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# Disciplining the body: power, knowledge and subjectivity in a physical education lesson

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In recent years there has been a move in feminist and social theory towards an interest in the body as a social and cultural site. The dominant discourses in Western society have traditionally, emphasized the body as a physical and biological given, to be understood like other 'natural' phenomena, through empirical investigation.

Philosophical, feminist and poststructuralist discussions around the body (Foucault 1979, Foucault 1981, Bartky 1988, Bordo 1990, Grosz 1994) have demonstrated how our knowledge of the body and the body itself is constituted in specific cultural and historical circumstances and in the context of particular relations of power. This happens in many different sites including the print and electronic media, in schools, public spaces and in and through institutional discourses associated with the law, medicine, education, sport, religion and so on.

Particularly important to this is an understanding of the body as not separate from the mind - the typical mind/body split of western thought - but as integrally associated with 'the self'. In poststructuralist terms this is understood by the concept of 'embodied subjectivity' where those social practices which form selves work through language and material practices to locate individual subjects in relation to institutional and cultural discourses. The body is thus produced by and exists in discourse where discourse refers to 'sets of deep linguistic principles incorporating specific grids of meaning which generate what can be spoken, seen and thought' (Foucault 1974 cited in McWilliam 1996, p.18). While discourse in this sense is differentiated from language, choices in language provide indicators to those discourses being drawn upon by writers and speakers and to the ways in which they position themselves and others. Questions can therefore be asked about how language works to position speakers in relation to what discourses and with what effects?

Education provides a fruitful site for such analysis. Again working from a poststructuralist position, education - specifically the pedagogical practices associated with schooling can be taken to be constituted as a text, produced by and through the interactions of teachers and students (and administrators, syllabus writers and so on who have been involved historically in the production of classroom knowledge). This provides the opportunity for an interrogation of such texts as they contribute to the (re)production of social relations and embodied subjectivities. In this sense the

pedagogy is not seen simply as a process of teaching and/or learning where technical and/or cognitive skills are acquitted but rather as dialogic process where teachers and students together construct meanings/text as they draw on their experiences of other discourses texts, institutions and genres.

In this chapter one specific site within education will be examined - that of physical education. As a an area in education which focuses specifically on the body it is well-placed to define, shape and inscribe bodies through its material and discursive practices. This chapter will offer one way of exploring how this takes place through

- i) a close examination of the language of a physical education lesson and some of the other non-verbal behaviours which are part of the lesson,
- ii) through an interpretation of that language in the context of the discourses and power relations that have been drawn upon to constitute the physical education lesson as text.

Physical education lessons are constituted intertextually as teachers and students draw on their experiences of other physical education lessons and on their previous positionings in relation to discourses around physical activity and sport, as these intersect with discourses and social practices which determine cultural notions of femininity and masculinity, age relations, ethnicity and so on. Similarly in interpreting the lesson I will be drawing on these same discourses as they have been documented in the literature to understand how embodied subjectivities are being constituted in the lesson.

While this chapter does go beyond the language of the lesson to other material practices it will focus on the spoken language of the teacher. It is important to acknowledge that there are problems with a singular focus on language. Bodies are certainly not only or indeed mostly produced in and through language, rather material practices such as dress, the organisation of space, the work done by bodies through exercise, paid labour are all implicated in the construction of bodies as cultural products. Language however in both written and spoken forms influences how we can think about/conceive of bodies; it categorizes and associates value with certain kinds of bodies rather than others. For instance through medical, legal, psychoanalytic educational discourses bodies are described and positioned in relations of value. School physical is a site which because of its focus on the body brings together a number of discourses and material practices to bear on the bodies of teachers and students.

The questions which motivate this study are as a follows

- How are bodies constituted in physical education lessons?
- What discourses and material practices are drawn on to constitute bodies and in what relations of power?
- What are the consequences of such inscriptions for individual subjectivities and social relations?

### **A methodology**

To answer these questions we need a way of making a close and meticulous study of language as a social practice as it contributes to the construction of meanings and social relations in specific cultural contexts. While Michel Foucault eschewed a close analysis of language, his work provides a means to understand and interpret the ways in which language and other social practices work to constitute specific relations of power which are not monolithic but which are pervasive and negotiated. For Foucault power is neither absolutely negative nor positive, rather what is of interest is the ways in which 'specific practices actualize relations of power' (Gore 1993).

