

# Obesity discourse and the crisis of faith in disciplinary technology

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According to Kirk (1998) (following Foucault) a shift in corporeal power has been underway since the late 18th century in many ‘western’ countries, from an external form of power and locus of control to an internal form and locus. In light of the increased volume of discourse around the alleged obesity crisis (Gard & Wright 2005) we revisit and attempt to update Kirk’s thesis about the regulation of bodies in schools; is the widespread concern about an obesity crisis producing new ways of managing and disciplining children’s bodies? We explore in some detail a case study of curriculum development in Health and Physical Education in Ontario, Canada where we argue that the grades 1–8 syllabus trades the productive compliance and liberal individualism of previous eras for a new layering of physical education discourse and the production of cheerfully courteous and responsible individuals. We complete this analysis by asking whether this curriculum development in an era of obesity discourse signals a crisis of faith in disciplinary technology. We end by noting the need for the retention of spaces within school physical education where young people can question assumptions about corporeality.

Keywords: Physical education, obesity crisis, corporeal regulation, curriculum, disciplinary technology.

## Introduction

In his book *Schooling Bodies*, Kirk (1998) drew on the work of Michel Foucault to argue that a shift in corporeal power has been underway since the late 18th century in many ‘western’ countries, from an external form of power and locus of control to an internal form of power and locus of control. In the book he used historical material

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from Australia and Britain on the emergence of school practices centred on the body – in particular physical training, sport and medical inspection – to argue that changes in school practices from the middle of the 19th century up to the present exemplify Foucault's thesis. He argued that during this period schools sought to regulate children's bodies to meet the institutional imperatives of the school for order and wider societal imperatives for a healthy and productive citizenry. During the 1940s and 1950s, shifts from regimes of physical training to forms of physical education based on sport practices demonstrate a movement to a looser form of power over the body. At the same time Kirk (1993) noted (along with Turner 1984, Shilling 1993 and others) the increasing prominence of discourse since the 1970s around the slender, mesomorphic body as a social and moral good.

In light of the increased volume of discourse around the alleged obesity crisis (Gard & Wright 2005) we revisit and attempt to update Kirk's thesis about the regulation of bodies in schools; is the widespread concern about an obesity crisis, particularly in relation to school-age children, producing new ways of managing and disciplining children's bodies? For instance, there are signs that schools are being used increasingly as sites for the collection and appraisal of children's bodily measurements. There is also evidence in official curriculum documents and public health policy of what appear to be 'explicit' and overtly 'top down' forms of social control.

In addition, we examine current pedagogical forms in physical education for signs that school practices remain a barometer for broader shifts in the corporeal discourse of 'western' societies. The data we draw on for this analysis derives from our studies in Australia, Britain and Canada. We do not intend our analysis to refer to any other western countries of which we have less knowledge. We leave it to the reader to decide whether similar processes have been in train in other places of which they have detailed knowledge.

In the next section of this paper we provide a brief historical overview of the practices of schooling bodies and how changing practices, from rational gymnastics at the end of the 19th century to sport-based physical education by the middle of the 20th century, illustrated a shift in corporeal power described by Foucault as characteristic of disciplinary society. We then take up the theme of further shifts in corporeal power in an era of obesity discourse, noting the apparent rise in interventionist practices such as weighing children and monitoring their food intake in schools. We explore in some detail a case study of recent curriculum development in Health and Physical Education in the Canadian province of Ontario, where we argue that the grades 1–8 syllabus trades the productive compliance and liberal

individualism of previous eras for a new layering of physical education discourse and the production of cheerfully courteous and responsible individuals. We complete this analysis by asking whether this recent curriculum development in an era of obesity discourse - which uses the language of lifestyle choice and decision-making to mask a series of moral imperatives centred on the body – signals a crisis of faith in disciplinary technology. We end by noting the need for the retention of spaces within school physical education where young people can question assumptions about corporeal matters.

### Schooling bodies and shifting forms of corporeal power

The emergence of various systems of ‘rational gymnastics’ in western countries towards the end of the eighteenth century (Munrow 1955) and their eventual widespread adoption by a number of institutions such as schools and the military by the end of the nineteenth century was a constituent part of the development of a range of regulative and normative practices aimed at schooling the docile body. As Foucault (1977) observed, docility did not imply violent subjugation of the body since economic productivity was partnered with the effective use of the labour of compliant and healthy citizens. On the contrary, in Foucault’s terms, the ‘little practices’ of schooling the body were meant to achieve the twin aims of ‘docility-utility’, without the need for the exercise of raw power through routine violent punishment.

