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‘Getting fit basically just means, like, non-fat’: Children’s lessons in fitness and fatness

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Abstract

Current concerns about a childhood obesity crisis and children's physical activity levels have combined to justify fitness lessons as a physical education practice in New Zealand primary (elementary) schools. Researchers focused on children's understandings of fitness lessons argue that they construct fitness as a quest for an 'ideal' (skinny or muscular) body. The conflation of fitness with thinness, however, is complex and problematic. In this paper, we draw from research conducted with a class of primary school children in New Zealand. Drawing on the theoretical tools of Foucault, and utilizing a visual methods approach, we examine how children experience school fitness lessons and construct notions of fitness, health and the body. The children's responses illustrated that obesity discourses and body pedagogies 'collided' in a way that shaped understandings of fitness lessons in ways inextricably connected with the avoidance of being fat. The children assumed that fitness lessons increased fitness and that being fit was demonstrated by a 'correct' corporeal appearance. We argue that body pedagogies inside and outside the school gates shape children's ideas about the body in ways which exclude other understandings of bodies, health and physical activity.

Key words: fitness, obesity, physical education, body pedagogies, visual methods, physical activity, children, children's voices, elementary schools

Introduction and background

Like elsewhere in the Western world, New Zealand children's fitness, physical activity and fatness have gained a great deal of attention from journalists, politicians, medical professionals and scholars over the last decade (Burrows, 2010a; Gard & Wright, 2005). The current perceived crises of childhood obesity and physical inactivity in New Zealand is apparent in recent newspaper headlines such as: "Number of obese Kiwi children 'scary'" (Todd, 2010), "School activities don't help fat kids" (Max, 2009), and "Help on way for obese children" (Saunders, 2012). These are coupled with a proliferation of policies and practices in New Zealand primary (elementary) schools which include, as Burrows (2010a) notes:

Print and media campaigns, the recruitment of lifestyle ambassadors, the provision of nutrition guidelines in schools, exercise prescribing doctors, community 'push-play' campaigns and the development of interactive web sites using sophisticated technology like pod-casting... (p. 236)

Recent guidelines from Government organization *Sport New Zealand* state that children should "do 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day" (Sport New Zealand, 2012a). New Zealand schools have responded to such calls in a variety of ways. Many have implemented 'fitness' activities that aim to increase heart rates and physical activity time during the school day. Fitness activities are not a new initiative in New Zealand schools. Indeed, in response to concerns about heart disease in the 1980s and 1990s, many schools implemented rope jumping and other activities, and fitness testing has continually held a place in programs since that time (Wilson & Russell, 1985). While such moves are undoubtedly linked to a physical health agenda, only in the last decade have such school interventions been explicitly focused on children's body size and weight. Current fitness-based resources in New Zealand schools draw on a range of body and weight discourses to remind schools to address childhood obesity. A current guide for school Principals and teachers states that:

Physical activity can help to prevent obesity in children, which can otherwise lead to lifelong illness for people, including adult obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart conditions and a range of health disorders that can shorten a person's life expectancy. (Sport New Zealand, p. 6)

While national government organizations apply pressure on schools to respond to the obesity crisis, there are few actual legislative impositions. The mandated New Zealand National Education Goals (Ministry of Education, 2004) require schools to prioritize learning in 'physical activity' alongside literacy, numeracy, science and technology, but there is little in this to suggest

an explicit weight or fitness focus. New Zealand schools seem to have responded to the public and media discourse (rather than any official legislation) and have voluntarily taken up programs to enhance children's fitness and monitor their weight. One such physical activity program popular with New Zealand primary schools is 'JUMP JAM'. JUMP JAM is a commercial product marketed to schools on the basis that it “contains everything you need to teach and facilitate this fitness programme”. This includes a CD with music tracks, a resource kit, a DVD with the “fun and simple-to-learn fitness/dance routines”, and a training manual complete with choreography notes for teachers (Kidz Aerobix, no date-a). Students and teachers are instructed by the resource to follow the exact movements and not deviate. In this sense, JUMP JAM is a 'show and do' resource, the implementation of which requires little planning or creative input from students or teachers. The JUMP JAM website claims it is used in 1950 schools nationwide; this is significant given New Zealand only has approximately 2140 schools attended by primary-aged (5-12 years) children (Education Counts, 2012). Many teachers then may simply take up this resource without considering the affect of the activities on children's notions of the body and health.

The uptake of such a commercial product as JUMP JAM is illustrative of wider trends towards the neoliberalizing of public education (Ball, 2012). Such moves, as Ross & Gibson (2007) note, see a greater influence on school programs from within the private sector and from commercial interests. These typically take the form of teaching resources. Significantly, there are now more school resources for health and physical education (HPE) in New Zealand being produced by the private sector than those produced by the State. Macdonald, Hay and Williams (2008) note that the blurred boundaries between public and private sectors, “alongside the confluence of neo-liberal discourses in education and health” have resulted in “individuals and organizations other than teachers and schools position[ing] themselves to deliver HPE” (p. 8).

