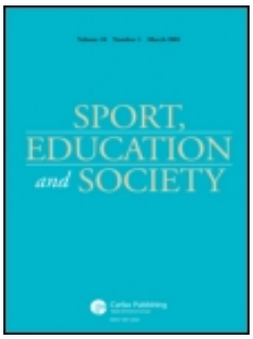

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Youth culture, physical education and the question of relevance: after 20 years, a reply to Tinning and Fitzclarence

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This article is an attempt to think through the idea that physical education should draw from youth culture in order to be more 'relevant' to students. We begin by revisiting Tinning and Fitzclarence's 1992 article 'Postmodern youth culture and the crisis in Australian secondary school physical education' in which they essentially argued that young people were bored by physical education because it had failed to keep pace with the pleasures they derive from consumer culture. With this as a starting point, we try to both critique and extend Tinning and Fizclarence's ideas by drawing on two broad areas of scholarship; cultural studies of youth and participatory action research. Our purpose here is twofold. First, we want to help clarify what might be meant by the terms 'youth culture' and 'relevance'. Flowing on from this, we suggest some directions for practice and research. These suggestions are not 'solutions' and we are at pains to argue that the 'relevance problem' may in fact be an unwitting shorthand for a range of related but distinct challenges. Because of this, as well as our own differing perspectives, we propose contradictory paths forward, including both more and less interest in student subjectivity and more and less allowance for student autonomy.

Keywords: *Physical education; Youth culture; Cultural studies; Student voice; Relevance*

The question of physical education's relevance to young people remains a pressing concern for the field. In its simplest formulation, the question of relevance stems from the tensions that perhaps inevitably arise when a slow moving institution, with its modern foundations in the nineteenth century, tries to keep pace with rapid social and cultural developments. In this sense, questions relating to how physical education might relate to young people resemble the problems of relevance that haunt a wide range of other cultural forms, from organised religion and organised labour to opera and test cricket. The extent to which any of these should or is able to change or stay the same is continually being negotiated. In each instance, scepticism and unease with chasing the winds of cultural change sit alongside an understandable fear of extinction. For physical education, various kinds of extinction loom as realistic possibilities in a number of countries, particularly as, for example,

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commercial organisations move into schools, selling gadgets and programmes in the name of fighting childhood obesity.

This article is an attempt to think through the relevance question by considering and problematising the idea that physical education should draw from youth culture in order to engage students and, in the process, save itself. Our purpose here will be neither to solve nor dismiss the questions that the idea of a youth inspired revival generates. Instead, we attempt to leverage the various fields of study in which we work (most immediately student voice, youth studies, cultural studies, physical education, dance education and sports history) to contribute to this ongoing conversation. We will argue that under sustained scrutiny, the apparently simple proposition that physical educators can and should learn from the values and practices of young people conceals complexity and some danger. While we think there is an irreducible tension between the idea of 'pedagogy' and the idea of 'culture', we also feel that a dialogue about the differences and similarities between the two suggest a generative research conversation. This is not simply because culture is to some extent fleeting, ephemeral and diverse, but also because the idea of teaching draws from two equally valid and problematic traditions; the tendency to both reject and celebrate current social and cultural arrangements.

We begin by returning to Tinning and Fitzclarence's (1992) article 'Postmodern youth culture and the crisis in Australian secondary school physical education'. In many ways, this important early article framed thinking about physical education's relevance problem for the next 20 years. We think there is value in recalling Tinning and Fitzclarence's arguments and those who subsequently shared their concerns because they offer a clear example of the way—in a very Foucauldian sense—concepts and theories construct the problems about which they purport to speak. Our interest here is not to discredit Tinning and Fitzclarence; as early commentators about youth culture and physical education they helped to open up new fields of enquiry and, as their paper makes clear, suggested new ways of doing physical education. Our paper seeks merely to continue the dialogue they initiated.

We then move to a discussion of the more general scholarship of youth culture. We do this for two reasons. First, we reject any 'common sense' understanding that romantically or naively imagines that there is a thing called 'youth culture' which we might discover, name and employ in the pursuit of specific goals. In fact, developing the core theoretical premise of this article, our argument will be that it is particular ideas about young people that produce the relevance question in the first place and not, as is usually assumed, the other way around. Second, we want to make what may seem the self-evident point that different understandings of youth culture will produce different ways of imagining its relevance to physical education.

Next, we consider youth culture via research that prioritises the 'voices' of young people and what they tell us about students' preferences, desires and aspirations, at least as they appear to relate to physical activity and the broader mission of physical education. As before, thinking about young people and physical education in this way suggests both new solutions and new problems. For example, while it might help to align physical education with young people's worlds, there can be no escape from

the problems that greater student autonomy in the construction of curriculum raises for the professional status and expertise for someone who, for lack of a better term, we still call a 'teacher'.

