

## On being critical in health and physical education

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*Background:* This paper is a reflection on being a critical teacher of health and physical education. It is a conversation of sorts between the two authors: a critical educator and researcher, and a critical teacher. It is based on the shared experiences of one of the author's (Dan) high-school PE and health classes over the course of a year during a critical ethnography of health and PE undertaken by the other author (Katie). The study was conducted at a multiethnic and low-socioeconomic high school in New Zealand.

*Purpose:* The purpose of this article is to reflect on what it means to undertake and embody a critical pedagogical approach to health and PE teaching. We explore the key tenets of Dan's approach and engage in a dialogue about the challenges and possibilities of such work.

*Design and analyses:* The argument here is informed by the aforementioned critical ethnographic study but the authors take a step back from that study in this paper to reflect on critical pedagogy in the field of health and PE and what drives one practitioner to forward his approach despite the difficulties he encounters. We draw on a range of analytical tools including critical approaches to gender, embodiment and pedagogy.

*Conclusions:* We argue that, despite the difficulties of being critical in health and PE, such work is greatly needed in health and physical education. We suggest that, perhaps, a more embodied form of critical pedagogy is required.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy; critical inquiry; teacher identity; health and physical education

School is, in a way I guess, a really important place to *be* different 'cause I guess you're trying to get kids to think differently and be different and make change. So if you don't do it, who's going to do it? (Dan)

Dan turns up to teach his PE class wearing a bright pink tie with a vintage shirt and roughly cut off jeans. He has on thick black-rimmed glasses (with missing lenses) and he carries an old leather briefcase. The students in his year 12 class (16 year olds) watch him as they wander into the gym: a few flick their heads and eyebrows up in the usual greeting. Willie says 'Hi sir, wassup'. Dan puts down his briefcase and calls the students over to the edge of the gym. 'Today', he begins, 'we are going to continue our discussions about gender.' 'You look pretty tough today Sir', laughs Sione. The class smile, they are used to their teacher wearing wacky outfits. 'So, what's your gender today sir?' asks Harriet.

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This article is a kind of conversation, or reciprocal dialogue, between a critical educator and researcher (Katie) and a critical teacher of health and PE (Dan). It is based on the shared experiences of Dan's PE and health classes over the course of a year during a critical ethnography of health and PE (HPE)<sup>1</sup> conducted by Katie at a multiethnic and low-socioeconomic high school in New Zealand. Dan became involved in the study when he volunteered his senior Year 12 and 13 (16–17 years) HPE classes as part of the research. Interestingly, this actually changed the nature of the study, since the focus had not initially been on teaching (it was on students' experiences and perspectives of health, PE and schooling). However, the nature of Dan's critical pedagogical practice was simply too compelling for Katie to ignore. Having herself taught in schools and now in teacher education, she had always held a strong commitment to critical teaching approaches. She knew, however, that these could be troubling, messy and disruptive; especially when they were at odds with content delivery and conservative institutional cultures.

As the opening vignette highlights, Dan had (and still has) a particular way of being a teacher of HPE. In this, he formed deep connections with students, all of whom were from very different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to him. The bulk of the study about Dan and his students is published elsewhere (Fitzpatrick 2013) but we write this article together now as a reflection on what it means for Dan to *be* a critical educator in and of health and PE. We are especially concerned here to explore what drives Dan to be critical and the consequences of being critical in contemporary school settings. We are also concerned that, despite a healthy amount of scholarship on critical health and PE, there are few examples of actual critical practice in schools. In the first section then, we explore contemporary discourses of the critical in the field of Health and PE. In Section 2, we outline the basis of the study and the key aspects of Dan's critical approach. The third section is an interview with Dan, a kind of conversation between us, reflecting on the challenges and possibilities of being critical in HPE. We end with some further reflective thoughts on the difficulties of critical practice and argue that, despite barriers to being critical in school, such practices are still urgently needed.

### **Critical approaches to health and physical education**

In the late 1980s and 1990s, discussions of critical pedagogy in physical education were lively. It is not our intention to rehearse those debates here (for an overview, see Rovegno and Kirk 1995; Tinning 2002; Muros Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa 2005), but some key observations are worth noting. At that time, Tinning (1988) advocated for an inquiry-based approach to critical pedagogy which he conceptualised along the following lines:

Within this model it is important to develop discourse about teaching that creates analyses that are critical and reflective. Technical skills are not valued as ends in themselves, but rather as means to bring about desired ends. Teaching and curriculum issues are seen as problematic, rather than given, and effort is made to understand educational issues from a perspective that recognizes the dialectic between means and ends and the social, historical, and political contexts in which issues themselves are embedded (84).