But in thinking of the mechanism of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.' (Foucault 1980, p.39)

This perspective enables the analysis of power at the site of operation - that is, in the relations between subjects as they take up particular positions in discourse. This allows us to go beyond the power or powerlessness that is assumed to reside in particular 'roles' or 'categories', like those of 'teacher' or 'student' to ask how these as particular positions in discourse are expressed by specific subjects in their relations with one another. In a somewhat controversial move Jennifer Gore (1993) has sought to construct an empirical technology which provides the means to examine the practices of power in pedagogy. While not using a linguistic approach herself, she developed the following coding categories derived from a careful reading of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* with which to analyze her data: surveillance, normalization, exclusion, distribution, classification, individualization, totalization, regulation, space, time, knowledge, self. I have drawn on these categories to assist in describing the effects of language choices in the texts analysed below

To make a closer study of how language use is implicated in the construction of knowledge and subjectivities a more fine grained tool of analysis is required; one which

is able to provide a systematic analysis of spoken language, an analysis which, like Gore's coding analysis, goes beyond 'insightful interpretation'. It might be argued that the analysis described below would be possible following a number of close readings of the texts. From experience I would argue that this may well be the case for some texts, but that a systematic analysis of the grammatical and lexical patterns leaves an insightful reading less to chance and can provide insights into patterns of use which would otherwise have been unavailable. To provide such an analytic tool I have looked to systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1985). as a system of grammar which recognizes the social constructedness of meaning (ref here to earlier chapters in the text??).

### **Method**

The textual analysis used here based on an interrogation of the text using questions and categories adapted from critical linguistics and social semiotics (Halliday 1985, Fairclough 1989) and interpreted in terms of Gore's coding categories. These can be divided into two main categories - those features of the text which are indicative of interpersonal meanings and social relations and those which construct ideational meanings, that is construct knowledge about the world. The questions under each of these categories are not intended to be exhaustive and have been particularly chosen with a spoken text in mind. Gore's coding categories bridge these since power operates both in terms of the interpersonal and in terms of the knowledge being constructed.

#### Interpersonal and social relations:

Questions to be asked under this heading include:

Who does most of the talking? Who determines what can be said, how it can be said and when? who determines what is of value in what is said?

What kinds of speech functions (commands, questions and statements) are used and by whom? How are these realized (declaratives, imperatives, interrogatives)?

What pronouns are used and by whom?

#### Ideational

Questions to be asked under this heading include:

What are the main grammatical participants? How are they described?

What processes are used with what modifiers (circumstances)?

What forms of address are used and by whom?

Is there evidence of modality? How is it used?

As teachers in the texts below make choices in language to constitute meaning and social relations, they draw on existing cultural and institutional discourses or sets of meanings which are already circulating in society; they also contribute to the (re)production of those discourses as they speak. To interpret any text it is necessary, then, to be able to identify the intertexts from which it may be constituted, the cultural resources which are available (and at times not available) for the participants, both listeners and speakers, to make meaning. The physical education lessons are constituted intertextually by drawing a complex range of discourse from education, sport, the academic disciplines associated with the study of human movement and most recently discourses which link exercise and fitness with health.

