9 Health and physical education and the production of the ‘at risk self’

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Introduction

Notions of risk have become increasingly central to contemporary constructions of curriculum and pedagogy in school-based health and physical education (HPE). While there is a long history of attention to ‘risk’ in the field of HPE, there is a marked difference in how risk is currently formulated and deployed. This chapter explores how these new ‘risk discourses’ operate in the HPE classroom. Theorists such as Beck and Giddens point to the globalisation of risk, arguing that risk is a central characteristic of late-modern neo-liberal countries (Lupton 1999a). Our chapter, however, specifically draws on governmental theorists to explore the broad cultural and social ‘turn to risk’, and the significance this has for the ways in which health and physical education curriculum and pedagogy attempts to shape and produce particular kinds of people. We explore some of the effects of ‘risk discourse’ for curriculum, teachers, classroom practices, and for the young people who are the target of the risk curriculum. The discussion draws from data collected as part of a larger study that sought to explore the dominant and contesting discourses that operate within school-based health education.

We will centre our discussion on an analysis of classroom data from a year 10 Health and Physical Education course that was taught at an inner city Melbourne secondary school in Victoria, Australia. A range of methods were utilised to collect data for this project. These included: teacher interviews; key informant interviews; classroom observations and an examination of curriculum documents and support materials. Texts were analysed via a form of critical discourse analysis that provides ‘a way of conceptualizing and deconstructing the relations both within and between education, the body, identity and health as constructed domains’ (for a more detailed overview of this methodology, see Wright, Chapter 2).

Risk, governance and health and physical education

The following excerpt, taken from the rationale of the Victorian Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum document, is explicit in its desire to produce a particular type of citizen:

The Health and Physical Education KLA [Key Learning Area] provides a foundation for developing active and informed members of society capable of managing the interactions between themselves and their social, cultural, organizational, physical and natural environments in the pursuit of lifelong involvement in physical activity, health and well being.

(Board of Studies 2000: 5)

In statements such as this we can see that HPE is concerned with producing a certain kind of subject: one who is ‘autonomous, directed at self improvement, self regulated, desirous of self knowledge, a subject who is seeking happiness and healthiness’ (Lupton 1995: 11). The concept of ‘governmentality’ offers a generative theoretical frame with which to explore the project of HPE in relation to producing certain kinds of subjects/citizens. Government, as understood by Foucault, is a ‘contact point’ where technologies of power, or domination, and technologies of the self interact (Burchell 1996: 20). Foucault describes ‘technologies of the self’ as those practices of the self whereby subjects constitute themselves in interaction with technologies of power. Technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

(Foucault 1988: 18)

Mitchell Dean refers to practices of the self as the process of ‘governmental self formation’. He defines this as

the ways in which various authorities and agencies [in this case HPE and its associations] seek to shape the conduct, aspirations, needs, desires and capacities of specified political and social categories, to enlist them in particular strategies and to seek definite goals.

(Dean 1995: 563)

For those who are interested in governmentality studies and practices of self-formation, the ‘turn to risk’ is significant (Turner 1997). As Lupton notes, a ‘new prudentialism’ has been identified ‘in governmental discourses and strategies, which moves away from older notions of social insurance as a means of distributing risks to a focus on individuals protecting themselves against risk’ (Lupton 1999b: 5). This new prudentialism produces a different way of acting on the self. It incites subjects to shape themselves in particular ways. We would suggest that school-based health and physical education is one such point of ‘contact’, in that it provides a key site in which the governmental imperative to produce healthy citizens is enacted via a range of pedagogical strategies and processes. The aim here is to ensure that students of HPE engage in certain technologies of the self that are both health-directed and related. The imperative to produce healthy citizens is not a new phenomenon, and we would argue that school-based health and physical education has always been about shaping a particular type of subject (Kirk 2001; Lupton...
In this sense, HPE as a site of governance has enduring qualities. However, we argue that in late modernity, and amid the proliferation of health and risk discourses, that this production and government of the self has taken on new forms (Peterson 1997).

