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Introduction

As a Physical Education (PE) teacher I recognise the ever increasing importance of health and physical activity as the core of wellbeing in our society. I am committed to enabling all people regardless of age, gender, class and ethnicity to experience the excitement of participating in a range of health and movement related contexts. By providing opportunities for people to learn in, through and about movement I believe that PE is uniquely located to foster a population of active and critical consumers of physical activity in our society (Macdonald & Tinning, 2003).

Although there is some evidence of PE teachers who challenge gender dualistic thinking, powerful dominant discourses are still shaping gendered patterns in PE (Webb & Macdonald, 2007). Many studies have investigated girls’ alienation and lack of participation in PE (e.g. Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Bain, 1995; Ennis, 1999; Griffin, 1984b, 1985, 1993; Hastie, 1998; Nilges, 1998; Satina, Solmon, Cothran, Loftus, & Stockin-Davidson, 1998), however, few studies have focused on boys’ experiences of PE (e.g. Drummond, 2003; Hickey, 2008; Parker, 1996). Moreover, as pointed out by Lundvall (2004), studies investigating gendered experiences of PE are typically comparative and rarely look at differences within genders. This “gender differences” research, primarily (although not exclusively) focuses on quantitative data concerning boys’ and girls’ perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and sources of motivation (e.g. Lee, Fredenburg, Belcher, & Cleveland, 1999; Satina et al., 1998). Research into the merits of single-sex and mixed-sex PE classes could also be included here (e.g. Griffin, 1984; Lirgg, 1994). In general, gender differences research has taken the categories of boys and girls as given and proceeded to argue that PE teachers need to take account of these differences. As such, it leaves mostly untouched the categories themselves.

This paper is based on my doctoral research in which I wanted to challenge the idea of boy as a homogenous category and highlight the fluidity of boys’ performances of gender. By employing a poststructural approach and in particular Foucault’s (1972) concept of discourse and Butler’s (1990) notion of gender as a performance, I wanted to reinforce understandings of the importance of gender in relation to PE, performances of gendered selves and relations of power. The prime thesis argument was that boys perform a diverse range of gendered identities depending on the social context and that we in this sense perhaps should be
regarding individuals’ identities as “polygendered” (Daniels, 2009). The thesis was guided by the following research question: *How do boys perform gender in Physical Education?*

### Methodology

In my study I used a participatory visual research approach (Pink, 2001; Prosser, 2007) in which PE classes were recorded using video, by both me as the researcher and the participating boys. By employing this approach I particularly wanted to include “student voice” and endeavor to bridge the gap between the researcher and the researched since through a poststructural lens reality is a co-construction. Visual research, according to Pink (2007), creates a “context where ethnographers/authors can create or represent continuities between [these] diverse worlds, voices or experiences, and describe or imply points in the research at which they meet or collide” (p. 144). Prosser (2007) argues that the use of participatory visual research methods in educational research is of importance since it shifts the focus from doing research on students to research with and by students. Participatory visual research methods thus “let the people speak for themselves” (Prosser & Burke, 2008, p. 408) and can therefore provide a more intimate representation of the participants’ contextually embedded everyday experiences. This also enables a more fluid and open construction of perceived experiences, lending full ownership over the construction and social-personal representation of those experiences (Banks, 2001). Nevertheless, when the visual data is edited and produced, a level of distance between the participant, researcher, and the social context is still maintained (Schuck & Kearney, 2006). To increase the level of intimacy between the researcher, the visual data and the social context Banks (2001) has suggested that the images produced by the participants can be used as a form of “interview probing”. This is why the visual data recorded by both me and the participating boys was used during the focus groups and individual interviews to help provide a more ethical and balanced presentation of results by giving the boys the chance to provide an interpretation of the visual data (Kaplan & Howes, 2004).

### The Research Process

The research setting was a multicultural single-sex boys’ secondary school in Auckland, New Zealand. Participants in this study were 61 Year 10 (age 14-15) students from two different
PE classes. All the participants and one parent/legal guardian signed consent forms. The researcher spent a total of 1 year with both PE classes collecting data from field notes, video recordings, focus groups and individual interviews.

After an initial period of observations lasting a couple of weeks I started letting the students being in control of the video camera. The only instruction I gave them before handing over the video camera was that they were supposed to produce a “mini-documentary” of their PE. Each student got to use the video camera for about 20-30 minutes resulting in a mixture of longer and shorter video clips. These clips were then copied across to my computer without any editing taking place and transcribed comprising narratives and still images. The boys’ visual representations and interpretations were then explored during the focus groups and individual interviews. The conversations were taped and later transcribed.