Along neoliberal lines, fitness activities such as JUMP JAM are also a form of, what Evans and colleagues (2008a) call 'body pedagogies'. Rich (2010) argues that body pedagogies stem from increasing societal concerns for the health of children (and adults) and she argues that “learning about ‘bodily ideals’ is not confined to consumer culture, but increasingly present in the policies, curricular and pedagogical practices of schools” (p. 148). Such body ideals are not limited to health but include body size and shape (Shilling, 2004).

Notions of bodily fitness are, of course, ubiquitous in contemporary Western cultures (Pronger, 2002). Representations of the 'fit' body accompany advertisements for everything from fashion and make up, lifestyle goods seemingly unconnected to the body (such as cars, computers, home wares), to food and physical activity products. The 'fit' body (read slim, muscular, young) is

not only a powerful form of social capital (Shilling, 2004), it is also, as others have argued, a moral responsibility (Gard & Wright, 2005). It is not surprising then that New Zealand schools, like those elsewhere, would assume some responsibility for the bodily fitness of the children in their care. Peterson and Lupton (1996) refer to this as the ‘cult of the body’ which they argue focuses on bodily appearance as symbolic of an individual’s worth. Tinning and Glasby (2002), likewise, note that schools draw on these beliefs and play a role in maintaining this cult, thereby reinforcing physical appearance as “a signifier of worthiness” (p. 110). By reinforcing such notions, fitness lessons are a form of *body pedagogy*: an activity “taken by people, organizations or the state...designed to enhance an individual’s understanding of their own and/or others’ corporeality” (Evans et al, 2008a, p. 17). Rich notes that body pedagogies attempt to define, shape and privilege certain bodies and “are intimately connected with contemporary developments in culture relating to health (specifically obesity discourse) and their translation into education policy and practice (2010, p. 147).

While engaging in fitness practices such as JUMP JAM, children develop specific understandings about their own and others' bodies and about the purpose of such activities. These understandings are, of course, neither politically nor morally neutral (Evans *et al.*, 2008a). They are explicitly linked to, and serve to reinforce, wider body discourses about what a healthy and 'correct' body is and the 'right' behaviors and attitudes necessary to achieve such a body. Burrows (2010b) argues that children perceive “physical activity as a weight-management strategy, which in turn will yield a slimmer and thereby healthier ‘self’” (p. 152). In school fitness lessons then, young people are not only doing fitness, they are also learning specific things about fitness and their bodies. This may or may not be the learning their teachers intend.

We take a directly critical approach here in order to question, what we suggest is likely to be, the unconscious use of fitness activities such as JUMP JAM in schools. Fitzpatrick notes that “some health and physical education scholars have become increasingly interested in alternative critical and sociocultural approaches to the study of movement and health, and a related questioning of the assumptions and approach of ‘traditional’ physical education and health education practices” (2011, p. 357). Gard and Wright argue, however, that the strength of body discourses in society may mitigate against more critical approaches because obesity discourses close “off spaces for other ways of thinking and doing physical education” (2001, p. 546).

In this article, we take up this challenge and ask what affect the uptake of fitness activities has on the *learning* of children in New Zealand primary schools. We apply a Foucauldian-inspired analysis and focus on the perspectives of the children themselves. In so doing, we employ visual

methods to gain an understanding of how children experience and understand fitness activities as a part of their schooling (we return to a fuller explanation of this below).

This article is in four sections. The first section introduces the key theoretical Foucauldian concepts while the second section outlines the methodology of the study, including the visual methods. In section three we present, in four themes, the children's views and the photos they took during the research. We end, in the final section, with some reflections on the study and consider the need for alternative school practices.

Discourse and governmentality

The work of French social theorist Michel Foucault, particularly his notions of discourse and governmentality, provides a useful framework here for understanding how notions of fitness and the body are perceived by school children. Employed by a number of health education and physical education scholars in recent times (for an overview, see Leahy, 2012), Foucault's theoretical ideas align well with this work. Evans and Davies (2004) point out that Foucault “sought to illustrate how subjectivity, our sense of body and self, is constituted in and through a wide range of discourses and practices within fields of power, knowledge and truth” (p. 43). In this study, such tools enabled us to understand how knowledge about fitness and practices of fitness in schools, construct particular health 'truths' for children.

Foucault's notion of discourse encompasses a multitude of ideas, practices, power relations and rituals that produce historically and culturally located meanings (Powers, 1996). Foucault used the term 'discourse' in multiple ways, although, in more general terms, he described discourse as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Discourses are not about objects; they constitute them and in the practice of doing so they conceal their own invention” In other words, discourses do not describe, but, instead, create and shape who we can 'be'; discourses structure people's ways of thinking and knowing about the social world. Markula and Pringle add that discourse should “*not* be considered as a simple translation between reality and language but as *practices* that shape perceptions of reality” (2006, p. 31, emphasis in original). Foucault (1978), indeed, maintained that “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (p. 100).

