Book review

Critical Pedagogy, Physical Education and Urban Schooling
Katie Fitzpatrick, 2013
New York, Peter Lang
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Critical pedagogy has been the target of some critique in recent years with questions asked about its influence on, and potential application in, the classroom (Biesta, 1998). Katie Fitzpatrick’s book, Critical Pedagogy, Physical Education and Urban Schooling, focuses on alternative ways of teaching physical education in urban schools. It highlights how critical pedagogies can enable teachers, students and researchers to move beyond dominant perceptions of students as physically able but academic under-achievers/uninterested. Fitzpatrick suggests that health and physical education (HPE) potentially offers marginalised urban students a distinctive space for learning and achievement.

Throughout, Fitzpatrick emphasises the potential for health and physical educational spaces to be inclusive and empowering for young people rather than marginalising along race, gender and ability as they traditionally seem to be. Whilst her study is located within New Zealand (NZ) and influenced by the cultural issues which arise within that country and community, Fitzpatrick keeps the international reader in mind. By drawing upon research from the UK and Australia she is able to illustrate how issues raised in the NZ context present important pedagogical challenges across contemporary global physical education contexts.

The book, split into two sections, deals with the methodological and theoretical challenges of critical ethnography and reproduction theory as well as the teaching and learning challenges of HPE and marginalised urban youth. The first section explores the background to the study and methodological reasoning for adopting an ethnographic approach. Chapter two provides a useful overview of previous critical ethnographies and as one would expect from ethnography, an insight into the lives of the participants in the NZ study. The 21 key participants (male and female, Year 12 and 13 students), predominantly of Maori or Pasifika ethnicity, are introduced to the reader at the outset, and vividly so, through the use of poetry. This enhances the description of the young people, allowing the reader to engage emotionally with the study at a personal level. The last chapter in section one addresses power issues related to ethnographic research, detailing some of the practical matters, for example, building relationships and the benefits of non-participant over participant observations. It provides a useful reminder to students, researchers and academics alike of the potential strengths and pitfalls of such a methodology especially when addressing
issues around the representation of participants when they are of different ethnicity/ 
culture to the researcher.

Section two deals with the racialized body and critically explores the intersections 
of race and class. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’, Fitzpatrick explores the 
impact of place on the experiences and aspiration of her participants. Focusing on 
the young people’s socio-economic status, ethnicity and outsiders’ perceptions of 
their ‘place’—Otara—as a ‘poor, brown place’, the author draws attention to how environment can influence tastes and habitus. Students’ tastes become constrained 
by their context. Drawing on ideas of taste and place further, we are encouraged to 
focus on how urban youth develop relationships with places and how these influence 
their identities and contribute to their educational experiences. Chapter five develops 
this idea of space further, drawing on neoliberal concepts of HPE to explore how 
meaning constructed in HPE lessons is (or becomes) located in the relationships 
between teachers and students. This chapter provides a building block for further 
critical discussions in chapter six where Fitzpatrick explores body and identity, 
echoing issues around stereotyping, ability and race. Further analyses clearly 
highlight the ways in which students become locked into their identities as non-
academic, but physically able students in physical education spaces, highlighting the 
‘reproductive’ nature of the subject.

In chapter seven, Fitzpatrick explores the ways in which notions of gender and 
sexuality are played out within the lives of the students at Kikorangi (the high school 
in which the study takes place). She discusses the notion of compulsory heterosexu-
ality (Roberts, 2004) and the ‘othering’ of gender identities and sexualities, processes 
that are inconsistent within the dichotomous positions of ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ or 
‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. This encourages the reader to explore the impact of the 
critical pedagogy of ‘Dan’ the class teacher on the lives of young people. The chapter 
again directs attention to the contradictory space of the classroom where Western 
notions of gender and sexuality are juxtaposed with those found in Maori and Pasifika culture. Fitzpatrick interrogates how this clash of cultures impacts the 
students’ identities. Again her use of Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, capital and field 
are brought to life through the ethnographic methods employed and the data it 
reveals.

Drawing upon the key theme of HPE as a contradictory space for the students in 
the study, chapter eight brings together notions of racialised and gendered bodies 
and provides a review of the application of a critical pedagogy to this space. Drawing 
heavily on the notion of HPE as a subject matter able to develop more than just 
‘physical skills and a scientific analysis of movement’, Fitzpatrick reflects upon the 
potential of a critical pedagogy in HPE to deconstruct power relationships, and in so 
doing allows an exploration of relationships in ways that better resonate with 
students’ lives and experiences. Parallels are drawn between the marginalisation of 
youth in education more broadly and the marginalisation of youth in HPE, in which 
bulodies are constructed in an environment where white and thin are normalised. The 
chapter raises key questions about the emancipatory potential of critical health
pedagogy in terms of the development of HPE spaces that are both inclusive and empowering.

Bringing the book to a close, Fitzpatrick begins chapter nine by highlighting what she views as ‘spaces of hope’ where teachers, drawing on critical practices, resist reproduction and play out different, more emancipatory visions of physical education in the field. To explore the contribution of education to the lives of the students in the study, she returns the reader to the lives of Dan and the Kikorangi students two years after the completion of the study. Consideration is then given to how the experience of a critical pedagogy has intersected with habitus and impacted the lives of the students with whom she had worked. Finally, Fitzpatrick returns to where she began and discusses critical ethnography as a research tool and positions her research in relation to the long-established but ever-growing body of ethnographic work in the field of education.

As Fitzpatrick points out, physical education and health are generally afforded less status within schools than other subjects considered more academic. However, Critical Pedagogy, Physical Education and Urban Schooling highlights the important impact physical education and health can have on young people, if grounded in principles of critical pedagogy. The book is an accessible and engaging account of the potential impact of critical pedagogy in schools, and of the strengths of an ethnographic approach to educational research. As early career researchers, we found the book to be a thoroughly engaging example of critical ethnography and an invaluable resource in developing our understanding of the practical application of critical pedagogies within school. It introduces thought-provoking ideas around the body, HPE and invaluable research and pedagogical insights for practitioners, researchers and students alike.

References

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