

Fitting the jigsaw together: the body-school-society nexus and children's understanding of body pedagogies.

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Introduction

Increasing attention from many agencies on children's health, a proliferation of health interventions in schools and a growing body of knowledge about body pedagogies has prompted research studies to be conducted from sociological and particularly, socio-critical perspectives. This presentation will consider the impact on children's understanding of health through examining how health knowledge is prescribed in one Aotearoa¹/New Zealand primary school. Discussion will focus on how teachers re-contextualise this knowledge using social-cultural constructs such as the interrelationship between the body, school and society. The presentation reports findings from an ethnographic study that explored how primary school aged children came to understand and see their bodies. The study focused on children's understanding and perceptions of body pedagogies through their experience of being involved in a school wide focus on health as well as an intervention called Healthy Homework (HH). HH was an intervention that integrated a school curriculum and an eight week homework programme that aimed to teach children to be active and eat well at home, with both children and parents/caregivers being encouraged to eat nutritious food and lead an active lifestyle.

Method

The context for this study was a multi-cultural primary school - Tuihana School (a pseudonym) in Auckland. The study adopted an interpretivist methodology, with the researcher engaged as a participant observer within the class and school for one day per week over a two year period. Ethnographic research was chosen because in education it enlightens the social worlds that contribute to understanding behaviour, values and meanings of children within their cultural context. A point of difference in this Doctoral study was the move away from a quantitative data gathering study of predominantly physical evidence (biomedical) to the gathering of children's voice data about how they feel about their bodies (perfection - shape, weight, size) and what they share about what their bodies can do (competency and performance). Importantly, young people's voices are rarely heard in educational and sport research even though they are important to the education process and directly affect it (MacPhail, Kirk & Ely, 2007). Hence the research question, "What are the children's perceptions and experiences of their bodies and their selves within the micro-culture of a school during and after a Healthy Homework (HH) intervention?" Field notes were collected as the primary data source and were analysed using thematic analysis. NViVO software was used for coding with codes generated inductively. Pseudonyms were allocated to all the participants (including in-depth students, class participants and teachers).

Results

Drawing on data gathered through being a participant observer, one of the themes evident was the social construction of the body and its relevance to children. Findings revealed the subtle and complex ways in which schools and schooling shape children's understandings about health, food, activity, and their own and others' bodies and behaviours. This presentation will focus on ways in

¹ Aotearoa is the Maori (indigenous people) name for New Zealand

which health discourses were revealed and at times, how they were constituted as regimes of truth in and through schooling. Interventions that focus on school-based physical activity and nutrition practice is one strategy that policy makers internationally use to try and reduce childhood obesity (Wright, Burrows & Rich, 2012). Environments where children learn about their bodies and their selves are not free from the politics and policy of obesity discourse. It is this environment and the interconnection between the body-school-society that can impact on the identities of students and their understandings of health, their bodies and their selves.

Discussion

This presentation will explore these 'regimes of truth' and the socialisation effect they had on children's understanding of their bodies. Drawing on Bernstein's (2000) theorising of the relationship between schooling and social values, discussion of the study's findings will expose the ways in which society reproduces difference and social status through the distribution of power, class relations, communication codes and the principles of control. Bernstein (2000) suggests that society's values are promoted through the three message systems - (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) - that underpin a school culture. Indeed this presentation will expose a hegemony evident in the pedagogical activity undertaken by a number of teachers through curriculum and assessment practices that reinforced a behaviourist perspective of health. Teachers inadvertently reinforced health practices that were biomedical and often delivered these with little critical thought. This recontextualisation of health and body knowledge resulted in some children feeling privileged and others disadvantaged. Thus reinforcing that message systems in schooling collectively work to make education an arena of socialisation and allocation (Bernstein, 2000).

References

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