We also use the notion of governmentality here to interrogate how children's subjectivities may be fashioned through fitness lessons (as a technique of government) and obesity knowledges (McDermott, 2012). Governmentality is the 'art' or activity of government (Foucault, 1991); 'the conduct of conduct' (Gordon, 1991, p. 2), of a certain population (e.g. children). Foucault

conceived government as “a certain way of striving to reach social and political ends by acting in a calculated manner upon the forces, activities and relations of the individuals that constitute a population” (Rose, 1990, p. 5). As noted above, in recent times there has been a proliferation of school-based policies and practices addressing childhood obesity and children’s health (Pike, 2010). Foucault’s notion of governmentality enables interrogation of how fitness lessons, as both a body pedagogy and governmental technology, attempt to shape children’s “bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being” (Foucault, 1997, p. 225). Dean argues that “to analyse government is to analyse those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires and aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (2010, p. 10). Fitness lessons may therefore act “at a distance” (Rose, 1990, p. 10) on children in ways that align their thoughts, actions, bodies and desires with wider imperatives for fitness, healthiness and slimness. As McDermott notes, governmentality “insists on a commitment to self reflection and self improvement, which in the context of health governance, is habituated from a very young age through biopedagogical practices” (2012, p. 408). In this article, we are interested in exploring how children take on, as well as resist, attempts to shape them into governable and self-governing, fit and thin citizens. In the next section, we expand on the methods employed to gain such understandings.

The study: Through children’s eyes and in children’s voices

We draw here on evidence taken from a research project, conducted in 2009, with a class of 28 year five (nine year old) students from a school we call Kereru Primary School.¹ This is a state-funded co-educational primary (elementary) school in Auckland, New Zealand and is situated in a moderate-to-high socioeconomic area. Kereru Primary School children identified with the following ethnicities: New Zealand European (Pakeha) (20%), Chinese (20%), Indian (17%), South African (11%), Māori (indigenous) (7%) and British (6%), with the remainder identifying with various Pacific Island (8%) and Asian (11%) nations.

From the class of 28, 24 students gave their own assent and gained parental permission to be involved in the research. All of these 24 participants completed a simple questionnaire and provided an answer to the statement “I like fitness”. The answers were made on a three-point continuum from ‘agree’ to ‘disagree’, with an option of ‘neither agree nor disagree’ in the centre. As no children ‘disagreed’, three children who ‘agreed’ and three children who ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ with the statement were selected to be involved as key participants in the study. These

¹ The names of the students and school are pseudonyms.

six students (three boys and three girls) were selected so that the group contained a range of ethnicities. These six students then became the *child researchers*. The child researchers participated in fitness lessons with their class, and photographed their classmates (with their permission) ‘doing fitness’. They then participated in semi-structured photo elicitation interviews (explained below) the following week.

Self chosen pseudonyms are used here for each of the children. The participants were: Georgia (9 years old, Chinese, female); Shreya (9 years old, Indian, female); Daisy (9 years old, New Zealand European/Pakeha², female); Sammy (9 years old, Zimbabwean, male); Joseph (9 years old, Chinese, male) and Jimi (9 years old, New Zealand/European/Pakeha, male).

Visual methods

A visual methods approach of photo elicitation interviews was used. Harper (2002) broadly describes photo elicitation interviews (PEI) as “based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (p. 13). Each of the six child-researchers in this study was provided with photographic training before the research process began. The key message given to the child-researchers before we began was to take photographs that would demonstrate how they saw, thought and felt about the fitness lessons their class were involved in. Fitness was a regular activity that the class engaged in at least three times per week over the school year. Teachers planned sessions of between fifteen and thirty minute’s duration for their class in addition to regular ‘whole school’ activities (typically the JUMP JAM program or long-distance running).

The child researchers took the photos during the three class-based fitness lessons in one week. In the first lesson, a digital projector was used to display a DVD movie of the JUMP JAM routines onto a large screen in the school hall. All the children and their teacher copied the routines shown for approximately 15 minutes. During the second fitness lesson, students undertook a cross country (long distance) run for 20 minutes. This involved a series of ‘warm-up’ stretches followed by running around the school field, and finished with the students ‘cooling down’ by walking around the concrete court in silence. Other classes participated at the same time and the teachers were positioned at the perimeter of the field.

The third fitness lesson was an outdoor JUMP JAM session with the entire school (approximately 270 students aged 5-11). A small group of year 6 (10-11 years old) students and their teachers stood on a stage and performed three rehearsed JUMP JAM routines. A sound

² Pakeha is the commonly used term in New Zealand for those of European descent. It is an indigenous Maori word.

system blasted the music out over the school grounds while the children and teachers performed the JUMP JAM routines simultaneously.