From their first appearance in the mid 1800s, physical activities in schools in Australia and Britain could be viewed as practices of corporeal regulation and normalisation that were integral to the emergence and operation of at least two institutions of modernity, surveillance (or “the control of information and social supervision”) and capitalism (or “capital accumulation in the context of competitive labour and product markets”) (Giddens 1990, p. 59). As Turner (1984, p. 161) has argued, following Foucault, from the early 1800s “capital could profit from the accumulation of men and the enlargement of markets only when the health and docility of the population had been made possible by a network of regulations and controls”.

This alignment of corporeal regulation and normalisation with surveillance and capitalism was part of a process of reifying and constructing the modern body which had been in train since the Renaissance (Broekhoff 1972). Physical appearance was increasingly conflated with self-worth or value (Finkelstein 1991), initially defined as the classed, raced, and gendered (or socially positioned) self, and

later, for the dominant social classes initially, as the self-as-individual. By the end of the nineteenth century we can see these notions being worked through in a range of mass corporeal regulative and normative practices within prisons, schools, factories and barracks (Foucault 1977). It is here, within this nexus of practices, that early forms of bodily practices in schools in both Australia and Britain can be located, particularly military style drilling and exercising and school medical inspection for the masses, with games and other sports fulfilling a similar role for the middle and aspiring upper classes. All were practices of surveillance as bodies were shaped to meet particular social and economic ends.

The emergence of drilling and exercising, school medical inspection and competitive team games in schools exemplify in highly codified forms the notion that the body is not a 'natural' phenomenon despite the hegemony of medical and biological science (Kirk 1993). Instead, it reveals a body that is in nature and culture simultaneously, a body that can be normalised and regulated to suit particular social class, gender, economic and cultural purposes. The body shaping which took place during this period, towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, had two key features. The first of these was that children were usually treated in the mass rather than as individuals, even within the private school practices of games playing. The second was that these practices of corporeal regulation and normalisation relied in the main on securing children's compliant participation through the enforcement by teachers and other adults of precise and meticulous prescriptions and measurements. These prescriptions were detailed in texts and manuals in the cases of drilling and exercising and medical inspection or, in the case of games playing, through the strict application of increasingly formalized rules and also through an unwritten but all-pervasive code of 'gentlemanly conduct' (Mangan 1986).

By the beginning of the twentieth century in Australia, Britain and elsewhere, the use of formalized physical activity for the purposes of shaping the docile body was explicitly inscribed in the official discourse of educational policy-makers, manual writers and head teachers of elite schools. There followed a period of consolidation of these school practices during the first three decades of the twentieth century, through the institutionalisation of drilling and exercising as a form of physical training, medical inspections in government schools and games playing in private schools. Naming these decades as a period of consolidation is not intended to imply that these physical practices were not subject to debate and development. For example, Gymnasts sought to reduce the formality of their exercises by advocating the use

of music to develop more rhythmic activity, an initiative that was to result in a radical shift in movement culture by the 1940s through the work of innovators such as Rudolf Laban (McIntosh 1968).

Indeed, the 1940s marked a sea-change in the processes of corporeal regulation and normalisation within schools, with a gradual shift from treating children's bodies in the mass to a greater concern for individual bodies. A new, less regimented pedagogy was also emerging and there began to appear less strictly prescribed movement. The reformist agenda of inspection and intervention proposed by school medical officers in Australia in the pre-World War One period, informed largely by a philosophy of positive eugenics (Kirk & Twigg 1994), was watered-down somewhat during the 1920s in the aftermath of the war as radical eugenicists advocated drastic solutions to the problems of feeble-mindedness and other forms of 'abnormality'. At the same time, change was not abrupt, and the strategies of medical inspection and the identification of 'defectives' continued to be employed well into the late 1930s in Australia (Kirk & Twigg 1994).

