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Research Reflections - University Research Conference, 10 September 2015

‘Banter, bonding and bodies’: Power imbalances within male Physical Education (PE)

Power is present in human relationships, and is rarely equal. The extent of these power imbalances depends on situation, context and behaviour. Amongst young males shifts in balances of power can lead to behaviours such as bullying, particularly at school. The diverse school environment means that power imbalances are constantly in flux. This is something Rivers (2012) recognised in his call for researchers to consider how bullying exists in different educational contexts. With this in mind, an ethnographic study that focused on power imbalances within male PE was undertaken.

Often inherent within PE are single-sex classes, changes of clothing, a central focus on the performance of the visual body and a strong emphasis on competition – aspects that are often missing from most other subjects. These, together with more common practices such as peer-group dynamics, informed my examination of key social processes and subsequent relationships in male PE. Whilst only preliminary, results highlight influential bonding rituals between young males, the significance of young males’ relationships with their PE teachers and a culture of shame and fear in reporting instances of ‘bullying’.