During these three lessons, the six child-researchers took a total of 421 digital photographs between them. In the week following the fitness lessons, they then engaged in individual semi-structured, photo elicitation interviews with Darren. Each interview lasted between fifty five and seventy minutes. An interview guide was used to provide guidance and structure, but questions were sufficiently open-ended to allow the children to describe their experiences, thoughts, feelings and stories in their own way. The photos were used as a starting point during these discussions but the children also talked about fitness in a broader sense than was reflected in the images. In addition to being asked to explain the photos, extra questions included: what is fitness? Why do you do fitness at school? How can you tell if someone is fit? Why did you choose this photograph? If you could change anything about fitness, what would you change? How does this fitness activity make you feel? The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The photo elicitation interview method provided a useful way to both generate and analyze children's voices, particularly given that both the research topic and photographs were based on children's bodies and movement. Mizen (2005) notes that enabling children to produce their own photographs provides unique evidence that moves "beyond an illustrative function, to offer a deeper understanding" (p. 124). Hill (1988) argues that "the child is the expert (the only expert) on [their] feelings, perceptions and thoughts" (p. 91). In this way, the use of PEI as a visual methods approach was particularly useful in the co-construction of knowledge, what Pope (2010) describes as involving an "exchange of meaning and experience" (p. 193). However, Thomson (2008) makes two key points regarding the subjective nature of photographs. First, that "an image is not neutral", and the second, that "an image can be read in multiple ways" (Thomson, 2008, p. 10). When using visual images in research it is important to acknowledge that, contrary to popular notions that 'pictures never lie', a photographic image "is not a simple window on the world" (Thomson, 2008, p. 9). The photographs featured in this article are, of course, open to interpretation by the reader. Pink (2007) argues, however, that the main research interest in the photograph is not how the researcher interprets the image, but how the image has meaning and significance for the participant. She notes that "visual images are made meaningful through the subjective gaze of the viewer, and that each individual produces these photographic meanings by relating the image to his or her existing personal experiences, knowledge and wider cultural discourses" (Pink, 2007, p. 82). The children, for example, chose photographs that illustrated why they 'do fitness' or what they liked about JUMP JAM. In other instances, photographs rekindled

memories, leading participants to reflect on past experiences and memories not directly associated with the school activities and which were then “potentially unknown to the researcher” (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1512). For instance, when Sammy chose a photograph to demonstrate ‘things he liked about fitness lessons’ (i.e. talking with friends), he quickly changed the direction of the conversation and recollected how he walked (and sometimes even stopped running completely) when he managed to escape the teachers’ view. Clark (1999) refers to this method as *auto-driving*. The photos in this sense then were not used as data in and of themselves but rather used as catalysts for wider conversations around the research topic but also include the related perspectives the children shared. This allowed us to identify different discourses the children drew on in talking about and around their photographs as well as enabling us to reflect on how discursive body pedagogical practices may affect children’s ‘bodies and souls’. This research method thus allowed a way for us to represent the children’s experiences ‘through their eyes and in their voices’ (Graham, 1995).

However, while listening to children’s voices was critical to this research project, we were also cognizant that adopting a naïve approach to children’s voice could over-simplify the complex nature of children’s lives and experiences. As Mazzei (2009) states, voice must not be conflated with pure, clear evidence; voice is “slippery, shifting, knowable, unknowable, certain, uncertain, audible, inaudible, and certainly unstable” (p. 45). Simply presenting participants’ voices to the reader, even ‘unadulterated’, word-for-word ‘exact’ voices (i.e. including pauses, stutters, false starts, self-corrections and silence), does not articulate the ‘truth’ or reflect the ‘real’ meaning of an experience (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). In fact, we are cognizant that our critical approach means how we interpret children’s voices also reflects our own motives and values (Marker, 2009).

We view photo elicitation interviews then as a means to help bridge a virtual ‘chasm’ between researcher and child to develop a partially shared understanding of the experience of fitness lessons (Harper, 2002). In this way, listening to these children’s voices allowed us some insight into the ‘really-lived worlds’ of each child (Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992), “even if what we hear is not to our liking” (Thomas, 1993, p. 62). Thus critically reflecting on *whose* voices we listened to and *how* we re-present them provided us with richer and thicker understandings and representations of children’s voices. In the following section, we focus on the main themes constructed during the photo elicitation interviews. These themes, although overlapping and interconnected, have been separated and unpacked in order to demonstrate the diverse ways in which body pedagogies such as fitness work to shape how children think about their bodies.

Understanding children's views on fitness in school

It became clear during the interviews that obesity discourses underpinned these children's understandings of their school fitness lessons. Through the auto-driven nature of the interviews, it also became clear that body pedagogies also emanated from outside teacher-led fitness lessons. The children frequently mentioned friends, family, and television as places that governed how they thought and acted around their own corporeality. We explore the views of these six children here and have organized the main themes into the five sections that follow.

“If you're too fat it's going to be bad for your health”: Fitness lessons as healthy body pedagogies

The children in this study understood fitness as closely linked with being healthy. However, they directly and unproblematically related the achievement of good health, and the avoidance of illness, to body size, shape and weight (cf. Burrows, 2010b; Rail, 2009). For instance, Georgia talked about fat people needing to lose weight, pointing to a photograph (figure 1 below) of her classmates doing JUMP JAM to explain that “if you're too fat it's going to be bad for your health and you can't do many things like running and sports and jumping”.