The invention of a new physical education which introduced working class children to sport and sport-related skills as a curriculum activity for the first time after World War Two, was part of a (nother) liberalizing wave in primary school education (Kirk & Twigg 1995). From the earliest forms of physical activities in schools in the late 1800s to the arrival of this new physical education in the 1940s and 1950s we can see marked contrasts in the ways in which anticipated outcomes were expressed. For instance, Australian Inspectors of Drill argued in 1889 that "with a compulsory system of drill, incipient larrikinism would receive a severe check, and the military spirit of the colony would be greatly fostered" (Vic. MPI Rpts. 1889-90, p. 264). Some sixty years later the writer of the foreword to the 'Grey Book', a new Australian syllabus for physical education, stressed the "right of all children to play" alongside their "enjoyment" and "well-being" (Education Department, Victoria 1946).

The shift in corporeal power signaled by these changes was further elaborated in school programs over a forty year period between the 1940s and the 1970s. The emphasis changed from treating the mass of bodies to the individual body, evidenced in new teaching methods of individualised skill and fitness development, and from external prescription and enforcement to internal motivation to participate, evidenced in the concern for children's enjoyment of physical activities and the development of positive attitudes and lifelong participation (Kirk 1992). Foucault (1980) had described this process more generally as follows:

From the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century I think it was believed that the investment of the body by power had to be heavy, ponderous, meticulous and constant ... And then, starting from the 1960s, it began to be realised that such a cumbersome form of power was no longer as indispensable as had been thought and that industrial societies could content themselves with a looser form of power over the body (Foucault 1980, p. 58).

If drilling and exercising and medical inspection can be seen to reflect a heavy, ponderous and meticulous set of practices, then the emergence of a sport-based form of physical education and other practices such as educational gymnastics seem to suggest the arrival of a less ponderous form of corporeal power. In so far as we might suggest such a relationship between shifts in corporeal power and specific practices of schooling bodies, and notwithstanding the precise dating of the process, we need to remind ourselves that the liberalising potential of the new physical education was bound to be affected by its location in the school and the school's institutional imperatives. Between the 1950s and the present there is little evidence to suggest, even when we consider the de-schooling society movement (eg. Illich 1971) and the experimentation with open plan schools (eg. Hamilton 1977), that the imperatives for social order have changed much since the late 19th century. Schools continue to require compliance from pupils as a fundamental requirement of institutional order and they remain a key site for the development of appropriately skilful and productive workers and good citizens (Kirk 1999). Given this institutional context, we need to be cautious about the extent to which a new, sport-based physical education might realise the looser form of power over the body Foucault may have had in mind.

Indeed, developments in popular physical culture and corporeal discourse during the closing decades of the 20th century such as the rise of a cult of slenderness, the mediatization and commercialisation of the body, the invention of media sport, regimes of dieting and exercising, body reshaping and re-sexing through medical interventions, and the broader process of the body as an individual project (Shilling 1993); each of these developments has produced from physical education in schools in some cases only faint echoes and in others complete silences.

In Britain, it would appear that the current form of sport-based physical education has changed little since its first appearance in the 1940s and 1950s. To be sure, the range and diversity of activities has increased. New pedagogical models such as Teaching Games for Understanding and Sport Education have gained some ground, as have examinable and matriculation courses (Kirk in press). But increasingly, in the face of ongoing developments in corporeal discourse more

broadly, this form of physical education seems to remain locked in the liberational moment of the 1940s and 1950s, informed by a logic of individualism, play and fun, that now look in the first decade of the new millennium as properly ‘old-fashioned’ and naive (Kirk 1999).

Even though health-related exercise (HRE) initiatives first emerged in the late 1970s in Australia and Britain to challenge sport-based physical education, they appear to have had little impact in terms of share of curriculum time, and have been treated by physical education teachers with ambivalence (Harris 2005). This resistance to HRE has continued despite an increasingly loud clamouring for physical education to take some responsibility for an alleged obesity crisis among children. We want to argue in the next section that the strange time-warp that physical education appears to have existed in since the 1940s is now in the process of being profoundly disrupted as the strident voices around this alleged obesity crisis take greater and greater effect.