Kirk was also a strong advocate (Kirk 1986a, 1986b, 1988), stating that 'teachers are, and I would claim have always been, mediators and legitimators of a range of beliefs and values, and are potential agents of either social reproduction or emancipatory change' (Kirk 1988, 32). Critical pedagogy books and other texts followed, some of which were conceptual

(Fernandez-Balboa 1997) while others sought to be more applied (Wright, MacDonald, and Burrows 2004).

This work was built upon the foundations of broader movements in education drawing on the critical theory of the Frankfurt school and embracing a politics of social change and social justice advocated by critical scholars in the USA, UK and other contexts. David Kirk points out, however, that, as a broad project, critical pedagogy sought to engage differently in different contexts, rather than being another set ideology in itself:

Even though a critical pedagogy begins from the assumption that all human activity is value laden, it does not seek to indoctrinate. On the contrary, with its central concern to bring about social change through education, a critical pedagogy aims to open up possibilities and alternatives, to reveal the complexity of social life, and to resist the imposition of simplistic explanations and quick-fix solutions. (Kirk 2006, 257)

Kirk's statement draws our attention to an ongoing tension in the field of critical pedagogy anticipated by Lather (1998) over 15 years ago. She argued that previous debates had established 'critical pedagogy as a "boy thing" whereas the "girl thing" was to use poststructuralism to deconstruct pedagogy, often on one's own' (488). Lather was referring here not so much to the politics of gendered representation, but more to what she determined to be the 'masculinist' approaches taken by some critical pedagogues. Such approaches assumed there to be a 'correct' critical pedagogy, advocating certain political positions as superior to others. Lather (1998) described this as the 'masculinist voice of abstraction and universalisation, assuming the rhetorical position of "the one who knows"' (488). This is a key tension in critical work more generally; the potential tendency for critical pedagogy to become another imposed method of teaching which marginalises those it seeks to emancipate; or, perhaps worse, a method of 'saving' the marginalised and thereby ignoring the complexity of localised cultural identities, including student perspectives.

In physical education, critical scholars have, indeed, embraced broader academic moves to shift the focus from external politics towards recognition of the complex, embodied identity positions of young people. Poststructuralist approaches to HPE have explored the intersection of gender and other forms of marginalisation such as body size, ethnicity, racialisation, dis/ability and heteronormativity within physical education and physical activity settings (Wright 2006). The work of key scholars in the field (Wright 1996, 1997; Burrows and Wright 2004; Fitzgerald and Jobling 2004; Azzarito 2010; Burrows 2010; Fitzgerald 2009; Sykes 2011), among others, has highlighted in powerful ways how broader political contexts are lived and embodied by young people in physical education, in different ways within and between international and cultural contexts. This work has also drawn attention to the urgent need for changed practices; the need for more inclusive approaches to physical education. The result of such moves has, however, been a focus on exposing the complexity of power relations in the field rather than on highlighting examples of alternative pedagogical approaches (with some notable exceptions, for example, Enright and O'Sullivan 2010; Fitzpatrick 2010; Oliver and Hamzeh 2010).

What remains, however, is a clear and urgent need for physical education practice to change. Tinning (1991) noted, over 10 years ago, that the issue of whether a critical approach was needed was based in questions of ontology. He suggested that teachers were likely to subscribe to one of two positions. The first was built on an understanding that 'society is on track and all we need to do is a better job of working (through consensus) within the current social frameworks'. The other, he suggested, rests on an assumption that

‘there are fundamental problems with the structure of society and the way to improve the situation is via conflict and contestation with those who defend the status quo’ (5). One could argue that there remains such a divide in the field between those who continue to focus on highlighting power relations and those who highlight pedagogical change rather than political change. Critical educators in HPE now, however, also have a different kind of opposition. The notion that the ‘society is on track’ has been replaced in the public mind with a concern for the health of young people. Driven largely by obesity concerns, there has been a strong push in the field over the last 10 years for physical activity and personal health to become a learning focus in schools. Evans (2013) recently asked ‘is this really what PE has become in schools ... . A curriculum fostering a dehumanising self-concern that substitutes manifest features of personal health or performance goals for more important humane societal goals?’ (85)