[insert Figure 1 here]

According to these children, fat people were not only unfit, but at increased risk of disease. Georgia was sure that “if you are, like, too fat you get this sort of sickness, like, I think in Chinese [it is called] *tángniàobìng* [diabetes], so it's, like, the sort of thing when you eat a lot of sugar”. Shreya also stated that, “if you are overweight that can cause heart diseases and things like that”. As Evans and colleagues (2008b) state, obesity discourse frames people's thoughts and actions concerning the body in a way that privileges ‘weight’ as a direct measure of health and well-being. The children in this study took up these discourses and made direct links between the activities they engaged in at school and avoiding the risk of illness.

The concept of risk is, of course, critical to the governmentality of childhood obesity. Coveney (2006, p. 154) argues that obesity discourse positions children as a population who are either “sick, slothful and dangerous, or innocent, helpless victims”. In the latter, children are positioned ‘*at risk*’ of inactivity, obesity, even premature death. It is in no way surprising then that the children themselves engage with such fears. The resources used at their school state explicitly

that, in the case of JUMP JAM, the activities will reduce the risk of “cardiovascular disease, hypertension, some cancers, obesity, diabetes” (Kidz Aerobix, no date-b, p. 4). The JUMP JAM resource, it should be noted, fails to state any evidence of such claims.

Discourses of health risk then are interwoven with those of fitness for these young people. This results in fitness (and fitness lessons) being “widely promoted as an opportunity to avert several of the risks to selfhood present in modern society” (Tinning & Glasby, 2002, p. 112). In this way, school fitness lessons, as experienced by the children in this study, act as a technology of governance; whereby children understand themselves as being at risk.

“Getting fit basically just means, like, non-fat”: Fat-avoidance body pedagogies

Foucault (1980) argued that in every society there are particular discourses that function as ‘regimes of truth’. In this, he acknowledged that all discourses are not equal but that some are perceived, at the intersection of power/knowledge, as containing objective truth. Certain regimes of truth were, indeed, evident in this study. In particular, the idea that fitness lessons would prevent fatness seemed to be powerful. Shreya described fitness lessons as “an activity that you do or an activity that helps you exercise and maybe lose weight or something along the lines of that...”. Jimi’s expressed that, despite the fact that he did not enjoy running laps, it was important for his weight. In the interview, he pointed out the photograph below (Figure 2) to show “something [I]... don’t like about cross country”.

[insert Figure 2 here]

Jimi said he liked running, but “don’t like doing so many laps...I have the stitch and can’t breathe!” He also bemoaned the common practice (one that the other children also commented on) of teachers saying “you’ve got to keep on running!” when he was tired. He also noted that you get “told off” if you did not listen to that particular instruction. This led Darren to ask Jimi, “Do you think doing cross country training makes you fitter?”

Jimi: Yes.

Darren: How do you think it makes you fitter?

Jimi: Um...because...it is good for you and because it is good exercise?

Darren: What do you mean by it is good for you?

Jimi: It is good for your body because if you don't do exercise you get really fat.

Daisy also conflated fitness directly and unproblematically with body size. When asked to describe what image she would include in a picture dictionary to illustrate the word 'fit', she replied the person would need to look "very skinny". Her definitions for this dictionary were as follows: "getting fit basically just means, like, non-fat....fit means, in a way, getting like non-fat, like, just helping your body to get skinny. It'll also let you fit through the door".

The regime of truth that fitness equaled non-fatness was further reproduced outside of the school grounds. During her interview, Daisy described her weekend activities with her friend:

She [my friend] was coming over on Saturday and she asked me if I wanted to go for a run... I was like 'really? It's the weekend!'...because I normally don't go for runs on the weekend. She was like, 'doesn't everybody want to get skinnier?' and I'm like, 'yeah...how about this: we run to the pools and go for a swim after it because it's refreshing?' and she's like 'OK!'.

During this conversation Darren asked her "why do nine year-old girls want to get skinnier?".

After a lengthy pause she replied:

I want to get skinny because it is fun exercising. I just like being skinny and I think I know a lot of girls [who] just want to be skinny because...who doesn't? 'Cause who wants to be really fat? Nobody wants to be really fat.

Daisy and her friend connected their desire to 'get skinnier' with the triple 'truths' that exercising would achieve this, that 'everybody' wants to get skinnier and that 'nobody' wants to be fat.

Daisy's comments reveal how power is productive in shaping bodies and subjectivities. Children's bodies are governed by these discourses through a range of 'micro' level techniques of power. Foucault referred to this as 'disciplinary power', "the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Gore (1995) argues that this kind of disciplinary power includes both *normalization* - "conforming to a standard - defining the normal" (p. 171) - and *totalisation*, the giving of "collective character" (p. 179). Through power-knowledge relations, Daisy assumed 'everybody' to have the same beliefs as her. Her belief in the relationship between fitness and thinness, and her desire to be thin, assumed the status of a social norm linked to the valuing of thinness and a fear of fat.

Foucault (1977) emphasized the importance of disciplinary power's 'normalizing judgment'. These children's comments show that, not only are actively judging their own and others' bodies against a perceived 'norm', but they are also actively monitoring and regulating behaviors assumed to achieve the norm. Moreover, as Evans *et al.* (2008b) note, such normalization

processes are especially powerful in that they are subtle, rather than directly coercive, and are actively self-regulated by the children themselves.

