of the physical self also emerge in authors work. At the same time, none of these theories has been dominant in the literature, and the wide range of approaches perhaps explains why there appears to have been little systematic development of this topic as a line of research development.

Some of the contributions to the embodiment and physical education literature explicitly explored relations between the body as a philosophical, socio-cultural and historical concept and physical education as an embodied pedagogical practice. This work included examples, such as Fitzclarence (1991), who offered specific suggestions for alternative pedagogies that might counteract the repressive effects of traditional physical education. Others, such as the movement educators, showed how individually liberating pedagogies of movement might be practiced. But arguably none at this stage provided a basis on which pedagogies of embodiment and in particular transformative pedagogies might be built.

## **Trends and issues in work on the body in physical education**

Notions of the body in culture have been in the literature in physical education since at least the late 1980s, though this use has been patchy in several respects. Where a concept of the body specifically is used, it is often not defined (eg. Velija & Kumar, 2009).

Additionally, while the body is sometimes mentioned infrequently (Vertinsky, 1992) or not at all (Wright & King, 1990), it is clear that the authors concerned have much to say about the body and body culture. Physical education researchers have used a number of terms related to the body such as embodied identities (Kirk & Tinning, 1994), embodied subjectivities (Wright, 1995), body narratives (Oliver, 1999), physicality (McDermott, 2000), habitus (Gorely et al, 2003), body-meanings (Azzarito et al, 2006), the embodiment of gender (Velija & Kumar, 2009) and the physical self (Crocker et al, 2006).

Despite the lack of consistent terminology and an apparent reluctance to define the term, there is an implicit consensus in the literature on the importance of the body and body culture in physical education, particularly in relation to girls. All of this work, without exception, takes an anti-dualist stance (Dewey, 1938) In an early contribution drawing on phenomenology and existentialism, Whitehead (1990) claimed that every human is an indivisible whole and that embodiment and personhood are inseparable. Satina and Hultgren (2001) similarly note (quoting Heidegger) that “We do not ‘have’ a body; rather, we ‘are’ bodily”. They go on to charge that Cartesian dualism not only separates body and mind, but also then devalues the body compared with the intellect and in so doing objectifies the body as a thing that can only be understood as an object. In her critique of this dualist tendency in education, Whitehead argued that the body-as-lived is ‘the ongoing axis of thought and knowing’ and is thus of primary importance in education (Whitehead, 2010, p. 26).

Building on a monist perspective, several authors have provided insights into what Young (1980, p.140) called “the *situation* of being a woman in a particular society”. Young

had argued against the prevailing wisdom of the time in motor development research with young children that despite evidence of a “more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl”, this distinctively female way of moving is not due to some ‘feminine essence’ but is, instead, learned. In a patriarchal social order women learn to move in a confined field because they learn that "feminine bodily existence is self-referred to the extent that the feminine subject posits her motion as the motion that is *looked at*" (p148).

Other authors have developed Young’s notion of the situation of being a woman in relation to school physical education and other organised physical activity. Wright and King (1990, p.222), for example, noted that there is considerable ambiguity surrounding girls’ engagements with physical education. On the one hand, and consistent with Young’s analysis, girls are “constructed by patriarchal discourses of femininity that work to constrain and restrain their behaviour”; but on the other hand, in physical education lessons “they are expected to be active, competitive, and achievement-oriented”. The net effect, according to Wright and King, is that conventional ways of being feminine consistently undermine expectations in physical education regarding “activity, achievement and effort” and reproduce the gender relations of the wider society.

Vertinsky (1992, p.328) supported this analysis of Wright and King and noted that part of the source of the contradictions girls experience is that they are in co-educational classes compared unfavourably with the male standard as the norm, where girls are portrayed “as “deficient” males or passive victims of restrictive gender-stereotyped attitudes and practices”. Writing in a different context, of adult women in aerobics classes, Markula (1995) noted these same ambiguities, but in this context draws our attention to women’s contrasting behaviour in private and public spaces. She argued that women are privately critical (among friends) of priorities of the authoritative discourse of aerobics that laud the ideal body type,