### Shifting forms of corporeal power within the obesity discourse era

It is perhaps too early to make definitive judgements about the forms and functions of corporeal power being enacted in schools in the age of the ‘obesity epidemic’. However, both research and anecdotal evidence point towards a recent and significant historical shift in which different ways of thinking about and working on children’s bodies are emerging. For example, the *New York Times* (Kolata 2006) recently reported that New York City schools had followed the lead of Los Angeles and banned whole milk from school premises. In a similar vein, Singaporean health officials have introduced schemes whereby children classified as overweight are required to undertake remedial physical activity and prevented from buying food from school canteens over a certain caloric limit (Pirani 2005).

These examples are perhaps a slightly less startling development than the reported decision of some Australian pre-schools to ban chocolate cake and instruct teachers to inspect the lunch boxes of students (Edwards 2006). In the Australian report, Danielle Cronin, executive director of the Council of Catholic School Parents, exquisitely captures shifting understandings of the role of schools in a post-obesity epidemic world when she is quoted as follows:

“Preschools are probably leading the way with healthy-eating strategies in schools,” Ms Cronin said, admitting lunch-box inspections could prove controversial.

“Parents want to make sure that their kids are not hungry at school and they have the tendency then to load up the lunch-box with all sorts of things,” she said.

“There is a sense that it is their right as a parent to fill their child’s lunch-box with whatever they choose or whatever their child is telling them they want. It possibly could be a bit controversial. Some parents might object and some kids might object.” (Edwards 2006, p. 3).

If it is an accurate representation of the speaker’s views, this quote appears to assert a particular kind of relationship between schools, parents and children, one in which moral authority has shifted from parents to teachers. But there is another thread here, one that we might characterise as anti-pleasure and unashamedly disciplinary.

At Red Robin Kindergarten in Eastwood, parents had been told that birthday cakes should be as simple as possible, preschool teacher Jess Karhu said.

“For birthdays we encourage a vanilla cupcake,” Ms Karhu said. “It should be something little, not too big.”

And lunch boxes at the 40-child centre, which provides fruit platters for the children, do not escape scrutiny, with teachers conducting daily checks.

“If it is not appropriate it goes back in the lunch-box,” she said. (Edwards 2006, p. 3)

Elsewhere, the idea of mandatory levels of school-based daily physical activity has progressed to the level of government policy in a number of western countries (Morse 2005, Livingston 2005) despite the concerns of some teachers about already crowded school days. This policy direction seems to have gone hand-in-hand with moves to (re)introduce the practice of weighing and measuring students and calculating either their body mass index or their body fat percentage. In the run-up to the 2007 Federal election, the Australian Labor Party made the introduction of compulsory school weigh-ins part of its electoral platform. School weigh-ins appear to be particularly popular in the United States, although at least one state legislature has abolished the practice because of its cost and doubtful value (Moritz & Thompson 2007).

As our historical overview in the previous section shows, the meaning of ‘health’ and the rhetorical mission of physical activity in school contexts have shifted over time. Broadly speaking, physical



activity and official physical education have at different times been associated with fostering self-discipline, moral virtue, group cohesion, good-natured competition and self-expression. While these discursive threads linger in more or less significant ways, exerting a residual influence (Williams 1977), there is evidence that new discursive formations are taking shape. In what follows, we consider the role of physical activity within one official health and physical education curriculum, the Canadian province of Ontario's Grades 1–8 Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training 1999). Our argument here is that this example is emblematic of a partially new way of thinking about the role of physical education. The break with the past is partial because, as we will show, residues of the past remain. The idea of an 'obesity epidemic' is not a 'ground zero' for the future of physical education but rather a new phase in the layering of physical education discourse.

## Constructing the cheerfully courteous and responsible subject of HPE in the obesity discourse era:

### The case of Ontario's Grades 1–8 Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum

What is particularly interesting about the layering of discourses within official physical education curricula is the tensions and contradictions this process creates. To begin with, it is worth remembering that the idea of *officially* combining health education with physical education is a relatively new development and one which has been taken up in countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand but not in Britain and the USA. Despite these international variations, we would argue that the emergence of 'obesity epidemic' discourse has consolidated the link between diet and nutrition (health education) and physical activity (physical education) in the minds of curriculum writers and the general public alike so that combined HPE curricula, such as the Ontario curriculum, 'make sense' in a way they might not have done prior to the spike in obesity crisis rhetoric which occurred in the mid 1990s.

