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Female physical educators in all boys’ schools – Opportunities for enhancing social interactions?
The significance of physical education (PE) and sport in a boys’ school has long been highlighted as a device for the privileging of hyper-masculine identities (tough, stoic & assertive) at the expense of marginalised masculinities and femininities. The propensity for some “members of male sporting clique’s to engage in practices of bullying, shaming, violating and excluding” (Hickey, 2008, p. 148) raises important questions about how the practice of boys’ PE and sport can sometimes lead to unhealthy and damaging social interactions between different types of boys. In response to this rhetoric, some boys’ schools have acted to employ female PE teachers to disrupt “concern about the codes of unity, entitlement and privilege that can be forged among groups of boys whose identities are strongly aligned with sporting forms of hyper-masculinity” (Hickey, 2008, p. 148). Given this potential, we suggest that there is something unique or different about working in spaces or contexts around boys’ physicality. More specifically this paper raises questions about the particular implications for a PE teacher’s professional work, particularly as a female PE teacher.

In current educational climates the performance of boys in social and educational contexts attracts considerable concern. Better understanding the contributions and capacities of female PE teachers in all boys’ schools, (as localised social and political environments in which gendered identities are formed) is warranted. Professional identities and “the meaning of gender is negotiated in everyday interactions” (Priola, 2007, p. 23) implicating the culture of all boys’ schools as significant in the development of ideas around effective, gender inclusive, pedagogical practices. Drawing on case study data, this paper seeks to explore how notions of effectiveness about boys’ PE are formed, with intent to make visible the extent to which female PE teachers influence dominant gendered practices of social interaction in all boys’ PE settings.

Introduction
Over the past few decades, much attention has been focussed on the social interactions that occur in boys’ schools, with a view to revealing strategies to address boys’ supposed underachievement (Keddie & Mills, 2007; Kenway, 1997; Lingard, Martino, & Mills, 2009). In fact, much of the rhetoric around the purported underachievement of boys in educational settings has been fuelled by claims grounded in social interactions. For example, a lack of male role models, an increase in the number of females in the educational setting and a lack of boy-friendly pedagogies are frequently
drawn on as factors influencing boys’ performance (Bly, 1991; Hoff Sommers, 2000; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002). Acknowledging critique levelled against these arguments (Connell, 2004; Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2007), we suggest that such issues may be addressed “through classroom practices that encourage boys to appreciate a diversity of masculinities, whilst challenging the more ‘toxic’ forms that limit their and other’s educational experiences” (Keddie & Mills, 2007, p. 18).

Although sport has long been recognised as a central site in the social production of masculinity, this does not mean that sport typically facilitates the development of coherent and fulfilling narratives (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Indeed, Sport and physical education (PE) settings have been implicated as potential spaces where the cultivation of ‘toxic’ forms of masculinities, or those displaying hyper-masculine identities (tough, stoic & assertive), are potentially privileged at the expense of marginalised others (Hickey, 2008, 2010; Miller, 2009). There is a propensity for some “members of male sporting clique’s to engage in practices of bullying, shaming, violating and excluding” (Hickey, 2008, p. 148). This raises important questions about the ways in which boys’ PE and sport can sometimes contribute to unhealthy and damaging social interactions between different types of boys, and between boys and their teachers. Despite a move by some boys’ schools to employ female PE teachers to disrupt the dominant gendered practices of hyper-masculine identities, relatively little is known about how they negotiate the gendered socio-political landscape of their professional work. Perhaps more importantly, this also raises questions about the potential impacts on their work. This paper works to make visible the extent to which female PE teachers influence dominant gendered practices of social interaction in all boys’ schools. Further this paper acknowledges the political nature of teaching (Keddie & Mills, 2007) and explores the social interactions of one Year 8 boys’ PE classroom and their teacher, Rachel Moore*, to reveal this “space of schooling as a site of contestation, resistance and possibility” (Giroux, 2003, p. 6).