Several researchers have begun to explore the significance of risk, and how it operates within the field of HPE (for example, Gard and Wright 2001; Tinning and Glasby 2002). Explorations to date, however, have largely relied on policy/document analysis to suggest potential consequences in the classroom. Given the lack of classroom data, our research specifically sought to explore the different discourses that circulate within both the HPE curriculum and HPE classroom. Like Gard and Wright (2001) and Tinning and Glasby (2002) our data demonstrates that risk is of central importance within the HPE curriculum, and that expert knowledges were significant in the production of risk. Thus, it is not surprising that risk and risk knowledges were also a dominant feature of the HPE classrooms we observed. What was interesting, however, is the way in which risk and risk knowledges were deployed within the classroom context. We found that risk was critical to the way in which contemporary governance was enacted, in that it worked to interpellate the students as self-governing neo-liberal subjects who understood themselves as being ‘at risk’. In other words, if contemporary governance is primarily concerned with seeking ‘to foster and shape such capacities so that they are enacted in ways that are broadly consistent with particular objectives such as order, civility, health or enterprise’ (Rose 2000: 323) then, in the current climate, a first step in enlisting people into this process is to ensure that they understand themselves as being at risk (Tait 2000). Thus the pedagogical strategies we observed worked in complex ways to constitute the students as such.

The governmentality literature per se has tended to focus on ‘formal systems of governance’ that, not surprisingly, ‘neglect the non-rational (including moral) dimensions of governance’ (Moore and Valverde 2000: 515). Our focus in this chapter is on the micro-practices of risk technologies in actual classrooms. This leads us to question the primacy afforded to ‘expert knowledges’ in the governmentality literature. Like Moore and Valverde we have found that information about risks appears in a ‘highly mixed format that includes scientific data presented ... alongside moralizing melodramatic narratives’ (ibid.: 515). The following discussion explores how HPE operates as a site of governance, by working to constitute the ‘at risk self’, and the role that both expert and hybrid risk knowledges play in such a project.

**Constituting the at risk self**

...you think about everything that they have to face and you know, the risks out there to them. So we do things like nutrition and physical fitness and we also look at issues to do with drugs. So we are teaching them ways of looking after themselves, how to eat good food, be physically fit and minimise risks related to drugs. We give them knowledge, and then some skills and they can make informed choices. It is the last chance we have to get at them, to show them the things they can do for themselves, so they can be healthier.

(Interview: Ms Hill HPE – Key Learning Area Manager)

The year 10 course on which this chapter draws was entitled ‘Mind Your Own Body’ (MYOB). Interestingly, within the title of the course, the governmental imperative of HPE is explicit. One of the fundamental assumptions that underpins the course, which Ms Hill alludes to, is that all students are at risk and that HPE has a role to play in helping students manage the risks, so they can ‘look after themselves’. In the case of MYOB the course focus is on providing knowledge and skills in the topic areas of nutrition, physical fitness and drugs, with the objective being to ensure that students can make ‘informed choices’. The overall aim is for students to be able to mind their own body (an exemplary technology of the self) in a way that is congruous with the broader health/economic concerns of neo-liberal governance of the health of populations. The underlying assumption here is that it is only a lack of knowledge and skills that prevents students from acting rationally to minimise risks. The focus is on individual responsibility for changing health behaviours and this is what characterises contemporary forms of government of the self in HPE: these are the new practices of the self. These exhortations make sense within the risk discourses operating at the micro level of the classroom because they link up with broader public health imperatives to prevent certain harms and diseases associated with nutrition, drug use and physical fitness.