“They would be really fat, sit on the couch all day”: (Im)moral body pedagogies

Evans *et al.* (2008b, p. 401) recognized that body pedagogies, underpinned by obesity discourses, “carry particularly strong moral overtones in the notions of the body they prescribe and define. An individual’s character and value, their sense of self, comes to be judged essentially in terms of ‘weight’, size or shape”. The children in this study drew on such moralistic obesity discourses that positioned fat people as being *immoral*, *lazy* and *irresponsible*. This is evident in the following conversation with Jimi, who frequently referred back to this photo (see figure 3 below) to help illustrate his experience and understanding of fitness:

[insert Figure 3 here]

Darren: If I had a photo of a whole lot of different people, could we tell if they were fit just by looking at them?

Jimi: Yes [points to figure 3].

Darren: What would a fit person look like do you think?

Jimi: A person that has lots of muscles.

Darren: Anything else?

Jimi: Not really.

Darren: What about a person who was unfit...what would they look like?

Jimi: They would be really fat, sit on the couch all day.

Jimi's assertion here, that an unfit person can be identified, not only by their body size, but also by their behavior, is a form of moralizing based on body size. Gard and Wright (2005) and Tinning (2010) argue that prescribing *how* we should live our lives is embedded in a moral imperative that those who are fat, have ill health, or who do not ‘choose’ a so-called healthy lifestyle can be blamed for their own ‘bad’ choices. Coveney points out that technologies of power are more productive when they are able “to problematise the choices individuals are able to make. Making the right choice – that is the rational choice – results from the process of self-problematisation and the recognition of one’s self as a morally responsible subject” (2006, p. 146). In this case, the moral responsibility is to exercise and not sit on the couch all day. This, course, ignores the fact

that fitness and exercise choices are framed within historical, political, cultural, social and economic contexts (Kirk, 2006).

Drawing on her own research with children, Burrows (2010a) argues that they readily draw on “the notion that fat children will be on the couch doing nothing” (p. 247). This resonates with Jimi's own perspectives here. Sammy, likewise, talked about a classmate who, he said, did not “do much” during fitness. He explained that if this boy continued to not “do much... he will just get lazy”, adding later that ‘lazy’ people “would get fat...because they are not exercising”. Sammy also commented that fitness lessons “help[ed] me not to be lazy”. Doing fitness was constructed then by these children as a panacea to laziness, “something that is inextricably linked to being a ‘good’ citizen” (Burrows, 2010b, p. 158). Fat people were assumed to be unfit, unhealthy and lazy while skinny people were attributed the ‘collective characteristics’ (Gore, 1995) of being morally ‘good’: fit, healthy, and active. This does not simply normalize the characteristics of fat or skinny children, but also ascribes responsibility to individuals for their attitudes, dispositions and choices. The children perceived such ‘moral’ choices as the main determinants of health and body size, shape and weight. Children's bodies then are directly governed by discourses of morality and behavior. This is especially powerful because they make children themselves morally responsible for their fitness and health.

“It is exercise, but it’s not really good for you”: (In)valuable body pedagogies

As the above sections show, the regime of truth that equates fitness with slenderness not only positions thin bodies and fitness behaviors as normal and moral, but also as desirable (Halse, Honey, & Boughtwood, 2007). Conversely, being fat (or feeling fat) can result in shame, guilt and stigmatization (Evans *et al.*, 2008). Fitness lessons in school then act as body pedagogies by shaping the way in which the *value* of bodies is understood and (re)produced. Daisy's comments are especially pertinent in this regard. Daisy drew on figure 4 below when talking about the purpose of fitness lessons:

Daisy: ...it’s just a fun way to get fit...if you exercise when you are a little kid like me, then the chances that you can do [it] when you are older are awesome.

Darren: So if you do fitness now, what will that do to your body when you are older do you think?

Daisy: It would make you look skinnier, you could be a model!

[insert figure 4]

At nine years of age then, Daisy understood that fitness was something she 'should' do as a life habit. This notion is echoed in the JUMP JAM resource which claims to “establish fitness as a lifetime interest” (Kidz Aerobix, no date-b, p. 4) and provide “students with a valuable exercise habit early in life” (Kidz Aerobix, no date-c). Here we see an interesting convergence of obesity discourse, body pedagogies and neoliberal governmentality. Children are governed to be fitter (and skinnier), not just in the present but also for the future.

Like the other children, Daisy constructed fitness lessons as a means to get skinnier. She assumed, however, a fit/skinny body to be of high value and noted that such a body would give her opportunities to be successful, attractive, and (possibly) famous, like a model. Doing fitness and looking fit is thus epitomized as a measure of success in life. Halse *et al.* (2007) and Burrows (2010b) argue that some children consider fatness as not only unhealthy but also as detrimental to social status and acceptance. When Daisy was asked “What is wrong with being fat?” she replied: “people tease you”. Even for young children then, the body is a status symbol made and remade by discourses of thinness and the marginalization of fatness (cf. Sykes, 2011). O’Dea (2005) argues that such practices lead to the further marginalization and stigmatization of children whose bodies do not surrender to the ‘ideal’ – especially those who are labeled overweight, obese or fat.