Simultaneously, critical approaches to health and PE have come under fire for being too cerebral and dislocated from the lived experience of young people in diverse communities. Hickey (2001) argued that ‘the emancipatory goal that underpins critical theories of teaching and learning is built on a theory of rational self-determination’ (227, also see Gore 1993). How practices might change, however, to meet the greater complexity of subjectivities and multiple oppressions remains unclear. As the late critical scholar of education, Joe Kincheloe, reminds us:

Knowing and learning are not simply intellectual and scholarly activities but also practical and sensuous activities infused by the impassioned spirit. Critical pedagogy is dedicated to addressing and embodying these affective, emotional and lived dimensions of everyday life in a way that connects students to people in groups and as individuals. (Kincheloe 2008, 11)

What is perhaps needed then is a more embodied and lived approach to critical health and PE, which combines the intensions of critical practice with an understanding of complex embodied experience and connects directly with students; one, possibly, which is more playful and less rational, one which requires us as educators to connect with our students and expose our own place in the hierarchies of power. Azzarito (2009) argues that:

Physical education settings can become sites of transformation ... and resistance ... conceivably safe learning spaces in physical education can destabilize oppositional and hierarchical gendered and racialized constructions of the body. (35)

What might these kinds of physical education lessons look like? How can physical education be a site of transformation, which destabilises gender, racial and other stereotypes? In the study introduced above, a critical researcher (Katie) serendipitously came across such a teacher in Dan; one who did, in his practice and in relationship with his students, destabilise stereotypes. In the next section, I (Katie) briefly explain the study and Dan’s approach before we reflect together on his experience of being a critical teacher.

### **A critical study**

During 2007, I (Katie) conducted a critical ethnographic study (Thomas, 1993) of young people in health and physical-education classes in one school. Critical ethnographic studies of health and physical education are rare. Such a methodology, however, allowed me to spend in-depth and prolonged time in one school and to become familiar with the

people, practices and cultures therein. Thomas (1993) defines critical ethnography as ‘conventional ethnography with a political purpose’. He explains it thus:

Critical ethnography is a way of applying a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry. It does not stand in opposition to conventional ethnography. Rather, it offers a more direct style of thinking about the relationships among knowledge, society and political action. (Thomas 1993, vii)

Madison (2005) adds that critical ethnographers should focus on building reciprocal, meaningful and deep relationships, indeed, that the success of the method requires this. While there is no space here for an extended discussion of methods (for a fuller discussion, see Fitzpatrick 2013) it is important to note several aspects of cultural context relevant to this discussion.

The school in which Dan was teaching in 2007 was a very low-socioeconomic high school in one of New Zealand’s poorest urban areas. I (Katie) had taught at the school and led the department (of health, PE and outdoor education) in the early 2000s. I returned because I had strong relationships in the school and community and I wanted to explore students’ perspectives of health, PE and school life. The school population at the time numbered around 1100 students, almost all of whom were either indigenous Maori and/or migrant communities with links to the Pacific Islands (Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Niue, The Cook Islands). Dan and I are both white New Zealanders (known locally as Pakeha). The area surrounding the school, South Auckland, is one of the most culturally diverse places in New Zealand but is also poverty-stricken and known, especially in media discourse, for crime, drugs and gang activity (Loto et al. 2006). This local information is important as it frames the resulting discussion also along the lines of how teachers might and do connect cross-culturally with students in HPE.

A key part of the methodology, which we also draw on here, is narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connolly 2000). This article is not a typical representation of narrative and we chose the format for specific reasons. The stories within are layered because they are the result of an ongoing reflective relationship between the two of us, and the slipperiness of co-writing. We agreed to write this article together partly as a reflection of what was happening in the study in terms of critical teaching, but also to excavate the relationship between us as teacher and researcher. This is tricky as this article reports across several points in time. Previous writing from this study has very much been Katie’s representation of Dan’s practice. While Dan is unused to writing these kinds of texts, we wanted to create a space to subvert this version of the story. However, we also need to give some background to the reader. The next section, therefore, reflects Katie’s analysis of Dan’s pedagogy from the ethnographic study. In that study, although we had a strong and trusting relationship, it was very much Katie’s project and Dan was a participant. This also helps Dan in gaining some distance from his practice when it is represented back to him in this manner. Later in the article we reflect from the present moment on the meanings drawn from that study and our ongoing challenges with critical practice. This is a more dedicated collaborative effort but the focus shifts to centralise the perspective of Dan. This is why we represent the later section as a series of interview questions which Dan responds to unencumbered. Clandinin (2010) notes the development of relationships over time and on-going reflection on the process of knowledge production is a key tenet of narrative inquiry. She states that it is partly a process of attending to ‘lives in the making, lives in motion’ (15). Rather than seeking the truth at any given moment, narrative rather seeks to drill down and expose the many relational layers of the stories we tell ourselves (and others). This is our

attempt here, to use our distinct and overlapping voices as a tool for reflection on what we believe in: critical approaches to HPE. We then at times speak together and at times separately and have tried to make this explicit along the way.