Given the focus of the course, the following analysis and discussion explores the role of risk in enlisting HPE students to engage in practices of governmental self-formation. Ms Hill states in her overview of MYOB that one of their explicit aims is to provide students with ‘knowledge’. We suggest that this knowledge is of a particular type and its deployment in the HPE classroom is ostensibly largely about constituting an ‘at risk’ subject. Within MYOB, the classroom becomes a key site where students are constituted as ‘at risk’, and learn to understand themselves as either already being at risk, or potentially becoming at risk (essentially at risk of being at risk!). This takes place via a number of pedagogical practices that employ a range of risk knowledges.

Once the students are identified as subjects who understand themselves as being at risk, the rationale of HPE then becomes one of working pedagogically to make sure that students engage in practices that limit risk so as to guard against becoming the unhealthy ‘at risk’ other. The production of risk was recursive as every opportunity to reiterate risk was taken up by the teachers, in an attempt to ensure that students would not forget they were ‘at risk’.

**Risk knowledges**

The following analysis of classroom data explores how risk knowledges are deployed within the HPE classroom to lead students into understanding themselves as being at risk.
Expert risk knowledges

Expertise is central to the project of governance (Rose 1989), in that it renders a myriad of social fields and spaces governable through a range of practices that seek to document, calculate, classify and evaluate individuals and populations (Peterson and Lupton 1996). Hence, we currently have a proliferation of epidemiological data regarding increasing levels of obesity and the prevalence of so-called lifestyle diseases (cardiovascular disease, diabetes) which are seen as amenable to intervention. These expert knowledges are disseminated in various ways, the HPE classroom being one. In reference to our data, the deployment of expert risk knowledges via the pedagogical space of MYOB occurred in a number of ways, with the effect being to ensure HPE students attained knowledge about their ‘at risk’ status. The following excerpt from a nutrition classroom highlights how expert risk knowledges are deployed by the teacher, and how such knowledges are utilised in the space to engage the students in the practice of comparing the self, in this case their diet, to expert knowledges about nutrition and dietary risk.

Ms Murry: Okay today we are going to be looking at nutrition, and I want you to write everything down that you ate yesterday and today already.

Class: [General groan.]

Ms Murry: Now once you’ve done that I want you to go through and make a note of the following things. I’ll put them on the board and go over them in a minute. Start writing down what you ate, and be honest with yourself. Be sure to note quantity.

Class: [Another groan.]

[Ms Murry turns to the board and writes down the following list: Fibre, Calcium, Cholesterol, Salt, Sugar.]

Ms Murry: Can I have your attention for a moment please? Now this is for when you have finished noting down what you have eaten. I want you to go to your text and look up each of these on the board [points to board] and find out what they do for you or to you and make some notes. Um, I want you to focus on the following [writes on board as she is talking] What is the RDI? Are you eating the RDI? and What will happen to you if you don’t eat the RDF? [stops writing] So girls, basically the consequences of not eating properly, eating the things you should be eating. So, what are the risks to your health? So whether it be related to cancer, CVD [asks a question] Who knows what CVD is? [no one answers] Mmm well, it’s in the book. So you might want to organise it under some goals for yourselves like this in your books, like this [compiles the following list on the board].

Goals
Reduce Fat intake
Problems which may occur if this goal is ignored:
My personal goal:
I will lower my fat intake by.

This style of activity is commonly utilised within HPE, and there are a number of pedagogical practices used to deliver this content. Versions we have observed include: setting of a homework task where the students monitor their food intake in a food diary; the use of computer software for the analysis; an assessment task where students report on their eating habits and have to explain why they weren’t inside the dietary guidelines, what the associated risks are, how they could then improve their diet and monitoring of their health behaviour change. Although there is much to be made out of the above classroom excerpt and the additional examples, in this chapter we are interested in how expert risk knowledges are deployed in this setting. Expert knowledges are used to legitimate the focus on ‘healthy’ eating and the teacher uses expert nutrition and risk knowledges as a way of engaging students in a process of self-knowing in relation to whether they are eating ‘properly or not’ and what the consequences are to their health if they do not. Her specific directions require that students ‘confess’ their diet, to ‘be honest’ with themselves and then analyse their diet in light of what expert knowledges recommend. Ms Murry’s final comments suggest that if students properly understand the health risks then they will rationally change their eating behaviours. This mode of reasoning encapsulates the pedagogical effects and governmental function of HPE, highlighting the role risk plays within both.