but publically conformist rather than transgressive. Returning to the topic of girls and physical education, Wright (1995) argued that the male standard as norm is manifest in the dominance of team games traditionally associated with males, while activities traditionally associate with females such as dance are viewed as marginal. Echoing Young, Vertinsky (1992, p375) summed up the situation of girls in physical education, where they learn “to experience their bodies as fragile encumbrances, as objects and burdens, rather than as living manifestations of action and intention. As a consequence, many readily learned to underestimate their bodily capacity for sport and games”. Vertinsky (1992, p390) recognised the need for a different approach to physical education in order to address these ambiguities and contradictions that characterise the situation of girls. She argued that there is a need for a form of “physical education that emphasizes agency, action and the possibility of transformation and focuses on more than the single attainment target of physical activity”. As such, “teachers...would do well to encourage girls to talk about their bodies, how they feel about their sizes and shapes, and the different ways their bodies can move. These views of the body can then be discussed in terms of dominant messages that girls get about their bodies in this culture...” (p389). Several scholars have responded to this call to make spaces in the curriculum that allow girls to name and critique the patriarchal discourses surrounding their embodiment (e.g. Fisette, 2010; Enright and O’Sullivan, 2010; Oliver, 1999; Oliver and Lalik, 2004a).

Armour (1999) argued that since physical education is ‘body-focused’, physical educators should make this focus explicit. This is because physical education “can have a major role to play in the establishment of pupils' embodied identity.” (p.10) Satina and Hultgren (2001, p530) argued for the development of a ‘pedagogy of embodiment’ that offers girls opportunities to “develop and express self-affirming views of their body in an atmosphere that does not replicate culturally imposed limitations”. In one of the earliest

activist projects of working with girls in physical education, Oliver and Lalik (2001) developed the notion of the 'body-as-curriculum', explaining that they "wanted to develop a curriculum of the body that would begin with girls' experiences, interests and concerns with their bodies, rather than featuring adults' perspectives exclusively" (p. 307). Further studies have added support to these calls to create what Vertinsky (1992) named a gender-sensitive forms of physical education, with Gorely et al (2003) and Azzarito et al (2006, p94) arguing "a 'gender-relevant' critical pedagogy should be employed in physical education classes to offer alternative constructions of embodied femininities and masculinities", while Crocker et al (2006, p 197) advocate "interventions focused on the physical self and body image need to target young adolescents, if not children."

The possibilities for creating transformative pedagogies that are gender-sensitive must, however, address the issue of the male standard as the norm and the treatment of girls as "deficient" males (Vertinsky, 1992). This issue is part of the wider gender order of society. With respect to embodiment, Bourdieu (2001, p67) noted that when we come to consider masculine domination, we must account not only for the social and economic circumstances in societies that favour men over women, but the embedding of these social structures in the body itself. He writes, "the masculinisation of the male body and the feminization of the female body, immense and in a sense interminable tasks...induce a somatization of the relations of domination, which is thus naturalized" (Bourdieu 2001, pp. 55-56). This somatization of the relations of domination is a matter of fundamental importance to physical educators, since it suggests socially critical working on and with the body must be part of any process of bringing about social transformation (Wright and King, 1990; Vertinsky, 1992). In this context, Bourdieu stated the

Intensive practice of a sport leads to a profound transformation of the subjective and objective experience of the body. It no longer exists only for others or ... for the



mirror.... Instead of being a body for others it becomes a body for oneself; the passive body becomes an active and acting body. (Bourdieu 2001, p. 67)

Bourdieu noted that the power of masculine domination is such that women who play sport take many risks, including having their femininity and sexuality called into question. But these risks precisely make his point; the subversion of the gender order through an active and acting body provokes strong reactions in some men and women since it appears that the 'natural order of things' itself is being brought into question.

The ways in which girls as active and acting bodies might practice the physically active life is, as Markula (1995) noted, differentiated according to private and public spaces. Azzarito and Sterling (2010), in a study of minority ethnic girls in England, noted that public spaces were seen by the girls to be male spaces and therefore fraught with risk, and their preferences for physical activity were overwhelmingly in the private space of home. While we have noted the unfavourable comparison of girls to the male standard as norm, we might also consider along with Hills (2007) that these standards operate even in girl-only physical education environments, and that girl-only spaces are not necessarily safer for less skilled girls if they lack social status or a friendship group. Moreover, Evans (2006, p557) claims that along with peer scrutiny and criticism, "the evaluative gaze of the teachers exerts power over the pupils, intensifying the gaze and other comments from peers (fear of ridicule), and also self-criticism (fear of inadequacy)."