### **Dan's Pedagogy**

After spending so much time in Dan's classes, I started trying to identify specific strategies he used to engage students and raise critical issues. I had initially thought that the success of his approach was largely due to his personality, which was playful, self-effacing, performative and non-defensive. It was clear to me right away that Dan did not believe in authoritative approaches to teaching and he tried to make students aware that many school rules and practices are deeply arbitrary and should (always) be questioned. It was the way that Dan went about his teaching practice that was so striking; not only his ability to perform and dress differently (as in the opening vignette) but the way he valued playfulness in his classes and his relaxed approach to the role. He seemed to want to earn the students' trust and to understand their worlds. This was especially significant given the cultural context. Dan was a White (Pakeha) teacher working with indigenous Maori and migrant Pacific Islands youth; some of these youth were involved in gangs and all of them were from poor and working-class backgrounds. Having taught in the school myself, I believed these kids had huge untapped potential and rich, diverse cultural backgrounds. But I had also experienced that poverty and lack of opportunity made some of the students angry, defensive and unmotivated. After living and observing Dan's teaching alongside his students, I identified five aspects of his approach that seemed to be significant. I discuss these in more detail elsewhere (Fitzpatrick 2013), but I briefly explain these below.

### ***Building the environment***

In all of his classes, Dan highlighted the importance of relationships. He took a deeply humanist approach to his teaching that included getting to know his students and their hopes, dreams, talents and families (cf. hooks 2010). He structured lessons around group-problem-solving activities, communication and discussions about the collective experience. He privileged team games (rather than sport), many of which he made up himself, and introduced students to challenging activities such as outdoor education, organising community events and conducting community surveys about critical issues. He set problem-solving tasks and group challenges, always highlighting fun, involvement and team support. Such an approach is well established in physical education. Drawing on the work of Hellison (1973, 2003), Gillespie (2003), for example, argues:

Four humanistic goals should drive physical education: self esteem, self actualisation, self understanding and social consideration . . . physical activity can act as a powerful vehicle to help develop personal and social-moral skills. (188)

Others support this position, arguing that team problem-solving activities, sport and games provide a platform for students to learn how to be assertive, give feedback, negotiate with others and work together toward common goals (Siedentop, Hastie, and van der Mars 2004). While an important pedagogical approach in itself, building a strong network of relationships within the class became a platform upon which Dan introduced a more directly critical approach. This began with an explicit approach to power relations.

### ***Deconstructing power***

In almost every class I was part of during the study, I heard Dan make comments to the students about relations of power. These were typically aimed at reminding them that they were not simply dupes in the system but that schools were, nevertheless, located within power frameworks. Dan consciously made students aware of power relationships of schooling and reminded them they had choices and could resist. French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu argued that teachers have ‘pedagogic authority’ which enables a kind of loyalty to school systems, many of which are arbitrary:

In conceding the teacher the right and the power to deflect the authority of the institution onto his [*sic*] own person, the educational system secures the surest means of getting the office holder to put all the resources and zeal of the person into the service of the institution. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 124)

Bourdieu is pointing out here that teachers embody their authority, reinforcing their power and status over students, and ensuring the ongoing and assumed nature of this power relationship in schools. Dan exposed this by drawing attention to the frameworks of authority. He did this in a subtle but persistent fashion, weaving comments such as these into his classes:

If you want to finish this for homework it’s up to you, I can’t force you to complete it  
You have choices at school about what you will and won’t do. I don’t believe in asking students to line up for no reason. I won’t ask you to do that.  
Teachers can’t actually force you to do anything. You have to decide.  
There are no rules here apart from respect for others. You have to figure out how you want to be.

In these small ways, Dan named power, making the ‘secret’ of his pedagogic authority known to students. Making young people aware of power issues and social hierarchies exposes a secret in education, it makes explicit the hidden and helps students begin to ‘see’ the workings of power inherent in schooling (Fine and Weis 2003; Kincheloe 2007).

