Bad sports: The risks associated with not ‘fitting in’

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Abstract
This paper is about peer rejection and bullying in schools and the tragic consequences that it can have. The focus of the paper is in the ways schools interact with groups of young males and, more importantly, those who are left out of these groupings. My concern is that schools currently give too little attention to informing and/or shaping the peer group practices of young people. I argue that the current educational theory and practice focus too heavily on individuals and their potential to act independently and overlook the all-important socialisation that takes place within and between groups. Drawing on two case-studies of young males who experience peer rejection, I seek to raise concerns about the contemporary socialising practices of young males and the burgeoning need for schools to play a role in bringing about change. Given the continued prominence of sport as a trajectory for defining the dominant masculinity, I believe that it is critical that physical educators engage with the discussions and debates that surround this topic.

Introduction
There is currently widespread community concern that the socialisation processes of the past are now failing to provide young males with appropriate social resources to facilitate their long-term health and happiness. Indeed, the statistical over-representation of young males in incidents of suicide, violence, accidental death, injury through misadventure, and drug and alcohol abuse has attracted considerable attention. Compounding this profile are frequent media illustrations of tragedy, abuse and loss emanating from young males’ involvement in anti-social and/or risk-taking activities. Images depicting the consequences of their risk-taking activities are source of considerable social anxiety. Prominent here has been
alarming regularity with which groups of young males are involved in serious motor vehicle accidents (Walker, Butland & Connell 2000). What makes these acts of risk-taking even more threatening across society is their potential to damage and impact the lives of many innocent people.

Each year millions of dollars are spent in a direct way to remedy the problems associated with young male risk-taking. Large sums of money are spent both rehabilitating injured youth or their victims and in developing and promoting preventative strategies through community education programs. As part of the formal social framework established to nurture the development of young people, schools are a part of this process. While schools continue to present as safe places for young people to be, their appropriation within the broader social concerns of society is warranted. Probably the sharpest signifiers that problems of young males are problems for schools, have been the shooting sprees undertaken in a number of American schools. While the events that occurred in Colorado, Kentucky, Oregon and Arkansas took place a long way from New Zealand, the images and narratives they projected were transported around the globe in the visual omnipresence of the media. Through the lens of the global media, things that occur a long way away can appear very close.

Further propelling social concern about the plight of young males relates to the declining educational performances of young males at school. Pivotal here is statistical evidence that paints a contemporary educational profile in which girls outperform their male counterparts in many aspects of their schooling (Buckingham, 2000). Concerned that this trend is the result of educational concessions that have been given to girls, on the back of the feminist movement, some are questioning the extent to which current curriculum and pedagogy cater for girls more than boys. The assertion here is that the rise of feminism has been catalytic in the demise of masculinity. According to boys’ education advocates, such as Peter West, “We have championed girls’ education but now it is important and necessary to do the same for boys” (in Cook 2001, p. 3).

I need to make clear at the start of this paper that I do not subscribe to the argument that young males have become the ‘new victims’ of society. Nor do I believe that the social anxiety surrounding contemporary masculinity is an issue for males to sort out. Rather, I view issues of masculinity and/or femininity as relational and therefore having implications for both males and females. When young males take risks, abuse alcohol or drugs, get bullied at school or act in violent or destructive ways, their actions and reactions are not ‘secret men’s business’. Mothers, sisters, teachers, girlfriends, coaches and all sorts of other people have the potential to be deeply effected by the consequences of their actions. To this end, an oppositional politics that views gains by one gender as
losses for the other, is divisive and unproductive. Both genders have considerable incentive in advancing the health and education practices of young people, regardless of gender.

That said, the specific focus of this paper is on the socialisation practices of young males in the context of schools. Prominent here are the experiences that some young males have in being either accepted or rejected by their peers. While schools are focussed on developing the academic abilities of young people, success in this arena is by no means a guarantee that an individual will have positive experiences at school. Elsewhere I, along with colleagues, have talked about the primacy of sport as a social vector for framing masculinity (Hickey, Fitzclarence & Matthews, 2000). While there seems to be a practical and theoretical acceptance that a wider range of identities are now on offer, and that they are reversible, the discourses and practices of sport continue to be powerful forces in determining ‘who is in’ and ‘who is out’. In the interest of locating some of these issues within mainstream educational theory and practice, I will recount two incidents that involve young males in schools. This intensely qualitative approach allows me to talk through some of these issues in specific and grounded ways rather than in ethereal or abstract ways.