A Methodological Signpost

This paper draws on case study data collected to interrogate PE pedagogy in two Catholic boys’ schools. Specifically, data obtained via field observations of one Year 8 lesson and then reflective semi-structured interviews with the teacher and six of her students are considered here. Analyses adopt the principles of feminist poststructuralism, and in particular draw from the works of Michel Foucault, as a theoretical lens to facilitate a reading of meanings that are invariably layered and that possess the potential for contradiction (Hickey, 2010). There is something slippery about researching social interactions (Law, 2004) and given the mutable nature of sport, PE and identity formation, we find warrant in drawing on research tools that trouble the taken-for-granted ways of being. Much of the existing work on gendered identities and sport has linked how we act and how we see ourselves to the localised, social and political environments in which we live, so as socially constructed. To be
able to consider the impact the culture of an all boys’ school has on shaping social interactions of various masculine identities a consideration of femininities is also required. As Aitchison (2007) explains, “…masculinity cannot be discussed other than in relation to femininity as each is a relational, if not dualistic, concept defined by its other” (p. 2). Foucault’s thinking around discourse and power relations has also proven helpful in a discussion of how particular masculine identities become normalised in these settings. As Garrett (2004) explains “while identities are constructed through a process of ‘positioning’ within available discourses and negotiation with others, they are embodied through the internalisation and ‘living out’ of these discourses” (Garrett, 2004, p. 225). Discourses, according to Foucault (1972) are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak…Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the process of doing so conceal their own invention” (p. 49). Foucault’s notion of discourse-power relations (Foucault, 1977), operating multi-directionally, highlights the forms of power that “work to control social relations and shape individuals” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 16). A final warrant for this perspective is that this particular lens asks questions about how some practices and notions around effective PE teaching become dominant and accepted uncritically as the ‘right way to teach boys’ PE’, whilst others are dismissed.

Analysing the Social and Pedagogical Interactions of Boys’ PE:
Sebastian’s story
As a heuristic device, the following narrative is used to analyse the dominant discourses evident in a Year 8 boys’ PE class. Additionally, it is also offered to demonstrate how individual lived experiences shape social interactions between boys and their female teacher as they engage in a pedagogical encounter of cricket.

The lesson commenced with Miss Moore (Rachel) explaining that after students had completed their warm up relay drills and practiced their bowling and batting skills in the nets they would spend the second half of the lesson playing ‘diamond cricket’. At the start of the lesson she suggested that this would most likely be a new game for most students, so she would require them to look at the whiteboard and listen to instructions about how the game was to work. There were quite a few groans from some students in the class, and comments such as “can’t we just play the real game”; “Boring…”; “Can we sledge in this game?”; “Do we still use a real cricket ball”? Sebastian sat with his head in his hands and reluctantly looked up so that he could see what this game required of him. At the back of the group heading out to the oval, Sebastian carried the equipment bag for Miss Moore and grumbled under his breath “I don’t really like cricket”. After overrunning the last cone when trying to pick up the tennis ball from the cone, Sebastian jogged slowly back to his team. He seemed aware that yet again, his relay team has finished last and that there were already students moaning
“can’t we just play the real game, this is crap”. Whilst we do not have the scope here to give an intimate account of the whole lesson the concluding game of ‘diamond cricket’ did nothing to boost Sebastian’s spirits when he stood in his crease at one of the four wickets. Aware that the bowler from the fielding team could bowl to any of the four batsmen, Sebastian did not appear overly surprised that the ball flew past his bat at lightening pace to collide violently with his middle stump. Of the six balls of the over, each were bowled to Sebastian with similar outcomes. With six runs deducted from the batting teams score for each ‘wicket’, at the end of the first over Sebastian’s team score stood at - 36. At this point, Miss Moore modified the rules that you couldn’t bowl consecutive balls to the same batsman.

During conversations following this lesson, it is not surprising to learn that Sebastian does not particular like PE. He explains:

“I like to be involved in everything, even though I may not be good at that particular sport, I still will be involved and try my best...I do acting, dancing and singing outside of school but that doesn’t really help here because it doesn’t really qualify as a sport...you know it is more cultural...I did try out for the school netball team but I didn’t get picked...I mean I like playing the games in PE, not really the skills cos they’re kind of boring, but I like warms ups and team games more than individual games...I’m not the best at PE in my class and I just find that I can be better with people than by myself, I’m more of a group person...I prefer cricket than football, just the roughness of football...I just don’t think it was fun...diamond cricket was sort of boring” (Sebastian)

Implicit in his account, Sebastian laments he is not a particularly skilled sportsman and it appears that he positions sport as the antithesis to cultural activities such as acting, dancing and singing. Interestingly his inter-school sport of choice was ‘netball’ which has a strongly linked with feminine identities (Russell, 2007). These activities, characterised by aesthetics, creativity and self-discipline are vastly different from the attributes of stoicism, athleticism, competitiveness and aggressiveness that permeate sports such as football (in its various codes) (Messner & Sabo, 1990). In the context of an all boys’ PE class, where traditionally masculine team sports such as cricket and football dominate the curriculum, the powerful effects of dominant gendered discourses act to position hyper-masculine identities as privileged. In the case of students like Sebastian, who appear to characterise what Connell (1995) terms ‘marginalised’ or ‘subordinated’ masculinities, pedagogical practices in PE that exacerbate ability levels can have some drastic outcomes with respect to social interactions. Exploring how Sebastian felt students in his class responded to him if he classified himself as not so good at PE, he explains:
“Oh well, they like encourage me to just try a bit harder and all that kind of thing...sometimes they’re like “Come on Sebastian” or “You’re not a girl” or something like that. Maybe those are the days where I’m just tired and I can’t be bothered doing PE cos I’ve had a late night or I’ve had a bad day...I think some students are afraid to say “I don’t like PE” because all other boys say “PE is just the best, it’s way better”, but you know there are boys who might prefer art or something like that...Miss Moore is good because she encourages me more and she is more responsible, she really tries to help me improve” (Sebastian).