Through our collaboration in this article we hope to make a similar kind of contribution made by Tinning and Fitzclarence; to propose new solutions and pose new dilemmas. In fact, to put this aspiration in a slightly more perverse way, we have tried in this article to see solutions where others have been inclined to see problems, and to notice problems within what are often described as solutions.

Tinning and Fitzclarence revisited

In their 1992 article, 'Postmodern youth culture and the crisis in Australian secondary school physical education' for the journal *Quest*, the Australian physical educators Richard Tinning and Lindsay Fitzclarence claimed that many secondary school age children were 'bored' with physical education. Their diagnosis was that a disjunction had formed between what young people wanted and what physical education was offering. They describe a world where bigger and better physical activity thrills were available outside of school and that culture was moving in directions that physical education had failed to recognise. They also suggest that teachers tend to misunderstand what they (teachers) saw as the apathy of their students. It wasn't that young people were lazy; it was that teachers failed to appreciate the cultural shifts that were occurring outside their classrooms.

It is true that Tinning and Fitzclarence spend time discussing the political, economic and administrative changes that had, they argue, undermined the status and resourcing of physical education. By themselves these developments were cause enough for concern. However, these were not directly relevant to the paper's central interest in the kinds of creatures young people were in the process of morphing into. Tinning and Fitzclarence describe a generation schooled on MTV videos and advertisements for soft drinks and expensive athletic shoes, populated by ecstatically young, thin, muscular bodies.

With the benefit of hindsight, we would argue that Tinning and Fitzclarence never make absolutely clear why the postmodern world that young people inhabit is incompatible with physical education, a point they essentially concede in this article:

> The adolescents who watch these ads also go to school and do physical education. They change into their physical education "uniform" and present themselves to their teacher for lessons in which their bodies are very much on display. Do they expect to engage in physical activity like the images of the Reebok ad? Do they expect life to be like the Coke ad portrays? Do they feel that their own bodies don't measure up to those adorning the TV images? Do they see any relevance in physical education to their daily lives? What is the nature of the experience of these adolescents in the context of school physical education, and how might it contribute to a crisis in school physical education? There are no easy answers to these questions. (pp. 293–294)

What Tinning and Fitzclarence *do* argue is that postmodern youth culture is a place in which, quoting Brettschneider (1990), young people are exhorted to construct their own 'lifestyle biographies'. Also, it is here we get to what we understand to be the essence of Tinning and Fitzclarence's theoretical formulation and the dimension we think speaks most loudly today. To begin with, they concur with Brettschneider in arguing that young people now view and value physical activity, such as sport, differently to adults. In other words, physical activity now *means* something new. They write:

> A postmodern analysis provokes us to consider that the idea of crisis has a profound cultural meaning. In particular, it can usefully be applied to our conventional ways of making sense of the world, for as the world has changed so dramatically, so too our frameworks for making sense of change have been brought into question, become unstable, and in many cases lost their interpretive powers. (p. 297)

The timing or the speed of these changes are, understandably, not things Tinning and Fitzclarence speculate about. However, we are clearly talking about reasonably recent and radical change because of the way these changes have, they argue, outstripped our capacities to understand them and, at least in the case of physical education, respond. Nonetheless, Tinning and Fitzclarence describe a world dominated by ever more pure expressions of free-market capitalism in which the image is a dominant currency. The primacy of the image is part cause and part effect of an intensified pre-occupation with self-creation, a project that never ceases. Moreover, images and the media that distribute them have usurped the integrating role of other institutions (school, family, work). Like Giroux (1994), this line of argument holds that the media now teaches us to live. In the end, Tinning and Fitzclarence appear to make two not necessarily compatible points: first, that physical education is just not as stimulating as the world of postmodern youth culture and, second, that physical education is insufficiently dynamic to cope with the range of lifestyle choices that postmodern youth culture makes available.