One of the core issues that I would like to raise through these incidents involves the lack of formal recognition given to peer relations in the context of schooling (Hickey & Keddie, in review). While there has been an emerging recognition of the need to work more purposefully with peer groups, the resulting practices exist largely as innovative rather than mainstream practice. Indeed, a good deal of this work is located to the middle school years to correspond with the developmental coupling of adolescence and peer groups. Outside of adolescence it is widely understood that, while peer groups are still a factor, their influence is easily over-ridden by adults, namely parents and teachers (Harris, 1998). Traditionally, teachers have been led to believe that one of the key ingredients in establishing ‘effective’ pedagogic relationships between themselves and their students involves them being able to control or dilute the influence of the peer group. Within a paradigm of individualisation, teachers are encouraged to view students as independent agents capable of determining their own happiness, rather than as social creatures propelled by a desire to be accepted or ‘fit in’. Unfortunately, the “just say no to” advocacy with regard to disruptive, antisocial and risk-taking behaviours of young males fails to give adequate attention to the potency of the peer group influence. Without a deep understanding of this influence, effective pedagogies and policies cannot be developed.
An American story of rejection, abuse and tragedy

On April 20th 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold stormed into their High School in Columbine, Colorado, USA in a murder-suicide pact that would send shock waves around the world. Armed with 90 bombs, including two twenty-pound propane explosives, two sawn-off shotguns, a 9mm semi-automatic assault pistol, a 9mm semi-automatic carbine rifle, seven knives and a supply of ammunition befitting of a small army, the boys went on a killing rampage. While their deeds were not without forerunners in American schools, the level of violence committed by Harris and Klebold emerged as a social marker that ‘violence had come to school’. Massive international media coverage of how 15 were killed and 20 injured during the shooting spree at Columbine ensured that the world knew that schools were not safe places. While there has long been recognition of the deviant and miscreant element of school populations, Harris and Klebold took mainstream consciousness to a new level. They were not ‘outcasts’ from marginal, ethnic or socially disadvantaged backgrounds. No, they, like many of their victims, were white, Christian, middle class, American boys.

Secondary schools are renown for their inter-group rivalries. Recognition of the important identity struggles that takes place in groups is supported by the existence of sub-cultural groupings labelled as ‘jocks’, ‘nerds’, ‘freaks’, ‘geeks’ and so on, and a wide range of pejorative ethnic labels (see Connell, 1989; Walker, 1988; MacAnGhill, 1994; Martino, 1999). Such groupings are of course fluid and individuals move in and out of them according to their needs, deportments and commitments. Interestingly, Klebold and Harris had not always been marginalised. Based on her interactions with previous friends and teachers, Michaelis (2000) was left with the impression that they were generally well liked and athletic during their primary school years. It wasn’t until they were in the middle school that their peers began to alienate them. Over time they found themselves alone; being actively rejected from the ‘in-groups’ and not fitting-in to the peripheral groups that were on offer. This left them without group affiliation and therefore without any real support or allegiance among their peers.

Over time Klebold and Harris experienced the full weight of rejection from the ‘in-group’. They were frequently subjected to physical assaults and taunts and were regularly excluded from social activities involving their peers. Though they worked hard to conceal the frustration and hurt they were experiencing, their victimisation was well recognised among their peer group. A fellow student at Columbine later commented on how the boys’ anger, particularly Harris’s, gathered intensity.
Everywhere they went, they were taunted and teased about how they dressed, about being gay. You could tell he’d (Harris) get upset by it. Most of the people in that group, when people teased them, they walked off and didn’t say anything. But he seemed really fired up when he talked about the jocks. I had no idea his hate would drive him this far. (Michaelis, 2000: 18-19)

As appears to be the way with many boys, Harris’ and Klebold’s frustration and hurt developed into anger and gnawing resentment. Importantly, the focus of their resentment was not restricted to their assailants. They also felt a deep sense of injustice toward the leniency in disciplinary matters regularly afforded to the athletes and popular students at the school. They were appalled by the way teachers and administrators at Columbine glorified the athletes and would regularly turn a blind eye when marginal students were picked on by them and other popular students. What the school fraternity didn’t know was that Klebold and Harris were watching every incident of injustice and were ‘keeping score’. The final entry in Harris’s journal reveals the impact of his ostracisation. He wrote, “I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things” (Michaelis, 2000: 10).