In addition to building relationships and reflecting on teacher power, a culture of playfulness in Dan’s classes also allowed students to engage with critical issues.

### ***Playfulness***

Lugones (1994) defines playfulness as activity open to uncertainty and surprise. Playfulness is, she explains, partly ‘an openness to being a fool’. This combines ‘not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight’ (636). She notes that cultural worlds have differing values and boundaries, and argues that playfulness is a signal of an embracing world. People exhibit playfulness when they are fully part of the society and community; when they are culturally included.

Dan was actively playful during classes. His habit of ‘dressing up’ communicated this in addition to his actions, his lack of defensiveness and his commitment to making himself the first subject of any joke. As a result, the classes had an atmosphere of fun. As a participant in these classes, I frequently spent a good deal of class laughing as Dan and students joked about their physical prowess, about cultural differences (in a very gentle way) and about things that happened in the school.

### *Studying critical topics*

In addition to joking and playful approaches, Dan planned his yearly curriculum around explicitly critical topics. While he also included scientific studies into anatomy, biomechanics and the like, he taught units of work on critical topics such as: gender and racialisation in the media and sport; how athletes' bodies are commodified, body image, fair trade and free trade (in the context of food production). Dan used an approach consistent with Wright's (2004) notion that critical inquiry is 'assisting students to examine and challenge the status quo, the dominant constructions of reality, and the power relations that produce inequalities' (7). These studies were 'serious' in that they linked with national qualifications and were formal topics of study.

The final part of Dan's approach to teaching was his embodied critical orientation. This is central to the discussion here of what it means to *be* a critical teacher of health and PE.

### *Embodied criticality*

A lot of teaching is an act . . . (Dan)

I consider this the most radical aspect of Dan's teaching and, perhaps, the most difficult one for others to emulate or draw on. This is because his teaching extends far beyond addressing critical topics of study or doing critical thinking exercises. Dan has a particular embodied approach to being critical. Crucial in this is the distance between what Sykes (2011) refers to as the 'archetypal PE teacher' and Dan. Sykes (2011) argues that the former 'embodies heteronormative, gender-normative, racist and ableist ideals about body image, ability and appearance' (75; see also Brown 2005). Dan played with, named and resisted all of these 'norms'. He dressed differently and moved in a range of ways, at times masculine, at times feminine – bringing these apparent binaries into question. While playing alongside students in games, he avoided overtly competitive displays of elite skilled performance and was seen, instead, to be playful. He included many activities in his PE lessons which were not located within his own skill set. He laughed at himself and joked about his 'weak' Pakeha (white) masculinity and his love for books. In such ways, he engaged students in conversations about ethnicity and racial stereotypes, destabilising notions of masculinity and sexuality, in a conscious way, with his body.

Youdell (2003), drawing on Butler's (1999) notion of the heterosexual matrix, explained that sex-gender-sexuality exist within a constellation. She named the constellation in the following way:

...the female body is already feminized, the feminine is already heterosexual, the hetero-feminine is already female. Sex-gender-sexuality, then, are not causally related; rather, they exist in abiding constellations in which to name one category of the constellation is to silently infer further categories. (Youdell 2003, 256)

In Dan's case, especially as a male PE teacher, the constellation constructs him as a masculine-heterosexual-male. By dressing in a range of colours, including pink clothing that could be labelled 'feminine', and by explicitly discussing his emotions and thoughts about gender, Dan disrupted this constellation. By disrupting the sex-gender-sexuality constellation, Dan challenged the dominant notions that all teachers (and students) in schools are heterosexual, and all male PE teachers display particular forms of masculinity (Brown 2005). His embodied and critical approach also undermines the silence, or at least extreme discomfort, around sexuality (Epstein and Johnson 1998) and racialisation in schools. This

is especially interesting given Alsup's (2006) observation about the practices of, in her research, preservice teachers. In a study of embodiment, she observed that 'the ease or difficulty of embodying a teacher identity was dependent on the amount of similarity between the preservice teacher's body and that preferred in the discourse community of secondary school teachers' (90). The discourse community, in this case of PE teachers, is well known for reinforcing a masculinist and heteronormative expectation of male teacher identity (Messner and Sabo 1990; Evans, Davis, and Penney 1996; Brown 2005; Sykes 2011)

Dan's ability to disrupt normative gender and racial expectations with his class was based on all of the preceding approaches discussed. The way Dan raised critical issues, both in everyday conversations and as explicit topics of study, enabled students to begin to engage with issues of power in their own ways. His own embodied criticality relied on the acceptance and trust he formed with this class. Space here precludes discussion of how the students responded to Dan's pedagogies (for a full discussion, see Fitzpatrick 2013) but I want to consider how Dan now conceptualises his own critical strategies and what 'push back' he experienced in challenging these norms. The final section then is a kind of interview between myself and Dan, which considers his embodied and lived experiences of being a critical practitioner in HPE.