Perhaps an even more striking tension arises when we place the public health imperative of reducing obesity inside an education context. In the Ontario curriculum the idea that education prepares students to make healthy lifestyle *choices* is prominent in the document's preamble:

Healthy active living involves a combination of physical activity and appropriate lifestyle choices. Students should begin

early on to acquire basic knowledge about a wide variety of health-related topics and to develop relevant skills. They need to understand how their actions and decisions affect their health, fitness, and personal well-being, and how to apply their learning to make positive, healthy decisions in all areas of life and personal development (p. 2).

The preamble also says that parents should read the curriculum document, ‘promote healthy active living through their own habits and practices’ and ‘support healthy eating and take responsibility for developing their children’s self-esteem’ (p. 3). Teachers, it says, are to develop ‘appropriate instructional strategies’ and ‘bring enthusiasm to the classroom and should model healthy active living in their own lives to encourage students to recognize the value and relevance of what they are learning’ (p. 3).

Despite the rhetoric of ‘choices’ and ‘decisions’, it is difficult to see what choices the Ontario curriculum invites its readers to make. Certainly these directives to parents and teachers about how they should conduct themselves do not appear to encourage a divergence of views or an exercising of critical judgement. Of course, what matters here is one’s starting position. If one accepts that an obesity driven health catastrophe is upon us then these statements might read as reasonable and restrained. On the other hand, if one is inclined to weigh the evidence about obesity for oneself and come to one’s own, alternative and sceptical, conclusions (Gard & Wright 2005, Kirk 2006), these statements might seem presumptuous, heavy-handed and condescending.

The Ontario curriculum consists of three content strands: Healthy Living, Fundamental Motor Skills and Active Participation. The introductory statements for each strand make clear that this is a curriculum devoted to promoting ‘healthy lifestyles’. For example, for the Healthy Living strand we read:

The healthy living strand will provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to develop, maintain, and enjoy healthy lifestyles, as well as to solve problems, make decisions, and set goals that are directly related to personal health and well-being (p. 10).

And later:

Students require knowledge to make healthy eating choices. Using this knowledge, they will examine their own food choices and eating patterns, and then make wise decisions and set appropriate goals (p. 10).

Throughout this document, the choices and decisions that children need to make are described as ‘wise’, ‘healthy’ and ‘appropriate’. However, with respect to food and physical activity, rather than a range of choices and decisions, what the curriculum presents children with is a set of behaviours and attitudes that they must adopt. For example, if (for brevity’s sake) we focus on physical activity and the Active Participation strand we read that:

Daily vigorous physical activity must become part of each child’s routine and way of life. The health and physical education program, which includes vigorous physical activity for all learners throughout the school year, will help children to become fit, independent learners; to develop interpersonal skills by interacting with others; and to relate fitness activities to healthy, productive lives (p. 30).

With respect to the concept of physical fitness, the curriculum has this to say:

**Physical fitness.** Teachers must use a variety of methods to encourage students to develop such aspects of physical fitness as flexibility, agility, co-ordination, strength, balance, and, especially, cardiovascular respiratory endurance. As levels of fitness improve, the duration of vigorous activity must be regularly increased. Students will become involved in assessing their own fitness levels, setting personal goals, and developing plans to achieve them (p. 30).

The intrusion of the words ‘must’ and ‘will’ is now apparent and behavioural imperatives, rather than choices and decisions, became more frequent the closer we get to the curriculum’s specific objectives. For example, the curriculum describes ‘Specific Expectations’ for grade 2 (age seven or eight) that include ‘identify the reasons for participating in regular physical activity’ and ‘display readiness to participate in the instructional program’ (p. 32) while grade 3 children (age eight or nine) are expected to ‘describe the health benefits of participating in regular physical activity’ and ‘adopt an action plan based on an individual or group goal related to physical activity’ (p. 33).

It is widely acknowledged in the fields of health promotion and epidemiology that specific or measurable health benefits flowing from childhood physical activity are virtually impossible to track (Boreham & Riddoch 2003, Twisk 2001). This is partly because insufficient longitudinal studies have been carried out. But it is also because the studies that *do* exist show little or no relationship between, on the

one hand, the amount or type of physical activity that children engage in and, on the other, their body weight or short and long term health prospects. In this context, we might ask what kinds of things an eight year old child might say about the 'health benefits of participating in regular physical activity' other than those they have rote learned from their teacher or some other source. In other words, what kind of 'choice' are they being invited to make?