### **Physical education and the body**

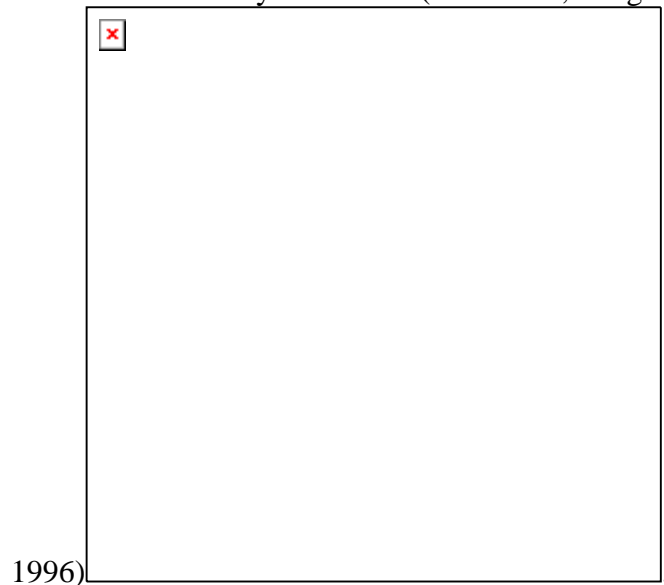
Physical education of all the curriculum areas of contemporary schooling provides the optimum opportunity for a detailed attention to the disciplining of the body and the production of embodied subjectivities. Physical education is centrally concerned with 'work' on the body, with the regulation and control of the body through both the ritualized practices of sport and physical education lessons (Hargreaves 1986) and through the scientific and medical rationales that underlie these practices (Kirk 1990). In Australia the physical education curriculum is profoundly implicated in constructing gender differences and patriarchal/dominant versions of heterosexual femininity and masculinity. This happens primarily through the dominance of those activities which have traditionally been associated with men and boys and with the construction of hegemonic masculinity, namely sports and team games (Connell 1995) and the marginalization of gymnastics and dance.

As well as discourses which constitute the body as gendered there are many other systems of values and meanings which effect the body and are embedded in the practices of physical education (Richard Tinning (1990) for instance has identified the influence of ideologies such as technocratic rationality, individualism, compulsory heterosexuality, mesomorphism). The two most prominent which need to be mentioned here are those which equate health with fitness and those which define physical activity in terms of performance and achievement. In Western society the commodification of the body, through the fashion and fitness industry and through the popular media, together with a prevailing anxiety about death through heart disease has led to the equation of health with fitness as realized in a slim toned body, the apparent product of hard work through exercise and diet. The pursuit is fitness and a 'healthy lifestyle' has also been promoted by the state (for instance, the NSW 'Life Be In It Campaign') as the practice of the responsible individual. The rationale for physical education as a

legitimate subject in the school curriculum has often been argued on the basis of its contribution to children's fitness through participation in physical activity and most physical education teachers would argue that one of their main aims is the promotion in their students' of a commitment to a healthy lifestyle and regular exercise.

The second discourse is one which promotes the acquisition of skill and the improvement of performance as the primary purpose of school physical education. These outcomes are achieved through teaching practices based on the principles and understandings of the body derived from research in the human movement sciences - for instance exercise physiology, biomechanics and motor learning. Learning is then taken to require the teaching of specific skills by experts who can demonstrate skills, break skills into their component parts for more easy acquisition, organize activities which provided for repetitive practice and are able to analyse skill performance and offer corrective guidance. This skill acquisition and training approach stands in opposition to other approaches which promote learning through movement which emphasise the *process* of learning rather than the end product (performance).

Movement education, a form of physical education developed by women in the Britain in popular in girls schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is an example of one such approach where the emphasis is on problem solving through movement and body awareness (Kirk 1992, Wright



The metaphor of the body as machine is prominent in both the healthy lifestyles and performance discourses. In one the body is to be exercised and cared for, to be worked on to accrue health benefits; in the other the body, is to be trained to perform effectively and to achieve in competitive situations. Neither stand alone, both have many elements of compatibility with each other and the other dominant discourses which inform

physical education. All are evident to some degree in the text which will be discussed below.

### **A text analysis: a girls' gymnastics lessons**

The text to be analysed comes from a year 9 girls' gymnastics lesson taught by a female teacher. In many ways this is not necessarily typical of a physical education lesson, taught as it is to a single sex class of girls. Physical education classes are increasingly coeducational and classes taught to boys have differences which can be linked to the differences in the positioning of boys and their male teachers in relation to the discourses and practices associated with sport. On the other hand, the structure and more general features of this lesson still serve to demonstrate how language use produces particular notions of the body and particular gendered relations of power.

The transcript of the gymnastics lesson was collected as part of a larger study in which teachers agreed to wear a microphone and were recorded using a professional Sony Walkman which they wore slung over the shoulders - no mean feat in a physical education lesson where the teacher is expected to be active. Further material was collected through videoing lessons and observational notes. In physical education lessons the teacher does most of the task related talking and there is usually far less verbal interaction between teachers and students so that most of the linguistic material that is available is from the teacher.