### *Being a critical pedagogue*

Katie: What does being critical mean? What is a critical HPE teacher?

Dan: For me, being critical means thinking about what is actually important, what the actual needs of the students are, from the micro level of individual student needs, through to local community levels and the national and global (macro) view. To me, being critical means constantly updating an endless list of priorities on a continuum a mile long, where a student's need to have breakfast before school is weighed against learning about the institutional racism of schools and universities. Where a student's need to gain qualifications to 'compete' in labour and education when they leave school is weighed against learning about, for example, Tibetan monks who use self-immolation as a form of protest against oppressive government practices. Where a student's need to be cared about by someone other than their immediate family is weighed against a teacher's responsibility to fulfil curriculum requirements of teaching, say, biomechanical principles. A critical health and physical education teacher, to me, is someone who uses the medium of physicality and holistic wellbeing to provide a space for those priorities to be contested, and addressed.

Katie: That sounds good but how possible is it, how can we get beyond this rhetoric and actually do this kind of work, given the conservative ethos of most schools? Is it really that easy?

Dan: It is never easy. But there is opportunity for this type of teaching and learning within the structures and strictures of schools, and the very nature of the traditional boundaries around what should be taught and how, I think necessitates subversive behaviour. It seems that everybody pushes back against something, and young people more than most, so I use that push back as a learning impetus. But the key is to start small. Start a conversation about one, small school rule, or what they could do with \$100 to make the most difference to society as a whole, or talking about newspapers as a business in infotainment, as opposed to crucial 'news'. Starting small is less threatening and has greater capacity for change, and it gets the critical ball rolling.

Katie: How difficult is it to be a critical physical educator? What were the consequences for you of being this kind of teacher?

Dan: The key thing for me is being on the same side and listening to the students, even with all the power that comes with being a teacher. So, automatically, I am almost on the other side of the 'law', and resisting against all those injustices that happen in school. With this comes all sorts of supposed issues of 'professionalism' and upholding the school's policies and practices from a contractual standpoint, as well as how others view my practice. Especially with physical education, my practices are on show and judgments about the quality of teaching are being made all the time, even though the common measure of 'good' teaching (which is usually

equated with 'good' student behaviour) differs greatly from what I think of as 'quality'. Conversely, I get to hold the 'outlaw' status; I feel that students perceive me as someone else for whom the ridiculous nature of some school practices requires me to resist them. Ridiculous in that they are amusingly illogical, ill thought out, and sometimes tyrannical. An example is the typical school assembly. There is not a more obvious example of the subordination of students than to make them line up, keep silent and sit in rows whilst listening passively (or not at all) to some 'blanket' messages about behaviour or academic discipline. The whole process reeks of traditional schooling, and has very little to do with learning. When teaching, I made my position about this very clear to my students. They shared my distaste for this form of control and they used passive forms of resistance anyway. In some ways I must, as an employee of a school, adhere to its policies. By signing my employment contract, I have effectively agreed to uphold the rules of the school. But when a school decides to take a course of action that goes against the moral principles I hold, one that I hope is aligned with basic human rights, what must a teacher do? What *must* a critical teacher do? Another difficulty has been the expectation to be involved with sport; as if the nature of my teaching subject requires me to be a coach. I think the only real relationship between teaching physical education and coaching sport is the ability to manage students in a large space. Everything else is pretty tenuous. Teaching is teaching, and I use the medium of physical education to push my agenda, as do all teachers in their respective subjects. It is just that I try to align my agenda with that of the students and what I perceive to be community and societal needs. My philosophical position means a total disregard for all that institutionalised sport stands for, especially when it claims to be 'character building' and 'good' for all students. I rail against all the rules and regulations, all the machismo, elitism and ridiculous posturing, all the things that make sport different from games and play, all the things that serve to separate and classify people, and all the things that cause students to write faked sick notes to be excused from PE class. I would rather encourage students to think and act critically about sport, than be involved in the school's covert push for status by playing on a team.