This literature suggests unequivocally that pedagogies of embodiment in which the study of the social construction of the body becomes an essential part of the curriculum are key to the development of transformative forms of physical education. Vertinsky (1992) argued that "it is unlikely that one single approach will serve the interests of all girls—in all sporting contexts....A gender sensitive perspective is thus one that lets patterns of discrimination themselves determine what action to take to eliminate bias". (p. 383) We

consider this comment to be underpinned by a pragmatist perspective that asks how might we improve the situation for both girls and boys in physical education? While there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, the literature would suggest that creating spaces for girls, in particular, to study embodiment is a critical element in any transformative approach to physical education.

### **Activist approaches to challenging body culture in physical education**

“That’s sick...Too muscular...I just think women should be feminine...not where you can see the muscle ‘cause I think that’s masculine—Alysa, age 13” (Oliver 1999, p. 239).

Given the continuing challenge of girls’ experiences of physical education, and given the predominance of writing on embodiment in references to girls, gender and physical education, we focus this section on recent and ongoing activist research with girls and their teachers in physical education as an example of transformative pedagogy.

Feminist authors (Bordo, 1989; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1995; Vertinsky, 1992; Wolf, 1991) claim that the “body plays a crucial role in the reciprocal relationship between women’s private and public identities. The social meanings publicly attached to the body can become internalized and exert powerful influences on women’s private feelings of self-worth” (Oliver & Lalik, 2001, p. 305). A key feature of activist work involved in engaging adolescent girls in physical education involves teachers creating spaces in their curriculum for girls to critically explore their embodiment (e.g., Enright and O’Sullivan, 2013; Goodyear, Casey and Kirk 2013; Hamzeh 2012; Oliver and Lalik 2001; 2004a). A pedagogy of embodiment helps girls “name the discourses that shape their lives and regulate their bodies...[in order to support] girls’ efforts to develop strategies for identifying, resisting, and

disrupting forms of enculturation that threaten their health and limit their life chances” (Oliver & Lalik, 2004a, p. 162-163). These studies, as well as other’s work on girls’ embodiment (e.g., Azzarito and Solmon 2009; Hills 2006; Garrett 2004) provide strong evidence that while purposeful physical activity is necessary to girls’ engagements in physical education, it is *not* sufficient by itself. Offering girls the opportunities to explore their embodiment *is* central to creating relevant physical education for girls.

In working toward understanding how to centralize embodiment pedagogically, activist scholars in physical education have consistently approached their work with girls from an anti-dualist stance, have actively sought ways to help girls name experiences of their bodies that are often at a pre-conscious level in order for girls to be able to reflect on those experiences critically, and worked to support girls’ sense of physicality in movement. First, activists’ work with embodied pedagogies disrupts the debilitating mind-body dualism that privileges and values the mind while objectifying the body as something to be controlled, manipulated, and ‘looked at’ (Grumet, 1988; hooks, 1995). This mind/body dualism far too often plagues our systems of education (Garrison, 1997; Kirk, 1992), our pedagogical practices (Satina and Hultgren, 2001) and our traditional physical education curricula (Oliver & Garrison, 1996; Wright, 1995). Starting from the perspective that *how* girls experience their bodies underpins their learning, activists have intentionally sought to make girls’ bodies central in their curricula (Enright and O’Sullivan, 2010; Fisette, 2011; Oliver, 1999; 2001; Oliver and Lalik, 2000; 2001; 2004a). Placing the body at the centre disrupts the mind/body dualism of traditional practice thereby creating the cracks necessary for better understanding how girls read, internalize, resist, or reject forms and processes of oppression that threaten their health as well as their abilities, interests, and willingness to learn to value the physically active life. These cracks also create the spaces for better understanding girls’ hopes—in other

words—spaces for not just the language of critique but also the language of possibility (Fine, 1994; Giroux, 1977). In this context, Giroux (1997; p.132) writes

A critical pedagogy has to begin with a dialectical celebration of the languages of critique and possibility—an approach which finds its noblest expressions in a discourse integrating critical analysis with social transformation [around] problems rooted in the concrete experiences of everyday life.

As activists have made girls' everyday experiences of their bodies central to physical education (Enright and O'Sullivan, 2010; Fiset, 2011; Oliver and Lalik, 2001; Oliver et al, 2009), they have come to understand the circulating discourses that shape girls' subjectivities, have been able to search for places to explore girls' agency, and have worked collaboratively with girls to practice change (Oliver, 2010). The results have been a much clearer understanding of *how* girls experience their bodies through dominant cultural narratives that objectify and demean girls' bodies, as well as *how* and *where* they resist these same oppressive narratives, and *how* they identify what they want to change (Fiset, 2011; Oliver and Lalik, 2001; 2004a). Fiset (2012) and Oliver and Hamzeh's (2010) work illustrates this point:

I don't like sexist things...the whole female ball thing that really annoys me even though they are easier to throw. It's just the whole point that he's making us think that we can't throw the bigger ones...I think if he puts them out, he shouldn't call them female balls, just be like, 'Here's smaller ones, throw them if you want. Anyone can throw them. (Fiset, 2012: p. 13)

Kim: Marie you said that sometimes the boys won't let the girls play because they have the wrong color of skin and they had taken a picture of you [Maggee Mae]...

Maggee Mae: Yeah...they told me I couldn't play because I was a girl and I was Black...Sometimes I know that at the fifth-grade recess, some of the boys don't want the girls to play because they are girls, and I think that is a problem because we should all be able to do what we want to do; we should be able to play what we want to play (Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010, p. 43)

A second way that activist scholars have worked with embodied pedagogies is by actively seeking ways to help girls name their experiences of their bodies that are often at a pre-conscious level. Greene (1995: 23) writes

Only when the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is—contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity or by unexamined common sense. Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have the opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices.

Part of what activist scholars have consistently done is to find ways to help girls name the meanings of their bodily experiences. An example from Oliver's work is this task: "Go through the magazines and cut out pictures and/or text that are of interest to you and categorize your pictures/text any way you want" (Oliver, 2001, p. 148). Many of the findings from activist work have come only after using creative methods such as this for assisting girls to find ways to put language to experiences that are difficult to explain in part because so many of these experiences operate on a pre-conscious level. Visual methodologies such as magazine explorations and critiques (Oliver and Lalik, 2000; 2001; 2004a; Enright and O'Sullivan, 2013), photographic inquiry (Oliver and Lalik, 2004a; 2004b; Oliver et al, 2009; Oliver and Hamzeh, 2010), photographic essays (Oliver and Lalik, 2004a); scrap booking

(Enright and O'Sullivan, 2010; 2012; Hamzeh, 2012); mapping (Enright and O'Sullivan, 2010; Hamzeh, and Oliver, 2012; Oliver, 1999), and drawing (Oliver, 1999; Fissette, 2014) have all been methods that activists have used to assist girls in the process of naming issues that influence their embodiment.

In addition to using visual methods as a means for girls to put language to experience, activist scholars have also used a variety of techniques to help girls further elaborate experiences that are only partially explained. For example, asking girls to imagine a world where particular things no longer existed (i.e., people didn't care how they looked, there was no such thing as 'normal' female behaviour, there was no longer racism) was found useful in helping girls better describe the circumstances with which they currently experienced their bodies (Oliver, 1999). Asking girls to talk about what "other girls" might think about their bodies was another technique useful in creating public settings where girls would talk about issues of embodiment that were important to them (e.g., anorexia and bulimia; teen pregnancy).

Through the process of trying to assist girls to find ways to name experiences that influence their embodiment so that they can start to look at these experiences from a variety of vantage points (Greene, 1995), what activists have learned is that this process takes time, patience, and creativity. Girls need multiple opportunities for exploring their embodiment because it is through these multiple and varied opportunities that they are able to better articulate what they know and feel. For example, in Oliver's (2001) work 13 year old African American girls were writing about the magazine images they had selected as a way to represent messages that girls receive about their bodies. One of the girls, Alexandria, looked up and said

‘I have a concept I want to talk about.’ She went on to explain that, ‘some girls at our school are pregnant’. The group began discussing how they were curious to know what it ‘felt like to be pregnant’ and how important it was to have their ‘mothers’ to talk with because ‘they don’t talk about it [teen pregnancy] at school’. Brandi mentioned that when they were in 5<sup>th</sup> grade they saw a film but that ‘then most people didn’t have questions and everyone was too embarrassed to ask questions’. She continued by saying, ‘Now everybody got all these questions and there ain’t nobody to ask’ (Oliver, 2001, p. 160).

This is just one of many types of conversations activists have had in their work with girls. What is important about assisting girls to name their experiences is that adults can begin to better understand just how important girls’ embodiment is to their interest in learning to be healthy adults.

A third way activist scholars have worked toward understanding how to centralize girls’ embodiment pedagogically is through their supporting and nurturing girls’ sense of physicality in movement. What is pivotal to the success of such endeavours was these scholars’ willingness to support girls’ physicality on the girls’ terms, rather than on some preconceived adult notion of ‘what should be’. Here is where we see how girls’ notions of embodiment lie beneath the surface. To illustrate our point we use an example from a study by Oliver and her colleagues (Oliver, et al., 2009). In 2005-2006 Oliver worked with two groups of 10-11 year old Mexican American, Hispanic and White 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls in a poor, rural border community about 40 minutes from Juarez Mexico. The girls were selected to work with Oliver one day per week for the entire school year by their physical education teacher. The teacher labelled these girls as either not like physical education or not liking physical activity in general. The study aimed to work with these girls to help them identify barriers to their physical activity enjoyment and participation and work with them to

negotiate the barriers within their control so as to increase their opportunities for engaging in physical activity.

The girls were given cameras in the beginning of the study and asked to photograph things that helped them be physically active and things that either prevented them from being active or prevented them from enjoying physical activity. Through this process the girls explained that being 'girly girl' often prevented them from being physically active because girly girls 'don't want to sweat,' 'mess up their hair and nails,' they didn't want to 'mess up their nice clothes' and sometimes they liked to wear 'flip flops.'

What Oliver began to learn as time went on was that these girls were using the idea of "being girly girl" as an excuse for not engaging in physical education. Over time they started to talk about how when the teacher was having them play something they didn't like such as football, soccer, basketball and Frisbee that they used excuses such as "we don't want to sweat" or "we don't want to mess up our clothes" as a way of getting out of the activity that wasn't meeting their particular needs. Below is a conversation Oliver had with the girls as they were explaining about why they didn't like these sports:

Maltilde says, 'because the boys kick your feet,' 'trip you on purpose,' 'push you down,' 'they won't give you the ball,' and 'grab your hair.' So I asked them whether it was the sport they didn't like or the way that sport was being played. I said, 'So if the boys are kicking you or tripping you or pulling your hair or not giving you the ball those kinds of things...' Sunshine cut me off and says, 'You feel left out and hurt.' I continued, 'I'm trying to figure out, if there are a lot of girls that are girly girls or identify as girly girls, they should be able to be active in ways that are...' Sunshine cuts me off again and says, 'Suitable for them.' I continue, 'Yes, that are suitable,



wouldn't you think?'... Sunshine goes on to explain that if girls 'felt comfortable with themselves they would be able to do physical activity.' (Oliver et al., 2009, p. 102)

Oliver came to better understand from these girls that not only did they not like the content in physical education—the traditional team sports - but they also did not like how the activities were played when boys were involved, did not like getting hurt or being left out, and wanted to be able to play and 'feel comfortable with themselves.' So, rather than play in situations they identified as unsuitable or dangerous, they chose not to participate. And what is so concerning here is that because their excuses 'not wanting to sweat or mess up their clothes' are SUCH normalized discourses around girls disengagement in physical education, no one questioned whether there might be some other reason they didn't want to play.

Rather than try to get the girls to critique how the notion of "girly girl" was contributing to their disengagement Oliver suggested that they work collaboratively to negotiate their barriers by making up games girls could play while simultaneously being "girly girl." So what they did was to create a book for games for days the girls "didn't want to sweat" or "didn't want to mess up their clothes," "break a nail," "didn't want to mess up their hair" and days that they girls wore flip flops. Through the process of Oliver working to support these girls' physicality of movement on their terms what started to happen was that the content of the games they created actually contradicted many of their self-identified girly girl barriers. That is, while they may have been making up games for days where they did not want to sweat or mess up their nice clothes, many of the actual games involved running, jumping, chasing, and fleeing—in other words, the possibility of sweating or getting their clothes dirty. Take for example, runaround kickball. The girls created this game for the days they didn't want to mess up their nice clothe. It involved kicking a ball and then the team that kicked all ran the bases while the outfielders collected the ball and then chased the girls running the bases trying to catch them. This study was conducted in a desert community, thus

they played the game in the dust so the possibility of the girls messing up their clothes was pretty certain. Many of their games had these types of contradictions.

What Oliver learned was that IF we want girls to learn to value the physically active life we need to start from where girls ARE, and assist them in finding activities that THEY find valuable and relevant and enjoyable, regardless of what we think. This example highlights just how central girls' embodiment is to their physical activity participation and that we cannot trivialize or dismiss this centrality if we hope to assist girls in becoming physically active for life.

### **Future directions for transformative pedagogies that challenge body culture in physical education**

What the example of activist work with girls in physical education shows is how a focus on embodiment as integral to a transformative pedagogy requires a radical reconstruction of physical education. In addition to pedagogies of embodiment, activist work typically employs student-centredness, inquiry-based education centred *in action*, and listening to respond over time (Oliver and Kirk, 2015). Future directions for transformative pedagogies, which challenge body culture in physical education, similarly require the construction of new and creative alternatives to traditional practices and to imagine new possibilities for the substance and conduct of the subject in schools.

Moreover, given the lack of consistency of purposes, theoretical frameworks, and methods within the physical education literature on the body in culture, we think researchers need to move beyond paradigmatic approaches to adopt a more pragmatic position that, though the influence of Dewey (1938) and others, lies at the root of transformative pedagogies (Ukopokodu, 2009). This position needs to focus, we suggest, on three questions: 'can we make the situation for these youth and children better than it is currently?', 'what would be better?', and 'how might we go about this task?'. Provided we answer the first

question in the affirmative, we suggest there is no one future best way or right answer to how we go about making a difference for the better in the lives of young people.

### **Summary of key findings**

- Concerns about body culture have been in the physical education literature since at least the 1970s, with an acceleration of numbers of publications from the early 1990s to the present
- Within this literature, advocacy for pedagogies that challenge body culture has dominated over the practice of alternative and potentially transformative pedagogies
- The body in culture have been conceptualised in a variety of ways, depending on authors' purposes and theoretical perspectives, and include historical philosophical sociological and psychological theories
- There is as a consequence no uniform methodology for studying or practising transformative pedagogies that challenge body culture
- Despite this lack of uniformity, there has been a consensus on the importance of body culture in physical education as a topic for transformative pedagogy
- One example of transformative pedagogy in which embodiment is integral is provided in the work of activist researchers with girls in physical education
- In working toward understanding how to centralize embodiment pedagogically, activist scholars in physical education have consistently approached their work with girls from an anti-dualist stance

- Activist researchers have also actively sought ways to help girls name experiences of their bodies that are often at a pre-conscious level in order for girls to be able to reflect on those experiences critically
- Activist scholars have worked to support girls' sense of physicality in movement
- Future development of transformative pedagogies that challenge body culture in physical education can benefit from asking three pragmatic questions to inform our work with young people

### **Reflective questions for discussion**

1. What might be the purposes of a transformative pedagogy that challenges body culture?
2. What theories and methods best seem to inform transformative pedagogies that challenge body culture?
3. What should be the future priorities for developing transformative pedagogies that challenge body culture in physical education?
4. How do transformative pedagogies that challenge body culture require a shift in conceptualizing what counts for physical education?
5. What might come of generations of young people that that grow up with a critical lens toward body culture? How might this change what is possible for physical education?

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