As body pedagogies, fitness lessons help to construct social meanings about *whose* bodies and *what* bodies gain status and value (Evans *et al.*, 2008a). They also shape children’s understanding of *how* to move their bodies and *what* specific activities have the highest status and value. The children in this study were cognizant that fitness activities (often adult-forms of exercise such as aerobics, jogging, and working out with exercise equipment) were of higher value than less exertive, informal physical activities such as playing, dancing, or walking. For instance, Daisy described her part-time job delivering advertising brochures to letterboxes. She mentioned that she ran instead of walking because “walking is fitness, but running is, like more fitness”.

Shreya pointed out the photograph below (Figure 5) to illustrate how she did not like it when other students ‘cheated’ by walking after they had passed one of the teachers. She connected teachers' instructions to “keep running” (during cross country) with a better form of exercise (i.e. that running was better than walking).

[insert Figure 5]

Shreya: Yeah, they [the teachers] say ‘keep going, keep going’ (sighs) and if some people ...have a note that they can’t run they even say 'go around!' and say ‘keep going, keep going, keep going’.

Darren: Has a teacher at Kereru said that to you before?

Shreya: Yeah, but that was near the ending when I just came out, but we’re still meant to be running until we come up to the courts.

Darren: How does that make you feel when they say ‘keep running’ and you are really tired?

Shreya: I’m like aaahhhhh!!! (drops head and shoulders down)...why do we have to run? We have already run so much!

Darren: That’s a good question. Why do you have to run?

Shreya: You have to exercise...otherwise, if you are all kept sitting there we’ll all be, like, plump.

Darren: What about just walking or walking fast? Why can’t you do that?

Shreya: Because that’s like... it *is* exercise, but it’s not *really* good for you.

Shreya reinforces the notion here that walking is not as good as running, and that running (although tiring and frustrating) is good to avoid being ‘plump’. Although she admits that walking is exercise, Shreya determines that it is not as effective as running.

Like the boy in Shreya's photo, Sammy too explained that he, at times, resisted the teacher's surveillance of running and would covertly stop and walk during cross country training at points when the teachers could not see him.

Darren: Why do you stop only when the teachers can’t see you?

Sammy: Because once they see you then they just tell you to continue running.

Darren: Why do you think they want you to keep running?

Sammy: To make you fit.

Both Sammy and Shreya believed that running was a more effective means to getting fit (i.e. avoiding being fat and/or lazy) than walking. They also identified the surveillance of the teachers as central to achieving the outcome of children continuing to run. Evans *et al.* (2008a) note that young people engage in behaviors that are deemed appropriate to gain value and status in the eyes of others, particularly friends and teachers. In attempting to achieve the ‘right’ body size, shape and weight, as well as displaying the ‘right’ types of physical activity behaviors, these children sought to prove to themselves and others that they were “good citizens” (Evans et al, 2008a p.

397). While they resented the teachers' surveillance, they perceived it as for their own good in the quest for fitness.

“Can you exercise too much?” – “No”: Dangerous body pedagogies

A number of health and physical education scholars argue that certain practices, particularly those typically included in fitness lessons, have the propensity to cause what McDermott (2007) calls ‘collateral damage’ to children. Burrows and Wright (2004, p. 91), for instance, suggest “that the identities constructed for children within contemporary panics around childhood obesity are ‘dangerous’ ones” because of the effect on children. These effects include increased self-monitoring of (un)healthy ‘bodily inputs’ and outputs, as well as increased surveillance of children’s bodies and behaviors by teachers, parents, and peers (Burrows & Wright, 2004). Smolak (2004, p. 16) notes there is a wealth of longitudinal evidence that body dissatisfaction in young people, “especially concerns about being or becoming fat, is related to the development of eating problems, eating disorders, and depression” and excessive exercise (see also, Zanker & Gard, 2009)

This can be understood via Foucault’s notion of power-knowledge. Markula (2001) explains that “power is inscribed on the body through normalizing specific body practices” (p. 174). The discourses of obesity and fitness provide knowledge about how children *should* understand, monitor, regulate and experience their bodies. Cliff and Wright argue that “a ‘fear of fat’ has been normalised and institutionalised” within school-based physical education (2010, p. 230). As a result, children monitor, examine, measure and compare themselves against the perceived norms of fitness and fatness and “discipline themselves to reach the required level of normalcy” (Markula, 2001, p. 174). In this study, children not only commented on aspects of their body they were dissatisfied with, but spoke about the actions they regularly undertook to mould their bodies and behaviors.

We were particularly concerned here with the children’s response to the question, ‘Can you exercise too much?’ Sammy, Jimi and Daisy all replied with a resounding “No”. Critical scholars such as Evans *et al.* (2008b) express an uneasiness that the subjectivities constructed by discursive practices may lead to body image dissatisfaction and potentially ‘unhealthy’ bodily practices in the quest to be ‘fit and healthy’. This can include excessive exercising (cf. Zanker & Gard, 2009). Clearly, the governing of children's bodies through fitness lessons, can be “detrimental rather than productive of health” (Gard & Wright, 2001, p. 537). In this final section we reflect on the meaning of this study and consider the possibility of alternative practices.