Overall, the biggest difficulty for me is having the guts to openly resist and make change within the school environment. So often it is easier to consent and passively resist from a position of silent reproach than it is to publically fight back.

Katie: Are there times when it goes wrong? I know in my own practice there have been moments when I've felt out of my depth in discussing some difficult issues. There are times when I feel that raising, for example, gender issues calls into question my own gendered embodiment in potentially risky ways. Has it gone wrong for you, how do deal with the contradictions of this stuff?

Dan: It goes wrong all the time. This type of teaching is messy and fraught, and you find yourself in a constant battle to live up to your own expectations. Teaching a unit of work on Fair Trade, for example, brought up issues of consuming 'goods' in an ethical, ecological, sustainable and fair manner. The contradiction is that it is so hard to 'walk the walk' and ensure you are modelling the behaviour you are exploring to work towards socially just consumer choices. I believe in admitting my flaws and contradictions, and that at the heart of critical pedagogy is the idea of negotiation and contestation of sometimes competing priorities. For me, critical pedagogy can be a kind of cyclic process, where the first and most important step is to make the opaque clear. Second is to engage students in conversations about it, to encourage motivation for change, both individually and collectively. Third is to negotiate the importance of this, comparative to other priorities. Fourth is the exploration of causes and alternatives, and fifth is the resulting action (or no action). Often, things can and do get stuck at any stage of this cycle, but an important thing for me to remember is that *my* action is important, even though it may be far from perfect. That in itself becomes the next conversation

Katie: What drives you to be this kind of teacher? Are you still the same?

Dan: First of all, there is a different kind of power in being a critical pedagogue. I experience a kind of unbridled glee in being subversive, in asking difficult questions, in making others accountable for what they do, and by making people justify their actions and choices. This is the wonky, weird pentagonal hole where I seem to fit. This is the place for me to be me. Because there is so much structure and control and power imbalance in each societal institution, including school, it sometimes feels like a never-ending military preparation

assault course on which I have to play. Because there are so many pressures to maintain the status quo, it is a constant challenge for me to step up and stick to my guns and maintain a belief in my principles and act in ways that I hope I will, ultimately, be respected. Second, there is such a *need*. I refuse to be complicit in the subjugation of others. With all the statistics of youth suicide, with the overrepresentation of young Maori (indigenous) and Pacific people in statistics of reduced life chances due to poor nutrition, poor educational outcomes, poor socio-economic status and poor access to mainstream opportunities of health services; with the young people who watch the evening news on TV and believe it all as the truth; wherever I look, I see a need. I could rabbit on all day about white, middle-class dominance and marginalisation of the “other”. I could talk about my own guilt for my colonial ancestors who thought it was only natural to colonise, westernise and christianise ‘undeveloped’ countries and peoples. Suffice it to say, I see enough *need* to be critical to justify my actions, to the point where it is what I am, and what I do. It is who I am.

Katie: So, how do you overcome that paralysis of guilt? How do we continue on while avoiding any kind of certainty?

Dan: By believing and hoping that things can get better. They can get better because they *have* to get better. By realising that people can change and people can change *things*. By saying, out loud and in front of people that I will not go along with the oppressive practices that cause some people to be marginalised. I try to get students to *use* the anger and frustration they feel when confronted by unfairness and injustice, to use that passion as motivation to make positive change. Students have a pretty good grasp of what schools are about. They know when teachers and managers are not being logical or reasonable, they know when systems within the school create inequalities, they know when some practices just don’t sit right. They also know when they have not been told the reasons behind some of the decisions that teachers make, and we all know how annoying that is. I just try to use the many examples of injustices that happen everyday in school as learning tools. For example, I was talking with a student once. She was working at her parent’s KFC franchise *seven nights a week* to help out *for no pay*. When her sister was away in Samoa, she took two weeks off school to look after her nieces and nephews during the day, because there was no one else. She was one of the nicest, most conscientious, most giving students I’ve ever met. When in Maths class after returning to school, she tried to ask one of her fellow students for help. ‘No, the class is supposed to be silent’ (from the teacher). So she asked for help from the teacher who responded, ‘No, you need to catch up outside of class time, it’s not my fault you’ve been away.’ And that was the end of it. When I talked to her about this, she was so angry and so shocked that there wasn’t any sort of humanity from the teacher, no understanding. We talked about this, in a small group, how one teacher’s actions can put a student off, not only an entire subject, but also school itself. What do you do as a teacher, when confronted with such knowledge of another teacher’s practice? Who claims your allegiance? The teaching profession, your colleagues, or the students?