Other risk knowledges

Moore and Valverde (2000) have suggested that there are many domains of risk governance and that most of the analysis in the field of governmentality studies to date has focused on rational and expert systems of governance. While we acknowledge that expert scientific risk knowledges are ever present within the HPE classroom, they are not the only risk knowledges operating. In our observations we found that other risk knowledges operated powerfully in the classroom, and that often the teacher and students worked in combination to produce and reproduce these. Moore and Valverde (2000) refer to these other risk knowledges as ‘hybrid risk knowledges’ where melodramatic and often mythical risk narratives (supported by popular cultural images) are mixed with scientific information. We suggest that these hybrid risk knowledges, which are actively produced within the classroom contexts, are incredibly effective in constituting young people as being at risk. The veracity of these knowledges is rarely challenged as they work persuasively to convince the HPE students that they should regulate their health behaviours in ways that are consistent with broader governmental objectives. The following excerpt is an example of this:

Ms Hill: Okay what is wrong with being unfit?
Class: [All at once] You get fat, look like Homer Simpson, yuk, you could die.
Ms Hill: So well if you don’t want to look like Homer it’s important to exercise to keep fit.

(Field notes, year 10 HPE class)

The above classroom discussion draws from expert knowledges about being unfit, as well as contemporary cultural icons, in this case Homer Simpson, to try and seduce the students into the project of getting, or keeping, fit. Ms Hill overlooked the students’ responses related to death and obesity, what might be deemed to be derived from ‘rational’ public health discourses. Instead she elected to pick up on the potential risk of looking like Homer to instil the need to exercise. It is possible to discern a ‘clash’ of discourses in the above excerpt. The promotion of self-esteem (allowing students to voice their opinions without fear of favour, accepting themselves as they are) has a long and not unproblematic history in the HPE classroom. The imperative to ‘give voice’ or ‘express yourself’ can be insensitive to the different identifications, self-images and body shapes young people have. It is a testament to the power and the proliferation of risk discourses that concerns about body acceptance are virtually made to disappear. In another example, this time in the topic area of drugs, we found that risk knowledges worked in complex and potentially contradictory ways. In a general discussion about harms associated with drug use, a student commented:

Student: I know a friend who bought some cocaine that had glass in it and it was in there so it tore up the stomach so the drug got into the bloodstream more quickly.

Ms Woods: Well yes that is one of the dangers of buying illegal drugs.

(Field notes, year 10 HPE class)

The student attempts to draw from expert knowledges, in this case pharmacological knowledges, to tell the story about harms associated with cocaine use. What is interesting is that rather than deploy expert drug knowledges that would have questioned the account that cocaine ended up in the stomach, the teacher chose to use the student story to highlight the risks associated with illegal drug use. Here expert knowledge of drug use could have potentially undone the work of ‘risk’. Instead, primacy is given to the hybrid knowledge, which conveys the ‘Say no to drug use’ message very effectively. A similar scenario arises in the following excerpt:

Student: Two girls were in bed and they were on LSD and one of them bit her girlfriend’s nose off, she was so out of it and scared. And then she went to the bathroom because she thought that dragons and things were coming out of her back. And she picked up a slinky, you know those wiry springy things and she started scratching her back with it trying to get rid of the dragons and she sawed her head nearly off. It was hanging on by a thread.

Ms Murry: It is one of the risks you take isn’t it with illegal drugs? You might consider that to be an extreme story and does that make you think that when you use drugs, well that won’t happen to me?