An Australian story of rejection, abuse and tragedy

Andrew Boyd (pseudonym) was 33 years old and had been a long time sufferer of anxiety and depression when he agreed to take part in a series of interviews about defining moments in his life (Boyer, forthcoming). When reflecting on his illness and the general lack of satisfaction he felt with his life, Andrew spoke at length about his experiences at school. Andrew explains:

*Being bullied gave me a distrust and dislike for most people. I am wary of being approached by people. If someone is walking toward me, I sort of step to the side because I think they are coming for me. I didn’t have a distrust for people when I started school. I wasn’t jumpy around people, or nervous. I think that developed very quickly as I started to have negative social interactions, as in being bullied and disliked - for no reason that I could see.*

By his own reckoning, Andrew clearly draws a direct correlation between his experiences as a victim of bullying at school and the person he is some 20 years later. Listening to Andrew describe the litany of drug treatments he has been prescribed and the array of therapists he has been referred to since school, one can’t help but look back on those days and wonder if it could have been different for him.
Andrew’s life as a victim of bullying began late in primary school. On one particular day when the students were invited to come to school out-of-uniform, Andrew made his ‘fateful’ error. Under the guidance of his mother he showed up wearing red combat boots. While Andrew concedes that he was already being singled out from time-to-time, the day he wore red boots to school would signal the start of what would become his “personal nightmare”. One of the boys in his class said he looked stupid and invited others to join in to jeer, push and deride him. While the class was lined up to enter the grade Andrew recalls being punched several times. “I can’t remember if I cried but I would have been close, I remember being really sad”. From that day, a pattern was set whereby Andrew would be physically and emotionally violated at school on a daily basis for the next six years. He quickly learnt that there was no place to hide at school.

While acts of physical abuse were initially restricted to outside the classroom, they soon entered classroom settings as well. Andrew remembers how particular boys would make sure they would sit behind him so that they could poke him in the back with their rulers, punch him and taunt him with names and threats. Somehow none of his teachers seemed to notice the treatment that was being dished-out to Andrew on a daily basis. Occasionally, if a teacher saw one of the boys physically striking Andrew he would be called to stop. On reflection, Andrew is still disappointed that none of teachers opted to intervene more vehemently on his behalf. By his own assessment, Andrew concedes that while he may not have “dlobbed them in”, he did not actively try to conceal the abuse that was taking place. “I was hoping they would get caught, but they didn’t”.

As his feelings of desperation grew, Andrew did try to call out for help. Like many children of his age Andrew was reluctant to actively seek help from his teachers for fear that it would confirm existing perceptions of him as weak and inept and further ostracise him (Newman, Murray & Lussier, 2001). Compounding Andrew’s problem was that he did not feel that his relationship with his parents was conducive to them offering him any meaningful support. In fact, he worried that their input might actually make things worse! However, as the abuse intensified and became prolonged, he realised it was necessary to get help if he was to break the cycle of abuse he was experiencing. Tragically, he would find this more difficult to do than he thought. Conscious of the potential for further retribution from his assailants, Andrew’s attempts to reach out for help were subtle and subdued. On several occasions Andrew seized on the proximity of teachers to point out his mistreatment. On each of these occasions, Andrew recalls that the teachers would ward-off his assailants and continue on their way. Andrew became frustrated by the lack of intervention from his teachers and couldn’t imagine that some of them didn’t recognise that he was being singled-out by his peers. He is convinced that some were conscious of what was going on, although unaware of
the magnitude or the severity of its impact, but probably felt that it was something that he had to sort out for himself.

When Andrew’s abuse did not abate, he decided that he would have to look for opportunities to expose his victimisation to teachers in ways that he felt were ‘socially acceptable’ and did not have him caste as a ‘dobber’.