### The roll call: standardization, surveillance and normalization

The lesson began with a roll call. The students were seated on the floor in front of the teacher while the teacher called each name in turn and waited for the students' response (surveillance). Students were allocated marks on the degree to which their uniform was complete. By Year 8 many of the girls could supply their own mark (surveillance, normalization, regulation, technologies of the self). Like most schools the appropriate dress in this class meant a specific uniform which went beyond the necessity of safety - in this case a short brown skirt or brown tracksuit pants with a pale blue T-shirt. These are clothes that the girls would not by choice wear on any other occasion and serve as an indication of compliance with school and class rules.

The roll call provides an opportunity for surveillance and for remarking on the uniform of the student as an indication of her attitude to the lesson, of defining the standard and of establishing rules. It serves to divide students into those who comply and those who don't - those whose bodily inscriptions fit with the range of expectations. Like most of a physical education lesson the monitoring goes beyond uniform to an observation of



body types - those which are slim and/or appropriately muscular and which can be taken to indicate an appropriate attitude to physical activity and those which don't.

Following the roll marking the teacher made a number of statements which served to establish that the arrangement for this lesson has been changed. This took place because the teacher was concerned that the girls may have been inhibited by the boys' scrutiny of their bodies. In doing so she constructs the girls as objects of the boys' gaze, under male surveillance. She also clearly differentiates the boys as a category from the girls with different attributes (classification) and characterizes all the boys and all of the girls as possessing the attributes described (totalization).

With the 9B 2 girls you weren't with us last week, but what we've decided very briefly is with Year 9's we're separating you for gymnastics as I explained, from the boys in your class, whereas you normally do co-ed physical education. Doing that particularly in gym because of skirts, and you'll see that the girls who were here last week have been told that they're able to wear light pants, um tights, something suitable they consider to gymnastics, (someone talking in class) Listen please, (pause). Something that you consider to be suitable for gymnastics.

What will happen, Mr P and Mr S are taking all the boys in the three classes. At the moment they're going outside, but at times,... we're doing gymnastics from now until the end of the term, they will be using half of the hall in here. So what we're particularly aiming at is you people being more conscious of what your doing instead of who's looking at you doing it.

In this quote the teacher establishes the normality of relations where girls' bodies are subject to the scrutiny of the male students and where the girls are so preoccupied with this scrutiny that they cannot concentrate. It is also taken-for-granted (as normal) that female teachers will teach female students and male teachers will teach male students.

#### The warm-up: the fragmented body

In the next section of the lesson, the teacher through a series of commands organized the arrangement of the warm-up. The teacher had some linguistic choices about the way she does this: her commands could take the form of imperatives, declaratives or interrogatives. This particular teacher tended to use declaratives when giving general instructions to the whole class; that is rather than saying 'find a partner, and with her, bring the mats out and place them in this half of the hall' she used what could be understood as a less powerful mode. She also used 'we' instead of 'you' when she was

clearly referring to activities in which only the girls would be involved (choosing partners). Both these grammatical strategies can be construed as an attempt to construct a teacher student relationship which is less skewed in terms of power. Its success depends on how the students make sense of what she says and they do this in the larger context of the lesson, their experiences of teachers, of this teachers and what else she does and says in this lesson.

You only need to work on one mat between two, so the storeroom is open, *we'll* have *our* usual partners please and a line down here giving lots of room for girls to bring the mats out and using this half of the hall just placing the mats in a space.

The following excerpt from the gymnastic lesson is typical of the more general linguistic features usually identifiable in a physical education warm up but also provides some further illustrations of how gendered bodies are constructed in physical education. Systemic functional linguistics basic unit of analysis is the clause, so the text has been claused for easier analysis.

Teacher: What's the purpose of doing a warm up?.

Student: Stretching our calves.

Teacher : Stretching and,

Girl: (Unclear)

Teacher : No, what else do we have to do other than stretching?

(Pause)

Have to get the blood circulating.

Alright.

So that all those fibres, muscle fibres are being fed with oxygen,  
so that we're prepared to do physical work.

Right standing up very quickly.

(Pause)

Right, just on the spot, just jogging.