(Field notes, year 10 HPE class)

Once again the student’s account incorporates expert knowledges and classifications commonly used in the drug field. However, these knowledges are combined to incorporate melodramatic and exaggerated tales of the effects of drug use. Together these knowledges in the classroom produced the risk associated with LSD use. The teacher used the story to reinforce the risk of drug use. In both of the examples it is clear that if the teachers had relied on isolated expert risk discourses about drug use, their responses to the stories could have been very different. For example, if Ms Murry had challenged the slinky story with expert facts about LSD use (or even the impossibility of sawing your head nearly completely off), she would have missed an opportunity to reinforce risk discourses and the individualisation of responsibility. As well, the narrative genre works well in establishing and maintaining interest, something that expert knowledges often struggle to do, and in this way often have more purchase in classroom dialogue. The call on students’ voices and experiences is also a persuasive pedagogical device.

Concluding comments

Governing in the neo-liberal context requires that people understand themselves as being ‘at risk’, and as we have argued, the contemporary field of HPE is inextricably tied to this project. HPE has the explicit intent of working pedagogically to ensure that young people come to learn that they are at risk and are therefore responsible for managing their risks. We have shown that the ‘at risk self’ is constituted and managed via the deployment, and production, of a range of risk knowledges. Some of the risk knowledges were derived from expert sources and officially enshrined within contemporary policy and curriculum; however, many were what Gore (2002: 4) refers to as ‘constructed out of pedagogy itself’. So whilst we acknowledge that policy is an important site for the articulation of dominant discourses in HPE, in this case risk, we also argue that not all of the discourses deployed in HPE are enshrined in the official policy and curriculum texts. Penney and Harris (Chapter 7) refer to this as slippage between policy texts and other texts.

In the classrooms, we observed how expert risk knowledges were mobilised in isolation, and as hybrid versions, to guide the students into understanding themselves as being at risk. At times the teacher’s deployment of expert knowledges could have, we suggested, operated to challenge the work and effectiveness of risk discourses. This is an important point because it indicates what can and cannot be said in the HPE classroom, and attests to the extent to which the classrooms in our research were constrained by risk imperatives. Even when there were opportunities to contradict risk discourse through the use of expert knowledges, the teachers turned to melodramatic hybrid discourses to sustain the risk identity imperative. Expert knowledges, whatever form they may take, worked in
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concert with moralising narratives (generated by teachers, students and popular cultural images/messages) to produce the at-risk young person.

What are the chances of disrupting or troubling these practices in our HPE classrooms? A full response to this question is beyond the scope of our discussion, however, as Nick Fox (1999: 29) has argued, 'What is hazardous is often likely to be highly contested'. He maintains that risk is now a part of how we think about ourselves and our social worlds and that:

These concepts are tied up with the values of a culture and the moral rights and responsibilities of members of that culture, and as such are implicated in how people understand themselves as reflexive, ethical subjects. Because these conceptions are contingent, the subjectivities which are created around risk, health and work are also relative: if this means that we are constrained by cultural constructions of subjectivity, it also means we can resist.

(Fox 1999: 30)

While this indicates the extent to which risk discourse saturates contemporary culture, it also raises a number of important questions which are beyond the scope of this chapter. For example, we might ask, to what extent do the students of HPE take up or resist the risk messages to which they are subjected?

Finally, following Nikolas Rose (2000) we argue that HPE as a governmental space is 'assembled from a complex and hybrid range of technologies' (Rose 2000: 323), and our observations of the HPE classrooms illustrate this discursive complexity. Becoming more cognizant of the discursive complexities that make up the spaces of contemporary HPE will allow us to understand the ways in which HPE acts as a site of governance and the multiple and non-unitary effects of risk and other intersecting discourses. This chapter has mapped some of the discursive practices that might shape young people’s understandings of themselves and of others, and the practices of self that HPE pedagogies foster. In order to extend our knowledge of this process, we need more research that explores classroom interactions as well as young people’s experience of HPE and their lived engagement with certain practices of the self.

References