The end of fitness: alternative body pedagogies

In the late 1980s, Kirk and Colquhoun's (1989) argued that there was a kind of triplex in which 'exercise=fitness=health'. The children in this research drew a more direct, simplified relationship between fitness and the body. For them, the outcome of fitness was expressed as a fitness=non-fatness duplex. When the children talked about fitness lessons getting them fit or fitter, they simultaneously invoked the notion that they were getting thin or thinner. In connecting knowledge to power through obesity discourse, the children's corporeal conduct is governed through the regime of truth that fitness=non-fatness. Inherent in this is a fear of fat and an assumption that fatness is risky and unhealthy.

In the context of wider obesity and inactivity discourses, the body pedagogies that shaped these children's knowledge and understanding about fitness and fatness *in school* intersected and interconnected with the body pedagogies enacted *outside of school*. This 'collision' of body pedagogies to 'improve' children's bodies and behaviors increases the probability that children may have an impoverished relationship with physical activity, their bodies and them 'selves' (Burrows, 2005). Following Foucault we suggest "...not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad" (1984, p. 343). The 'danger' is that children perceive 'other' forms of human movement, such as dancing, riding bicycles, jumping on trampolines, swinging from trees, and chasing friends, as frivolous, less valuable and unlikely to produce fitness. These activities as a result may be shunned.

The children's voices clearly illuminated the 'powerful ways' in which discourses of fitness, exercise, health and body size "endorsed outside schools is taken up within school cultures and can have a powerful bearing on individual's developing sense of well-being and self" (Evans et al, 2008b, p. 399). In this sense, Kereru Primary School endorsed body pedagogies which positioned formal, fitness-enhancing exercises as the 'best' means to achieve a 'fit' (non-fat) body. How the children understand what a fit body is, what it looks like and how it is achieved, has been shaped and reshaped through body pedagogies inside and outside of the school. The children's quest for thinness and avoiding fatness dominated their understanding of fitness lessons and caused them to actively monitor their own bodies and the bodies of others. Such an obsession with the body at a young age can be seen as a kind of 'collateral damage' (McDermott, 2007) which is reproduced by schools, teachers and students. The damage is produced by an unquestionable regime of truth that New Zealand children are at risk of fatness and ill health. Children further connect fatness

with a lack of social status and success, and assume those who are fat must be lazy. The lack of fitness can be read directly in the body and judgments made about the worth of an individual.

While it is clear that wider obesity discourses continue to produce these regimes of truth, there are also possibilities for teachers and students to imagine a different approach. Orner asks: "what are the generative and imaginative possibilities of redefining our relationship to our bodies in contexts such as schools—contexts that have historically been hostile to the lived, messy, irrational, 'grotesque' bodies we all possess?" (2002, p. 280). To disrupt and deconstruct such body 'truths' may require the rethinking of fitness lessons as a space for new kinds of body pedagogies. In proposing critical body pedagogies, perhaps the first step is for those who take fitness lessons – the teachers – to reflect on *their own body as pedagogy*. In Jones and Hughes-Decatur's work with pre-service teachers, they assert that:

teachers themselves need time to deeply reflect on and actively consider their bodies...how their body is shaped and contoured according to particular social and political demands....exploring the assumptions we have about our bodies that are always being read by others, including students in the classroom—opens up possibilities for articulating how and why bodies matter in education. (2012, p. 54)

By being willing and able to critically reflect on and engage with taken-for-granted beliefs about their own bodies, the bodies of children and the value of fitness lessons, the self-reflexive teacher *may* help children to unpick the fitness=non fatness duplex. Foucault (1980) argues that there are, indeed, possibilities for reclaiming the body. He states that "one's own body can be acquired only through an investment of power in the body" (p. 56) and, in turn, that power can also be "exposed to a counter-attack in that same body" (p.56). There are perhaps then possibilities for teachers and students to reinvest power in their own bodies as a counter to the prevailing discourses of fitness and non-fatness. Tinning and Glasby (2002) suggest to look to alternative discourses and practices other than those contemporary practices that are underpinned by the 'cult of the body'. This will, however, be no easy task. Given the current neoliberal turn in HPE and the somewhat inevitable proliferation of commercial 'anti-obesity' HPE resources, there is also a danger that teachers will be de-valued, de-professionalized and de-skilled to deliver critical HPE programs with their students (Vander Schee & Boyles, 2010).

Instead of reproducing obesity discourses through fitness lessons, teachers might use the children's understandings of fitness and fatness as a 'springboard' to begin conversations about the relationship between fitness and fatness. Instead of asking students to reproduce supposed 'correct' answers about fitness, teachers might instead challenge students "to explore, critique, and

reconstruct normative discourses and practices around the body” (Jones & Hughes-Decatur, p. 59). Crucially though, we believe that more productive practices could begin with schools first working with children to determine the kinds of physical activities that they find enjoyable and meaningful, rather than surveilling their bodies and insisting they 'keep on running'.

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