(Pause: sound of girls jogging)

Right keeping those ankles right up off the floor. (Pause)

Don't have to come very high.

Right rolling wrists,

make a wave with your forearms and your wrists,

(Pause: giggling and talking in background)

and pressing against each,

hands against one another.

We might do some hard things today  
so take the opportunity of this position.

Pray,

(laughter in background)

Press hard.

Alright standing  
and stretch,

up,

change feet,

up

and stretch, right back.

Keep those elbows high.

Straight up there.

Straight up,

there,

up,

there,

up

and point those little toes to the floor.

When you do gymnastics or dance,

Allison if you face me

you'll know what's going on.

You should turn your feet out

so little toes go to the floor.

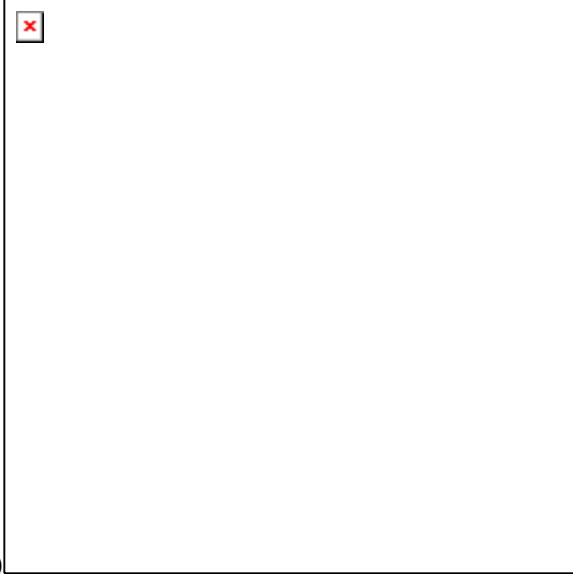
Not big toes,

but little toes. (Pause)

As is the case in most physical education lessons, the teacher does most if not all the talking, generally as a series of ellipsed commands realized by material processes ('press', 'stretch') and circumstances of place or manner, or in many cases, ellipsed to the point that only circumstances remain ('up', 'there', 'quickly'). The students are positioned as the recipients of a constant flow of talk to which they must respond by moving their bodies in specific ways. The students ('you') are the main subjects and actors in the clauses, with the body or parts of the body are positioned as the object/goal to be moved in specified ways and in specified directions. The choices of activities made in the warm-up are on the basis of the principles of movement derived from exercise physiology and from pedagogical imperatives about safety - students must go through a warm-up before they can participate in a skill practice without experiencing injury. The

activities thus draw on particular knowledge regimes which are translated into specific practices by the teachers and the students.

Of all the segments of the lesson the warm-up would have to provide the most potential for the expression of the regulatory practices and technology of training that Foucault



(1979) describes in relation to the disciplining of bodies in army training. Bodies are divided into component parts (calves, ankles, wrists, feet, elbows, toes) which must move or be placed in specific ways and within specific time frames. The physical organisation and the predominance of commands in the warm-up provide an optimum environment for creating relations of authority and control. Divergences from the appropriate execution of the activity provide the means for the assertion of the teacher's authority and their right in this lesson to regulate all behaviour pertaining to the body. Students are physically organised to facilitate surveillance by the teacher. They face the teacher and the pace of the instructions means that all students have to be paying attention so that they are performing the activities at the same time as the rest of the class.

In this text, what is of particular interest is the close attention to the positioning of parts of the body, to the placement of the feet and toes. The request to place the feet is explained in terms of the standards appropriate to gymnastics and dance, realized by the used of the obligatory from of the verbal auxiliary 'When you do gymnastics or dance ... you should turn your feet out so little toes go to the floor. Not big toes, but little toes.' The 'you' both carries the meanings of you the specific students in the class and you as is a statement of rule 'one should' - this is 'how things are done', drawing on a set of values and behaviors appropriate or 'normal' to the field (normalization, knowledge). This attention to the aesthetics and proper comportment of the body is taken up again in other parts of the lesson when the teacher says

Form, how we do things in gymnastics is important ... Let's now start to get legs together if they're supposed to be together; straight if they're supposed to be straight. Think about your feet, and instead of having this big blob on the end of your leg, right, your foot becomes the same line as your leg. Start to look at how you're doing things.