We might also wonder about the rationale and wisdom of expecting an eight year old to develop their own 'action plan' which, presumably, they would be expected to implement and monitor. Once again, experts in the area of exercise prescription know all too well that prescribing structured physical activity programs for young children is a complex and potentially hazardous business, particularly if one of the curriculum's stated goals is to improve children's fitness (see above). The issue of injury risk to one side, it is clear that educational objectives of this kind explicitly encourage children to see physical activity as a form of insurance or inoculation against sickness and disease as opposed to, say, a form of enjoyable recreation valuable for its own sake, an opportunity for socialising, or a vehicle of self-expression.

At every turn, the Ontario 1–8 HPE curriculum is a document that takes the food and physical activity behaviours of modern Canadian children as problematic. It makes no attempt to distinguish between different groups of Canadians for whom food and physical activity may be more or less problematic. And although its writers appear to have been at pains to avoid using the words 'body weight' and 'obesity', this curriculum, in our view, is a document of its time; an example of how physical education has become something new within the discursive realm of the 'obesity epidemic'.

In the light of our historical overview at the beginning of this paper, there are two other striking elements of the Ontario curriculum that are worth dwelling on. To begin, it is important to keep in mind that the enactment of corporeal power in schools invariably links physical activity with the development of certain personal dispositions. For example, the late Victorian and early Edwardian practice of school yard drilling not only operationalised ideas about how the body should move but also the kind of human subject that would be the by-product of this movement. Ergo, bodies that learned to move in precise and obedient ways in unison would foster and house efficient, productive and compliant subjects (Kirk 1998). In a similar vein, the Ontario curriculum trades 19th century compliance for a preoccupation with courtesy and safety. The curriculum writers repeatedly articulate a vision of physical activity happening in controlled, injury free and

interpersonally harmonious ways. For example, under the heading ‘Attitudes in Health and Physical Education’ we read:

Students’ attitudes towards health and physical education can have a significant effect on their achievement of the expectations. To learn effectively and develop positive attitudes towards healthy active living, students should enjoy the skill-development and physical activities. They should also come to recognize the importance of observing safety procedures, respecting others, and being punctual (p. 4).

While some readers will see this as unremarkable we would want to probe the connections alluded to in this paragraph a little more. In particular, it is not simply that the curriculum casually alludes to an uncontroversial preference for physical safety and general school decorum. On the contrary, the idea of safe, courteous play between happy children appears repeatedly in the curriculum’s learning outcomes. Courteous behaviour has become an officially sanctioned and assessable component of subject physical education. For example, within the ‘Active Participation’ strand, Ontario elementary children are graded on the extent to which they ‘follow instructions, pay attention, and attempt new activities’, ‘demonstrate respect for others in group situations (e.g., being courteous, speaking kindly)’ (both grade 1, p. 31) and ‘communicate positively to help and encourage others’ (grade 3, p. 33).

Many more expectations of this kind could be quoted but the salient point is this: health and physical education is understood in this curriculum context as both an appropriate and realistic place in which to promote interpersonal behaviours – or, as the curriculum calls them ‘Living Skills’ – that are held to be desirable:

**Living skills.** The development of living skills (e.g., decision-making, goal-setting, communication, time-management, organizational, problem-solving, conflict-resolution, and interpersonal skills) is an integral part of all aspects of the physical and health education curriculum, but particularly of this strand. The program will help students to combine these living skills with physical activity and fitness skills, and to apply these skills in ways that will be useful throughout their lives (p. 30).

To this point, we have tried to highlight the discursive tension in the Ontario curriculum between choice and compulsion; between visions of children *en masse* adopting a narrowly prescribed set of ‘health’ and ‘fitness’ focused behaviors and visions of them doing so in cheerful, interpersonally harmonious ways.

At this point, we might ask how this tension is resolved. The Ontario curriculum's answer is personal responsibility. The curriculum's introduction says:

**The Role of Students.** Students have responsibilities with regard to their own learning, which increase as they advance through elementary and secondary school. Those willing to make the effort required and able to apply themselves soon learn that there is a direct relationship between achievement and hard work. Such students become motivated, self-directed learners (p. 3).