The data was analysed using ‘thematic analysis’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The flexibility of thematic analysis means that there are a number of ways of determining themes and their prevalence. There is no fixed frequency or proportion of the data that needs to display evidence of a particular theme for it to be considered a theme. A theme was defined as something that “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

The Gendered Spaces and Places of Physical Education

The boys’ visual representations together with their descriptions and interpretations of these in the focus groups and individual interviews provided thick and rich accounts of boys’ performances of gender in PE and generated an array of meanings. Their visual representations and interpretations particularly gave me an indication of what they want “others to see and think about; they draw attention and direct attention” (Donoghue, 2007, p. 66). The visual component of my study in particular focused on the spaces and places which the boys had PE where the boys present, and are presented with ways of performing and doing gender, where learning about the self and the “other” occurs. Donghue (2007) argues that often the physical spaces in which gender is performed “tend to be viewed as mere settings, a backdrop or stage” (p. 66). However, the boys’ visual representations and interpretations in my research highlight how particular gendered identities and discourses of
gender which shape boys performances of gender are embedded in the design and structure of the physical spaces associated with PE.

Joseph’s and Randy’s visual representations and interpretations (Figure 1) draw attention to ways in which performing gender in PE constitutes and are constituted by a dominant discourse of gender inherent in the space/place itself.

![Figure 1: The spaces and places of PE (images have been edited to prevent the school and individual participants from being identified).](image)

While talking about his video clips (represented by the first two still images) Joseph says:

Joseph: Well you know I hate being stuck inside these four walls of the gym.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Joseph: Well I just don’t feel comfortable being trapped like this I rather be out in the open, like when I go bmxing with my friends on the weekend. Then we just go anywhere we want, there are no stupid walls to keep us in!
Researcher: So how does this affect your participation in PE?

Joseph: Well, I guess I am considered one of the non-sporty ones that doesn’t really like PE…ummm not like most of the other boys.

Researcher: Being sporty and liking PE is important if you are a boy?

Joseph: Yeah.

When I ask Randy to explain why he kept focusing the video camera on the lines of a rugby field and soccer field (the bottom two images), he says:

Randy: Umm, well… within these damn lines I always get tackled…people get really aggressive.

Researcher: Why

Randy: Well all the other boys like playing rough and tumble…but I don’t really like sports like rugby and soccer…they are too violent.

In Joseph’s and Randy’s statements above, the physical space of being “trapped” inside the boundaries of, for instance, the gym or the rugby field is significant. In this instance, the physical and geographical space of the gym and the rugby field plays a role in shaping the behaviour of these boys. Through physical and geographical mechanisms these spaces, become uncomfortable and confrontational places in Joseph’s and Randy’s experiences, which both constrains and enables certain gendered identities. For Joseph this means being called “non-sporty” and someone that does not like PE which are both seen as ideals not “compatible” with being a boy. In Randy’s case the rugby field becomes congruent with the performance of gender that is aggressive, physical and forceful. The physical space of the rugby field acts as a space where certain ideas of male identities and proper ways of acting manly are performed, enacted and displayed, “rough and tumble”.

Furthermore, what is interesting about this particular space, the rugby field, is that there are three designated fields at this particular school which are often used for playing rugby and touch rugby during recess/breaks. However, boys, such as Joseph, who rather do other things such as “bmxing”, do not have existing spaces for their recreational use. Donoghue (2007) argues that “encoded in the designation of and provision of space for particular activities and interests is the belief that ‘real boys’ like to do particular things” p. 68). The management of
physical spaces in this way reproduces differences and hierarchies of being a boy. It can therefore be argued that a school’s physical spaces are also agents in the gendering of these boys. While, as Venkatesh’s (1997) puts it, “individuals produce their space by investing their surroundings with qualitative attributes and specific meaning the formal qualities of a built environment exert a powerful effect on individuals by shaping the possibilities of their behaviors” (p. 90).

**Conclusion**

Young people’s visual representations and interpretations of their experiences in PE might further the study of gender in PE and help researchers, teachers and families understand how to address enduring issues of gender stereotypes in physical activity contexts. Joseph’s and Randy’s visual representations in addition to their verbal narratives suggest that the practices and processes of performing gender are embedded in and related to the material arrangements of the spaces and buildings themselves (Bourdieu, 1990). As a PE researcher I am therefore interested in the physical spaces that are produced and presented to our boys (and girls) and in accordance with Donoghue (2007) I call for an inquiry into what these spaces say about learning and where it occurs and how it occurs? But also for further research which makes visible the importance of considering physical spaces in sociological inquiries into gender in PE. I therefore continue to be interested in devising visual research methods which provides young people with a medium through which they can think about, reflect, articulate and reason their experiences in PE, and their relationships with their peers and more importantly themselves. The use of such research approaches might also have the potential to improve educative outcomes in PE and serve the public good by enabling more boys (and girls) experience the excitement of participating in a range of health and movement related contexts and become active and critical consumers of physical activity in our society.
References