_I was fourteen or fifteen at the time and I was sick of the way I was treated at school. I had thoughts of suicide at the time, wondering if it was worth going on. Just things like lying on the railway tracks because we used to walk along the railway tracks to school. I knew it would work. There were also thoughts of poison and jumping off things._

Andrew recounted the last time he actively sought intervention from a teacher. It was in a science lesson after all members of his class were given an egg to take care of for a week. They were to take it with them everywhere they went, as if it were their baby, and protect it from harm or injury. Knowing an egg is vulnerable if mishandled, the students were supposed to develop an appreciation for the fragility and dependency of early life. Andrew remembers that he quickly became “attached to his egg” and after only a few short days was surprised how paternal he felt toward it. “I remember a few days into the project one of the bullies just came up to me in class, grabbed my egg and started throwing it around. In the end someone just threw it on the floor and broke it”. Andrew was sure that his teacher had seen the incident. “The teacher couldn’t help but notice, but he said nothing”. Visibly upset by what had just happened Andrew approached the teacher to complain about the incident. “You’ll just have to get another one” was his reply. From that day on Andrew was convinced that he was alone.

**Interpretation**

There are a number of issues about the socialisation practices of young males in relation to schools that emerge from these two stories. Foremost among these is the health and safety of young people in the context of schooling. As long-term victims of school bullying Harris, Klebold and Boyd were subjected to levels of abuse so severe that their capacity to make balanced and reasoned decisions was impeded. All three resorted to suicide. In the case of Harris and Klebold, not only did they end their own lives but they ended the lives of a number of other people. Tragically, the carnage associated with their rejection at school will be carried in the hearts and minds of a great many people, including people who had nothing to do with Columbine High School, for years to come. Indeed, this event, and ones
like it, will probably have a long-term effect on the way society views schools. Adapting an old sporting metaphor, 'what happens at school doesn't always stay at school'.

The action that Harris and Klebold undertook in April of 1999 has left a scar on the Columbine community and beyond, that will probably take a generation to heal, if at all it ever does. With due respect to the victims of this tragedy, it is frightening to think about how confused, frustrated and resentful Harris and Klebold must have been in the closing stages of their young lives. Against all the moral and civic values that would have been presented to them by the significant adults in their lives, namely parents, mentors and teachers, they developed and enacted a plan to murder people they believed corroborated their abuse and rejection at school. It is a tragedy in itself that Harris and Klebold were not able to access a support network, within or beyond the school, that could help them to reconcile their situation non-violently.

During his years of abuse at the hands of his peer group, Boyd too was unable to connect with anyone who could help him reconcile his situation. Whether it was real or perceived, Boyd concluded that he actually did not have anyone who could help him. As well intending as they might have been his parents, teachers and other significant adults he had contact with, were unable to recognise or connect with his plight. Underpinning this problem was the fact that Boyd, like many males, was not good at calling out for help. Indeed, we know that males can have particular difficulty revealing their vulnerability or weakness. The inability or unwillingness of males to call out for help, seems to have been a long-term curse of masculinity. That said, it is concerning that Boyd, like Harris and Klebold, experienced the levels of abuse and torment that he did without attracting the attention of those that could be in a position to offer support. While none of these boys carried a white flag to signal they could take no more, it is worrying that the symptoms of their rejection and abuse were not detectable to interested or proximal others.

Together these stories illustrate the potential damage that can result from unfettered bullying and abuse within the context of schooling. The following quote from another young student at Columbine High School who, like Harris and Klebold, shows that others feel the weight of being rejected and abused by their peers. The student featured here has not yet killed anyone nor has he had a mental breakdown. While we hope that he will have neither of these experiences there is good reason to feel some anguish about the impact of the prolonged neglect of his plight.

*I have been beaten, spat on, pushed, jeered at. Food is sometimes thrown at and on me while teachers pretend not to see, people trip*
me. Jocks knock me down in the hallway. They steal my notes, call me a geek and a fag and a freak, tear up my books, have pissed in my locker twice. They cut my shirt and rip it. They wait for me in the boys room and beat me up. I have to wait an hour to leave school to make sure they’re gone. Mostly, I honestly think, this is because I’m smarter than they are, and they hate that. The really amazing thing is, they are the most popular people in the school while everybody thinks I’m a freak. The teachers slobber all over them. Mostly, the other kids laugh, or walk away and pretend not to see it. The whole school cheers when they play sports. Sometimes, I want very much to kill them. Sometimes, I picture how I’d do it. Wouldn’t you? (Michaelis, 2000: 13)

The more complete stories of Harris and Klebold, and Boyd reveal how groups of males who identify with the dominant discourses of sport were the primary sources of their abuse. It was from within these discourses that aspects of their masculine identity were ridiculed and punished. Both their stories reveal aspects of their victimisation as a result of the entitlement and privilege that some young males received through their connection with high profile male contact sports. Alarmingly, this observation resonates with a range of other commentaries on social practices of young males, such as Leftkowitz (1997), MacAnGhaill (1994) Mills (2001) and Walker (1988). Leftkowitz’s (1998) account of the regime of violence and abuse dished out by a group of male school athletes in the story of Our Guys, is a chilling insight into the power and privilege that can be garnered within such groupings. Propelled by the social status given to high profile male contact sports, groups of young males assert and perform a collective identity that is superior to all others. While the positions that young males occupy within these groupings are themselves very problematic, to be positioned as the ‘negative other’ of such groups is almost certain to attract a measure of violence and abuse.