Katie: What about difficult students, the young people that many teachers say just aren’t interested in school? How did you respond to those kids?

Dan: Students who aren’t interested in school either don’t see the value in a certain subject, or even in education itself, or they take issue with the manner in which that education is thrust upon them. There are many reasons why students don’t see the value of education, and most of those reasons are to do with their identity. If school doesn’t provide the opportunities to affirm their identity, then students won’t associate what goes on in school with success. For example, if a student excels in sporting excellence, then traditional physical education may be the only subject in school where that student feels a confirmation of their identity. Some people get that confirmation from social interactions and some may get it from academic success, but some also might get it from outside of the school gates. Students are aware of the power relationships in schools, and even if they can’t express that awareness, they can still feel the effects of it. If students feel they have some power over what happens in the classroom, if they can feel as though what they think actually matters, then they will be engaged. I tried to get students to engage with the fact that they could have power, they could have control, and that all of their disengagement and distrust was probably more to do with the system. Physical education tends to draw young people with physical prowess, often those who identify with physicality and competitive success, but critical pedagogy draws young people who have ever been pissed off about *anything*.

### Final thoughts

The field of health and physical education is a contested space and examples of applied critical practice in schools remain rare. What is clear is a continued need for the field to shift towards more inclusive and critical approaches which acknowledge the complex and embodied experiences of young people in different cultural settings. Young people experience health and PE classes (at the very least) at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, body size, class and location (as do teachers). Eminent critical educator Maxine Greene (2009) asks: 'where are the sources of questioning, of restlessness? How are we to move the young to break with the given, the taken-for-granted – to move towards what might be, what is not yet?' (84). If we are to do this, we must move to a new kind of critical practice, one which is lived within our own bodies in an engagement with students and cultural contexts. This is difficult work and is often unpopular. As Dan notes, it can place us in a contested position in relation to our colleagues. While we were writing this article Dan, and I both reflected on the difficulty of critical work, especially of sustaining challenging practices every day in schools. This kind of difficulty is, of course, apparent in much of the literature which contests different pedagogical practices. In this article, we have focused on aligning Dan's teaching with theoretical discussions in physical education. We have done this consciously in order to argue that we need to pay attention to theory in the field and not dismiss these kinds of debates to the realm of rhetoric. We have also, however, purposely linked this discussion to new forms of critical pedagogy of the kinds advocated by bell hooks (2010), Kincheloe (2007, 2008), Steinberg (2010) and others (Camarota and Fine 2008; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008; Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2009). These seek to weave together aspects of traditional critical pedagogy with the lived cultural worlds of students while engaging with hearing student voices and attending to broader located politics. In physical education we argue, these can be addressed and located also in the body. This is where we believe the new critical approach to physical education lies. Other educators in the field also acknowledge this as important. The dynamics of gender, class and ethnicity operating in our classrooms require us, as teachers, to forward a critical approach to our subject which is expressed in our bodies. Sykes (2011), for example, argues that students experience physical education in different (and visceral) ways according to the size and shape of their bodies. Oliver and Hamzeh (2010) show how discourses of gender can directly frame young people's experiences in HPE; they also argue, however, that this can also be a starting point for challenging current practices and opening up conversations about power relations. Perhaps beginning with considering and 'playing with' our own embodied physicalities as teachers might take us forward.

We end here with a statement from Dan that he labels a 'disclaimer', the acknowledgement that this is difficult, messy, complex and ultimately emotional work.

Dan: I think I need some sort of disclaimer. This is for those times I nearly broke down after class, for those times I could not get through to a group of students, for those times I went into class with a feeling of dread at the prospect of another day in the battle to be respected and liked enough to be reasoned with, for those times I failed my students and myself. Teaching is a flawed art. Teaching is an imperfect science. Teaching is hard. Teaching sometimes takes more than it gives. Teaching is exhausting. Teaching is a constant struggle to give all students what they deserve, even though sometimes they might not deserve it. But, with what you get back, and in a hope of contributing to a better life for students and a better world for all people, it seems worth it.

## Note

1. In New Zealand, health education and physical education are one subject area in the national curriculum policy and, as such, are connected here in relation to Dan's practice. Although the two subjects are, at times, taught separately, we use the term 'health and PE' in this article to denote the connection in policy and practice in this context.

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