The preamble to the 'Active Participation' strand states:

**Physical activity.** Participation in physical activity provides students with a variety of opportunities for increasing their self-esteem and developing positive interpersonal skills and attitudes, including practices of fair play and respect for others. Students, individually and in groups, should be strongly encouraged to participate daily in a wide variety of physical activities – dance, gymnastics, aquatics, and fitness and recreational activities (where facilities permit) – and to become increasingly responsible for their own daily physical activity (p. 30).

Here, personal responsibility is the theoretical glue between children enacting prescribed behaviours (compulsion) and the liberal educational rhetoric of opportunity (choice). As with courtesy, the curriculum includes learning objectives that call upon children to conduct themselves in ways that, presumably, are held to be indicative of a personally responsible physically educated subject: 'display readiness to participate in the instructional program' (grade 1, p. 31), 'participate vigorously in all aspects of the program' (grade 5, p. 35), 'assess their progress in fitness-enhancing activities at regular intervals (e.g., daily, weekly, or monthly monitoring of their pulses before and after active games, stretching, or push-ups)' (grade 6, p. 36) and 'assess their own levels of physical fitness on an ongoing basis, comparing with past performances, and apply the information to their personal goals' (grade 7, p. 37).

It is noticeable that the precise chain of causation between physical fitness, interpersonal courtesy and personal responsibility is not spelled out. Does participation in physical activity lead to a sense of responsibility or the reverse? Does playing games and sports foster respect for rules and other people or do games and sports, by their nature, assume a certain kind of subject? These questions aside, our contention would be that this curriculum document is a much more

precise portrait of a particular kind of person than it is a plan of action for teachers. No doubt this is partly a consequence of the relatively recent fashion for outcomes driven school curricula. However, we think that the demise of liberal education's naturally exuberant and creative child, laden with individual physical potential, is equally apparent. In his/her place is the 'couch potato' of modern and popular imagination; disinclined to physical exertion, easily bored, lacking self-motivation and prone to overeat and anti-social behaviour. It is surely this picture of modern children that explains why interpersonal courtesy, personal responsibility and personal fitness plans have become legitimate, official and assessable physical education objectives in Ontario.

Like all curricula, the Ontario elementary HPE curriculum is not a document that speaks with one voice and the rhetorical tension between choice and compulsion is an obvious example of this. But similar to the even more recent HPE and PDHPE (personal development, health and physical education) curricula of Australia and New Zealand, the human subject of physical education at the beginning of the 21st century is one in need of vigorous remediation. S/he is not a potential to be exploited but a set of problems to be worked on. And while physical education owes its very existence to a long standing desire to protect children from the ravages of modernity, the 'obesity epidemic' era has fused new bodily aesthetics, regimes of self-care and responsibility with a set of bio-medical imperatives to create what looks to us like a new variant of physical education. Many western educational jurisdictions have already introduced the testing and reporting of student fitness and body weight and more will probably follow. Policies and practices like these will rest easily alongside mandated levels of physical activity and a physical education that sees itself as an arm of public health policy. And it is this move, from educative to medicinal, that will make closer and more invasive surveillance of children's bodies seem reasonable and the stipulation that children cheerfully monitor their own fitness levels feel like a choice.

### A crisis of faith in disciplinary technology?

The example from Ontario is just one of an increasing number in which the school is viewed as a site and health-based forms of physical education and as the vehicle to address, in an overt, explicit and morally prescriptive way, the 'problem' of children's bodies, their nourishment and more generally their lifestyles. In Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*, the means of regulating the body and through this process ensuring a productive yet compliant citizenry was from

the late 18th century increasingly undertaken indirectly, by stealth, by the ongoing re-location of the locus of control from outside to inside the person, through self-surveillance in a society that is always watching. His use of Bentham's Panopticon provided an illustration of what Foucault meant by the notion of disciplinary society. The Panopticon was a structure that allowed an individual – whether prisoner, worker, patient or pupil – to be seen at all times by a watcher who him/herself could not be seen by the watched. The watched individual could not know at any given moment if the watcher was indeed watching. Bentham's intention was that the watched would over time modify their behaviour to that approved by the watcher without any explicit intervention on the part of the watcher, through an internalisation of the watcher's wishes and desires.