Ironically, sport is often positioned as a medium through which young people can forge constructive identities. Even in the wake of broader social anxieties about the socialisation of young males, sport continues to present as a social institution where young males can channel their energy in meaningful and productive ways. To this end, sport is often positioned as a circuit-breaker to the widespread social coupling between idle youth and misadventure. While I retain some optimism toward the value of an ongoing participation in sport, there is clearly a need to better understand and monitor the conditions that give rise to the positive and negative attributes on offer through this institution. Indeed, the justification for sport as both social and curriculum practices, needs to do based on its overall contribution to the development of its participants and the knowledge and values they assemble through their participation.
Implications for (Physical) Education

While it would be unfair to bestow full responsibility for the negative social experiences had by Harris, Klebold, and Boyd on to schools, it is clear that their respective struggles for peer acceptance at school were influential. For Harris, Klebold and Boyd, being at school meant being rejected by their peers. All three were reminded of their rejection through a regime of violence and abuse against them. While the root of their negative experiences at school lay with their peers, the lack of support they were able to garner from within their respective school communities is deeply concerning. Their stories, and the stories of a great many victims like them, underwrite a powerful argument that the current approaches schools employ to deal with peer rejection, are far from comprehensive. The collective narratives of Harris, Klebold and Boyd reveal how the practices of peer rejection can take place in schools without teachers recognising them, or at least acting on their recognition. It is now a matter of some urgency that schools set up processes through which they can recognise and interpret the key signals of rejection. As front-line workers, teachers are pivotal to the success of such a mission. While some teachers do this intuitively there is a need for the provision of training and resources in schools so that all teachers can play an effective role in this process.

While there is no doubt that wider social influences play a powerful role in propagating and normalising violence, schools must recognise that they too play a role in the reproduction of violence. Competing with the educational principles and policies of tolerance and inclusion are the discourses of sport where ‘successful’ masculinity is frequently defined around the attributes of strength, aggression and solidarity. As a result, playing fields, sporting arenas and gymnasiums become key vectors in normalising and legitimating the dominants associated with sites where many dominant masculine practices are rehearsed and legitimised. The closest articulation schools have with these discourses and practices is through the curriculum practice of physical education. As much as some schools try to distance their involvement with sport in the curriculum from the wider social practices that perpetuate a social hierarchy of masculine over feminine, strong over weak, and us over them, resonance of these divisions is all-pervasive (Miedzian, 1992). Any suggestion that schools can fire-wall their engagement with sport, as a curriculum practice, from the dominant discourses and practices of this institution is fundamentally flawed. Indeed, the mere inclusion of sport in the curriculum ensures the transportation of the dominant values of this institution. Schools must recognise this influence and physical educators need to lead the way in developing and implementing deliberate and strategic actions that can counter such influences.
One of the ways that schools can begin to tackle the problems associated with peer rejection and abuse is to examine all aspects of their culture and structure where such practices are either supported, albeit unwittingly, or unchallenged (Mills, 2001). One such area is in the way schools accommodate and honour particular groups of young males on the basis of their participation in high profile contact sports. There is evidence in the fuller stories of Harris, Klebold, and Boyd that a core aspect of their rejection emanated from their lack of physical stature and status; as projected through the dominant discourses and practices associated with football. While it is clearly not the intention of schools that sport be used as a medium through which to alienate or reject some students, there are many ways in which it can achieve these purposes (Leftkowitz, 1998). Consequently, it is important that schools, and in particular physical education teachers, better recognise the roles they play in promoting the conditions, albeit unwittingly, within which particular groups of students are privileged over others. Given what is at stake for the students who become subordinated by sporting discourses, it is encumbered on those who oversee the curriculum practices that support these discourses, to monitor and over-ride the socialisation of their propensity to both privilege and oppress.

References:


