

It's not for the school to tell us, Charlie ... after all, to us you are healthy big

Emma Rich

The gymnasium at Harkfield comprehensive middle school was sorely in need of a touch of paint, as was the remainder of the school. Nestled between the green fields and the back-to-back terraced housing so typical of this part of England, the drab school buildings, housing the village's 10–14-year-olds, were a constant reminder to the local inhabitants of Huddleton about the dismal state of public funding for education. Despite her physical work environment, Mrs Oliver, the PE teacher, is nevertheless feeling pleased with herself as she walks around the Year 7 class today, helping students to record fitness results, to weigh themselves and to measure 'fatness'. For years, she'd faced jibes in the staffroom from her colleagues who questioned the status of her subject. 'What is it you actually *do* in those lessons, Jackie, just kick a ball about?' Well, not any more, she thought to herself. PE's status in the school has risen in recent years, as Harkfield has marketed itself as a 'healthy school', in line with the National Healthy Schools Programme.¹ A smile transformed her face as she reflected upon the way in which she now gained kudos from her subject. How PE is enjoying the limelight! PE's the subject which really contributes to the 'Healthy Schools' agenda, complementing the initiative of the monitoring system in the canteen and the extra-curricular physical activity programmes.

A clique of loud, boisterous boys, racing each other out to the changing rooms, jolts Mrs Oliver back to the present. 'OK, OK, boys! I can see the time's getting on and we'll have to bring the lesson to a close. Get changed and then come back here to take a few notes,' she commands. Craig and Ben eagerly pull off their sweat-soaked T-shirts, making a show of tensing their abs as they pass Elise and Chloe. The girls are too busy to notice, staring intently at their fitness results, recorded on the now greasy and slightly crumpled lesson handout.

At the other end of the gym, Charlie and Mark amble towards the exit, oversized T-shirts covering their measured, poked at and exposed bodies. They stare enviously at Craig and Ben, 'the peacocks'. 'Oh god, my belly is spilling over. Just cover it up and get out. Just get out, Charlie! Just pass the girls and get into the changing rooms!' Mark tells himself, fixing his eyes firmly on the ground as he moves gingerly to the door. Next to him, Charlie

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feels the peering eyes of all the others around him, closing in and staring at his body. He tries to move quickly, wants to move quickly. Get to the safety of the changing rooms! But it's like someone's hit the slow-motion button. His feet produce slow, echoing ripples of sound, vibrating off the old wooden gym floor. Or so he believes. Lydia sniggers to her friend, 'Look at them, no wonder they get pushed around and no one wants to be friends with them!' Catching the sniggers, Mark hugs his body, trying to cover it, but surreptitiously grabbing the rolls of fat around his belly, thinking to himself, 'Feels like blubber. It's too soft. It's moving around again. Got a mind of it's own, my belly! Wish I could just push it back in!' Yet, the tighter he hugs, the more the soft, fleshy surplus seeps through his fingers.

A mix of pungent sweat and deodorant begins to heavy the air as the class return to the gym and get seated for the lesson round-up. After a few minutes of summarizing, Jackie tries to stress the importance of today's lesson in a couple of sentences:

Well done today, class. Now, I need to remind you that if you want to maximize your lifespan – barring accidents or illnesses, of course, over which you have no control – then you need to eat healthily. The repercussions – if you don't – are cancer of the colon, to diverticulitis, and heart attacks. This is for a lifetime – and if you get it wrong for the rest of your life, then you've got nobody to blame but yourself! You need to have plenty of fitness, you need lots of exercise, lots of energy and a good basic diet. If you eat too much and you don't exercise, you'll get fat. If you eat a sensible diet and you exercise enough, that's good for you. That's the end of the message for today!

'End of the message!' Mark sniggers. 'It's all she bloody goes on about. Wait 'till next week – what will she say then?' glancing across at Charlie. 'Shut up Mark, I'm trying to listen,' says Marie, who is studiously taking notes on what to eat. She's surprised at how much she's actually listened and taken notes. She stares intently at her notes, etching, 'Will I die because I'm overweight?' in capital letters, and frantically scribbles patterns around the edges of the words. 'Don't worry Marie, just skip breakfast or have a banana for lunch like you normally do, hahahaha!' Mark responds.

'Boys! Quiet!' Mrs Oliver reprimands Mark and Charlie.

It's been a long day. Charlie strides past rows of once red-brick terrace houses, now darkened through years of grime and traffic fumes. He studies his body's reflection in the windows. He reaches further past the cracks in the pavement with each stride. Puffs out his chest, then his stomach. By the time he's powered his way to number 137, he loses it, can't sustain it any longer. His expanded stomach deflates, like a balloon losing air, his body shrinking back to its normal size. Frustrated, Charlie catches a glimpse of his thick mass of black hair in a window. 'Well, I'd rather be bald than thin! When people say bald, you've got no hair, but bold is when you're strong. I want to

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be bold!’ With his ego deflating with each step, Charlie grabs his earphones, shutting out the world with his favourite radio show.

‘Charlie! Charlie!’ shouts a boy across the road, arms flailing. He runs over to Charlie and punches him on the arm. Charlie’s zoned out.

‘Shit, Tom. Sorry mate, I was listening to Moyles, didn’t hear you,’ pointing at his ear. Tom pats his stomach with both hands, ‘That fat lard?!’ They carry on down the street, laughing together.

‘Actually I wanna be like Chris Moyles,’ Charlie announces. ‘Yeah, you know, grow up like that.’

Confused, Tom asks, ‘Why? He’s a fat lard.’

Charlie scoffs, ‘Not too fat to climb Kilimanjaro! It’s just the thought of being big. Big and powerful and all of that. I’m gonna be a lawyer, I’m gonna be a solicitor in criminal law, hopefully. That’s why I wanna be big as well. I see people coming out of court in ... big, big people in suits ... and I think I wanna be like them. Because they stand out and they’re powerful.’

Curious, Tom looks intently at Charlie’s body and replies, ‘How can you get like that, though?’

‘Guess I’ll have to eat stuff. You know, eat more than what I normally eat which is more than an adult’s meal – so an adult’s meal with seconds!’ Charlie laughs. ‘I might have to eat some more burgers and Big Macs to look like that.’

Tom laughs, ‘Man you’ll never get to be that size – nor as funny as him!’

‘Well, I will some day. I mean, I’ve been around big people all my life. My Dad’s big, my step-dad’s bigger and my Aunty Caroline’s big. No, my Aunty Caroline’s *really* big because she’s had three babies and not lost any weight. It’s important I’m big too. Mate, I went kick-boxing Saturday. I weigh 6.1 now – I’m getting bigger.’ Charlie pauses. ‘I don’t know if that’s stones or kilograms!’ They both laugh. ‘But, you know – I don’t feel I’m big enough yet. Thing is, I weighed more than most of them skinny kids in PE today.’

‘Yeah ... skeletal Simon! Haha.’

‘I’m not surprised there are so many skeletals. Everything the school is doing. Look at skinny Marie and her bananas!’

Tom quickly loses interest in talk of school and runs to the adjacent fields. ‘Charlie, come on.’ Charlie and Tom begin climbing trees, daring each other to climb higher and swing across bigger and bigger gaps between the branches.

‘Charlie, look at this one!’ Tom points towards the gap between two strong branches. Tom clambers up the tree, grabs a branch and kicks his legs out, but he can’t get enough momentum to even get close to the other branch. His fingers slip and he falls into a pile of leaves. Both boys laugh.

‘This is how it’s done! You’re too small Tom, you’re not strong enough. Watch me!’ Charlie grabs the branch, throwing his body into the swing, feeling his body glide through the air. Stretching out an arm, he reaches the target with an ecstatic ‘yessss!’ Swinging through the air laughing, he forgets

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the stares, the comments, his overflowing body of earlier in the day. He's strong. He's Charlie. He's successful!

The feeling doesn't last long.

'Charlie, is that you?' Charlie's Mum's sat on the sofa, still dressed in her work uniform. 'Where've you been?' Charlie slumps his rucksack in the corner of the living room.

'What's up, you look like right mardy?' she enquires.

'Nothing. They just went on a bit at school.' Charlie's Mum sits bolt upright, recognizing the familiar tale that's beginning to feel uncomfortable.

'About your weight again, was it? Look, it's none of their business. I keep telling you, your Dad's big, I'm big, your Auntie, your Gran ...' Charlie's Mum becomes more animated, pointing an accusatory finger at the 1980s wallpaper, then the television, then the cat. Charlie begins looking around the room for the missing culprit. 'I mean your Gran's, she's 86 Charlie, 86! It's not for the school to tell us what to feed you!'

'It's stupid Mum, the school. We can't even have pizza and chips occasionally. I like pizza. Most people like pizza and burgers. And chips. Everyone wants burgers, chips and pizza. You should have a right to choose what you like, not be told!' Charlie sits down in the armchair and undoes his school tie, throwing it on the floor.

'What did you have today, then?'

'The usual. You'll see it on my printout, you can't escape it!' Charlie tries to explain the monitoring system in operation at the canteen.

'It's like a bit of this and that, making sure you have your carbs and protein and all that other stuff, but we can't eat too much. Too many red foods and you're done for! It's like they're trying to build us, like lego bricks!'

Charlie's Mum replies, 'Did you have them tests today, then?'

'Yeah, they were like pinchers, those things. Grab your skin. Did fitness tests too. Boring. What's the point? Running up and down?! We got weighed as well. They don't get that I wanna be an ultimate fighting champion. If we did kick-boxing, they would see how good I am. I can do some serious moves. I'm not like that hospital man we saw on the telly the other day, you know, the really obese man who had to have the op to make his stomach shrink? I still keep my healthiness.'

'Well there you go then, Charlie. You're healthy big, aren't you?'

Research context

This ethnographic fiction draws on research exploring how 'new health imperatives' and their associated strategies are being adopted, adapted and recontextualized in schools, and their impact on young people's identities, health, well-being and rights. These include government-funded health policies and school-based initiatives designed to prescribe the 'lifestyle' choices young people should make, particularly in relation to physical activity and diet (for example, annual weight checks and fingerprint screening in

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school canteens). The study formed part of a wider, international collaborative research project with partner institutions in New Zealand and Australia and was grounded in case-study methodology. In the UK study, this involved in-depth interviews and questionnaire responses from 1,176 9–16-year-old young people across a diverse range of backgrounds; teacher interviews across eight 'Healthy Schools' (see note 1); and analysis of health and PE programmes, school policies, textbooks and websites.

Note

- 1 The National Healthy Schools Programme is a UK school-based scheme focused on awareness of health-related policies and practices. The programme seeks to increase the knowledge, skills and behaviour of pupils. For schools to achieve Healthy School status they must meet criteria in four themes (personal, social and health education; healthy eating; physical activity; and emotional health and well-being).

Recommended reading

- Evans, J., Davies, B. and Wright, J. (eds) (2004) *Body Knowledge and Control: Studies in the Sociology of Physical Education and Health*, London: Routledge.
- Evans, J., Rich, E., Allwood, R. and Davies, B. (2008) 'Body pedagogies, P/policy, health and gender', *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(3): 387–402.
- International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (2010) Special Issue: Health Surveillance, The Body and Schooling, 23(7).
- Pringle, R. and Pringle, D. (2011) 'Competing obesity discourses and critical challenges for health and physical educators', *Sport, Education and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2011.607947.
- Wright, J. (2008) 'Biopower, biopedagogies and the obesity epidemic', in J. Wright and V. Harwood (eds) *Biopolitics and the 'Obesity Epidemic': Governing Bodies*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–14.