Perhaps more blatantly, Nigel and Matt provide additional insights into the “encouragement” that Sebastian receives from his peers.

“Sebastian...yeah he says he enjoys sport but he is no good at it...no-one wants to be in his team basically because he’s so bad...like no matter what he plays he messes it all up so he would be at the bottom of the spectrum because although he may be able to pass it around to other people and give everyone a go, well he cannot even do that because he would be intercepted in every way before he even gets able to...he get’s bagged every PE lesson...the lads really put him down publicly...everyone thinks he is just a nerd” (Nigel)

“It’s more just joking around but if a good person is joking around with someone who is not as good, like Sebastian, it almost seems like they’re bullying to a point, and they’re probably not, but it comes across that way sort of...Cricket a good one though because of sledging...in cricket you sledge, it’s just what you do when you’re behind the stumps and stuff like that...I was giving it to him” (Matt).

Inherent above, it appears that despite school rules and regulations that prohibit bullying and promote positive social interactions amongst students, the PE classroom can potentially become a breeding ground for the normalisation of such interactions. In a video-stimulated reflection session with Rachel, this incident is replayed and when prompted to explain how she went about planning this lesson, Rachel indicates:

“Well, I wanted to get away from just a traditional normal game of cricket, I mean the kids that play on the weekend absolutely annihilate those that don’t so I had two choices, we could all do something different, like diamond cricket, or I would have to run two games and divide kids by ability levels...but I mean there are a lot of safety issues with that, firstly we would have to use a tennis ball and they wouldn’t really get much of a chance to practice their skills if they only bat and bowl once...I mean at least with diamond cricket you get a good go at it” (Rachel)
Considering the above comment, the prevalence of performance discourses where the main consideration is “how can performance be improved or enhanced” (Tinning, 2010, p. 69) appears to underpin much of Rachel’s pedagogical intentions. Further, particular tensions are revealed as she describes factors that underpinned her decision to opt for a ‘new’ game. Perhaps most significantly, she alludes to being aware that a ‘traditional normal game of cricket’ privileges those able, dominant masculine identities and her choice of words such as “annihilate” conjures images of negative interactions. Interestingly, we see a concern with ‘safety’ mentioned. Although this is qualified by a statement relating to the use of a ‘tennis ball’ first and foremost, it could also be indicative of her subscription to a dominant model of teaching, where teacher control, management and order foregrounded (Tinning, 2010). When questioned on this, she explains:

“Well most of the male PE teachers, you know most of them have played cricket, so I think they have automatic respect from the kids…I think if I can just be good at the management stuff and know my content then it will be Ok…I mean I try to introduce new games, but the kids just hate it, and I say “well we’re going to keep playing it until you do it properly” because if we just played the main game, like they do in other PE classes, then they won’t learn anything” (Rachel).

A female physical educator’s contribution: concluding remarks

When considering the contributions that female PE teacher’s can make to the pedagogical practice of boys’ PE it appears that there is much about the discursive functioning of an all boys’ school context that acts to constrain their professional work. In the comments above, we see Rachel grapple with a desire to foster more inclusive pedagogical approaches yet weighs this against what occurs in other classes. In her work analysing professional teaching identities, Bloomfield (2010) acknowledges the significant impact that colleagues and mentors can have on the way a teacher constructs pedagogical practices. Given that Rachel appears to acknowledge how existing practices act to privilege the skilled participants, questions are raised about her adherence to a dominant teaching model characterised here by a warm up, skills and then a game with a focus on management, control and order. Acknowledging the significant body of sociological literature that exists to explain this culture of (re) production in terms of PE pedagogy (Curtner-Smith, Hastie, & Kinchin, 2008; Kirk, 2010; Tinning, 2010), it appears that a greater degree of critical analysis of how the school context (complete with its discourse-power relations) acts to impact on pedagogical practice could be addressed through undergraduate degrees. Whilst we are conscious that ‘awareness’ does not always translate into ‘action’, an understanding of how existing practices may inadvertently support and escalate the privilege afforded to some hyper-masculine identities is required by teachers. A greater acknowledgement of this may act to promote more inclusive social interactions amongst groups of boys in sporting and PE settings.
References