Practice: classification; standardization

Having completed the stretches, the practice stage is introduced by statements about what skills will be practised in the lesson today.

Rolls,  
we're not going to start with forward rolls today,  
we're going to start with backward rolls.

(Pause: a few groans from girls)

Backward rolls don't necessarily have to go over your head.  
What are the things to remember in a backward roll?

Student: Keep your head tucked in.

Teacher: Keep your head tucked in, yes,  
in any roll you have to keep your head tucked in  
cause basically you're trying to become like a ball  
aren't you.

Something else,  
Yola? (Pause)

What about your knees,  
where do your knees have to go in a backward roll  
if you're going to,

Student: under (rest unclear)

Teacher: Well under your chin or up to your chest.

You've got to keep your back rounded and  
your knees into your chest.

If you keep your knees into your chest  
then you will roll over.

If you're going to do a shoulder roll,  
keep your knees tucked  
and they go over your shoulder to one side,  
and then you don't get that stretch of the neck that you do in a backward roll.

What about hands  
if your going to do a backward roll?

Student:(unclear)

Teacher: Right,

where you just put them in that back arch,  
 where your hands went underneath you in the back arch,  
 that's where they go.  
 Keep your elbows in,  
 don't have them flying out to the side,  
 elbows in,  
 knees tucked to your chest and backward rolls.  
 Lets see,  
 one at a time please,  
 long ways, along your mat.  
 Don't have to tell you that  
 you know that one already.

The text above begins with a set of statements which classify rolls into backward and forward rolls and go on to set up the conditions by which backward rolls need to be executed successfully (knowledge, classification) . In this case the students are invited to recall (knowledge) presumably from previous lesson what they already know about the execution of backward rolls. The teacher reiterates the students response in a linguistic form which is characteristic of this section of the lesson : that is a rule-like statement realized grammatically by modulation - that is by modal auxiliaries such as *have to, must, got to, should*, as in 'you have to keep your head tucked in' and 'you've got to keep you're back rounded' or imperatives which encode correct procedures rather than expect an immediate response 'keep your elbows in', an enactment of a regulatory process by which certain rules of behaviour are invoked.

The number of questions in this section is rather unusual for a typical physical education lesson and is indicative of the ways this particular teacher is more likely to draw on a movement education discourse where students are expected to think about the elements of time, space, weight and flow in relation to their movements. A movement education approach is ostensibly intended to place more emphasis on student-centered learning and problem-solving. In Gore's terms it shifts more to mechanisms of the self, however movement education classes still provide contexts for constant surveillance and for the processes of normalization. What has changed is what is regarded as normal. In traditional physical education classes standardized performances are valued as normal in movement education classes expressions of creativity and variance are valued.

Material processes predominate with the body or body parts as objects to be moved in particular directions, in a particular manner (circumstances of place) to achieve a specified skill. It would seem that the body is taken primarily to be a tool or instrument, capable of honing in terms of skill in response to directions from the teacher/expert but learning and thinking about movement is generally not part of the physical education process.

The lesson continues with further practice and ends with an opportunity for students to use large apparatus such as a vaulting box and trampoline. Space precludes a continuing analysis of the features of the lesson. Nor is this necessarily required for this analytical project. This text is one instantiation of culture - the purpose in this analysis is to demonstrate how institutional and cultural meanings are constituted in this educational text in specific relation of power. Moreover this analysis is in itself partial and would always be so - other technologies of analysis may provide other readings.

### **Discussion**

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, what is it now possible to say. It is clear from the analysis above that the teacher is the one primarily involved in the processes of regulating what can be done, how it can be done and where. She is embodied as the expert through her capacity to ask questions to which she knows the answer, to demonstrate skills, to assist others through directions and by supporting and moving bodies. Through her use of language the teacher constructs particular notions of the female embodied subjectivity as being concerned with how one looks. On the one hand this is constituted in terms of male scrutiny and on the other in terms of the female body as an aesthetic object where close attention to the positioning of body parts is important.