Foucault foresaw an end to routine violent punishment as a means of securing the compliant yet productive behaviour of the mass of citizenry and its gradual replacement with a whole series of 'little practices' in school, barracks, factories, prisons and hospitals, the defining institutions of modern society that established an individualised, internalised and diffused/ capillarised form of power working on and through bodies. We have suggested that the shift from predominantly militarised gymnastics practices to predominantly sport-based forms of physical education during the course of the twentieth century provides an illustration of Foucault's description of the ongoing unfolding of disciplinary society. However, the extent to which sport-based physical education provides a window on the operation of corporeal power within an obesity discourse era is, we suggest, highly problematic. This recent shift towards more prescriptive, explicit and strident forms of health-based physical education exemplified by the Ontario HPE curriculum may more accurately reflect ongoing shifts in corporeal power in societies marked by an alleged obesity crisis.

Is this emerging reconfiguration of physical education around exercise, nutrition and cheerfully courteous and responsible individuals a sign that these school practices are merely catching up with other developments in physical culture? Or are the trends and events we have described in Ontario and elsewhere harbingers of further shifts in corporeal power and indeed in disciplinary society?

As we have suggested elsewhere (eg. Kirk 2004, Gard 2004), there appears to be a considerable disjunction between the kind of bodies constructed in and through forms of sport-based physical education in schools and the bodies populating fitness clubs, all forms of media-tised physical culture including advertising, movies and media sport, and body projects (Shilling1993) such as cosmetic surgery. While sports and games require a looser form of power over the body than



gymnastics, the emphasis on body surfaces, on representations and appearances within the media during the last three decades in particular constructs a body that is even more enmeshed in subtle and nuanced regulation and normalisation since these representations are experienced so often subliminally. The effects of mediatised physical culture appear to extend the disciplinary processes of individualisation, diffusion and internalisation of power in ways that sport-based physical education does not match. At the same time, we recall that the location of sport-based physical education within the institutional form of the school, with its own particular imperatives for social order, work on any loosening of corporeal power in particular ways. If there is a mismatch between contemporary physical culture and sport-based forms of physical education, in so far as the cultural referents that give meaning to sport-based physical education are located in the 1940s and 1950s or, at least, are increasingly difficult to discern in contemporary physical culture, is a shift towards prescriptive health-based forms of physical education signalling new imperatives in contemporary societies, perhaps centred on or informed by obesity crisis discourse?

We pose these questions not to provide the answers but to open up for consideration and investigation some new directions in our studies of the social construction of bodies and the operation of corporeal power, and the place in this process of physical education and related school practices. Our suspicion at this early stage in pursuing these new directions is that the obesity crisis discourse has forced a shift in the covert, nuanced, individualised and internalised practices of corporeal regulation and normalisation that have increasingly operated in advanced capitalist societies as a means of securing and sustaining a productive and compliant citizenry. The obesity discourse and its loud clamouring about crises may have begun to undermine faith in the uses of disciplinary technologies in schools and other institutions to gently coerce productive compliance. The explicit concerns to use physical education and sport to regulate the social behaviour of young people within the current development of a national strategy in Britain perhaps provides an example of the extent to which faith in less explicit, more nuanced practices characteristic and constituent of disciplinary society has been undermined within government itself. It appears to us that the emergence of morally prescriptive curricula and the measurement and reporting of children's body weights, shapes and sizes and the strict regulation of their diets may not be so much a *return* to an earlier phase of disciplinary society. It may instead be a new moment in which risk needs to be managed more explicitly and more centrally across a range of social practices centred on the body (Gard & Wright 2001).

We are not suggesting that the practices of corporeal regulation within late disciplinary society are necessarily benign or desirable. We would express concern, however, that the recent turn towards more prescriptive and explicitly coercive practices (if this indeed is what is happening) may close down spaces for critical interrogation of the 'truth' of an obesity crisis and the commonsense of what we must do to address this crisis. Indeed, whatever form corporeal power takes, we would want to argue for forms of socially critical physical education that can assist young people to question reflectively and reflexively assumptions and received wisdom about physical education and about physical culture more broadly (eg. Kirk 2000, Kinchin & O'Sullivan 2003).

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