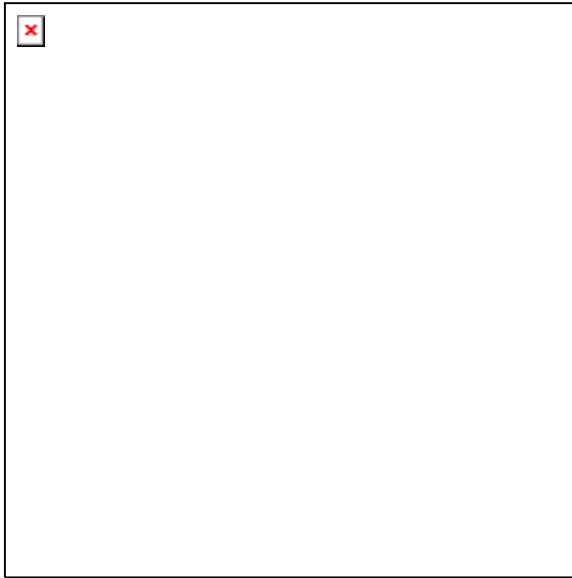
The lesson illustrates those assumptions about the body, about physical activity and about bodies and gender that are taken-for-granted, that is, that are dominant/hegemonic. What we have in both gymnastics and sport more generally is the adherence to an idea that there is a hierarchy of skills where the basics have to be mastered before moving on to the skills of a higher order. Not only is there a hierarchy of skills, but there is also a profound conviction that certain skills are valuable in themselves and need to be part of the students repertoire - e.g. forward and backward roll in gymnastics. While this is rationalized by arguments of safety, the whole configuration, the way of thinking about the body, the existence of these activities and not others in the syllabi speaks to a particular historical set of circumstances not the universality of these activities and skills and the ways of acquiring them.

The analysis above demonstrates that as Foucault points out : 'a relation of surveillance, defined and regulated is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency' (Foucault (1997)). But as Gore points out inherent to Foucault's notion of power is its capacity to be productive, pedagogy requires the exertion of power, it is inescapable. In physical education the exertion of mechanisms of power on the body is particularly evident - the physical organisation of the lesson lends itself to constant surveillance of the students by the teachers and vice versa, the knowledge and skills which constitute the content of the lesson are taken as given with the teacher as expert. This provides a context in which practices which regulate the body and which determine normal and appropriate ways of behaving are constantly reiterated. In the beginning of the lesson students are categorised into boys and girls with different 'naturalised' characteristics. The students practice of the activities set, their ability to judge their own rating in relation to the uniform requirement all speak to the successful operation of various technologies of the self in keeping with their positioning as students and as students of a physical education lesson.

What this means for the teachers and students involved is that other ways of thinking about the body remain hidden, certain ways of thinking about the body of moving the body become naturalized. Nor is the position of the teacher as expert questioned. This is not to say that all the students in the class accept their positioning, although their resistance is not evident in the transcript and in this class most of the students performed the movements as required. This does not mean that some students through their experiences of other discourses, texts etc (for instance alternative ways of moving the body such as yoga or different ways of thinking about femininity) could not or did not accept the ways in which the teachers practices positioned them.



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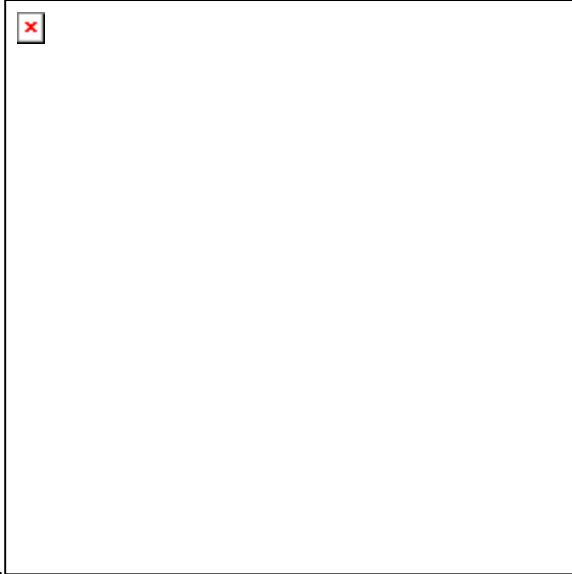


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