How then to respond? Tinning and Fitzclarence are critical of attempts to simply lengthen the menu of activities that constitute physical education classes. This, they argue, overlooks that physical education is now no longer reaching even those students who like physical activity; the problem is not what physical education is, the problem is what it *means*. Tinning and Fitzclarence conclude by calling for a rethinking of the nature of physical education. These are, of course, early days and in 1992 what this new postmodern physical education might be is anyone's guess. However, in 1992 the authors were incumbents at Deakin University's Faculty of Education where critical pedagogy was king and the purpose of education was considered, in part, to help students resist the powerful cultural forces that are shaping them (students) and the relationships they form (see Tinning & Sirna, 2011 for a collection of essays on this period at Deakin University and the educational concerns of the scholars that worked there). While Tinning and Fitzclarence tentatively propose that a postmodern physical education might at least involve students as 'critical consumers of physical activity', a question that occurs to us today

is whether many school students are not *already* critical readers of culture who need only to be read as such. Nonetheless, Tinning and Fitzclarence suggest:

> It is one thing to construct one's own biography by taking what one values from an eclectic range of cultural practices, but it is another to make informed selection based on critique and debate. (p. 300)

The ideas that Tinning and Fitzclarence discussed in 1992 were clearly on the minds of other scholars and it probably matters little whose cab was first off the rank, suffice to say that their formulation helped to set the tone for what we might call the 'crisis school' of physical education scholarship. The point to focus on here is that the concept of culture became central; culture had changed and physical education had not. Researchers like Kirk (1999) and Armour (1999) argued that physical education needed to re-orient itself to the new 'physical cultures' (Kirk) or 'body cultures' (Armour) in order to be relevant to young people. In North America, scholars such as Cothran and Ennis (1999) described the need for what they called 'culturally relevant' physical education programmes (see also Ennis, 1998). In fact, the same kind of malaise in school classrooms was also diagnosed in physical education scholarship and policy. In the name of postmodernism, Fernández-Balboa's (1997) edited volume beseeched scholars to cast off the old ways of researching and embrace new culturally relevant epistemologies. Also, while rejecting the postmodernist banner, Penney and Evans (1999) saw the struggles over Britain's national curriculum as partly physical education's version of the culture wars, pitting conservative, ruling class ideas about sport and character against young people's radically changed leisure and physical activity practices.

Our claim here is not to say that any or all of these views were or are mistaken. These are complex matters that have been taken up by some of the most important scholars in the field. By the same token, it was never really ever demonstrated that physical education's old fashioned-ness was the cause of mass disengagement, assuming that mass disengagement had in fact happened (the evidence for this remains largely anecdotal). What a culturally revitalised physical education might look like has not materialised. Nor has such an entity, if it existed, been shown to increase student affection for physical education. Moreover, there had been earlier periods of radical ferment in youth culture—the 1960s comes to mind—without discernable calls for physical education's complete overhaul. There is also no obvious reason why student disengagement with physical education might not be more efficaciously explained by ineffective teaching (or teacher education) or declining respect for authority or declining interest in physical activity *per se*; proponents of each explanation has evidence that could be marshalled. These points are, however, by the by. What matters more is that it is an interest in culture that produces the circumstances in which the problem of relevance comes into view. By foregrounding culture, at a time when the power and politics of culture were much discussed, the 'crisis school' could not help but find physical education in an anachronistic cultural hole even though it is difficult to imagine a time during the twentieth century when classroom physical education was not, in different ways, out of step with popular

culture. Meanwhile, the developments in media, capitalism and lifestyle to which Tinning and Fitzclarence drew attention were real enough and offered a perfectly plausible explanation for the current state of affairs.

In turning now to the study of youth culture, we want to suggest that the thing that Tinning and Fitzclarence seem most concerned about is what we might call 'popular culture', especially in the form of media texts produced by large corporations. This is a feature that has marked the critical literacy literature and seems to have taken its cue from writers such as Giroux (1994) who tends to equate the narratives of corporate media texts with the ways youth read these texts. In fact, the stories of Sophie, Leonie and Jill that Tinning and Fitzclarence tell at the beginning of their paper show just how varied the meanings young people draw from media texts can be.

Wise in their own way

At the risk of reductionism, cultural studies scholarship about youth culture can be thought of as a series of investigations into how it is that young people might be, or might become, wise 'in their own way' (Hoggart, 1957, p. 338). It tries to understand what matters to young people in their everyday life and, as such, alerts us to the space that might exist between what young people do and what they value. One response to Tinning and Fitzclarence's analysis is perhaps, therefore, that the question of curriculum's *relevance* to youth (what they do), is distinct from what teachers might do to engage youth in 'reading' youth culture (what they value). In other words, there may be utility in considering issues of pedagogy and curriculum quite separately, and that developing curriculum that is responsive to youth culture is a different enterprise from teaching with an awareness of youth culture. Perhaps the problem of relevance centres around understanding the reasons for young people's choices about their bodies and learning to read the cultural, non-instrumental (Hartley, 2008) use of bodies, physical activity and sports. For example, the stories of Leonie and Jill and others in Tinning and Fitzclarence's paper suggest that while young people might be less enthusiastic about physical education curriculum, they already possess knowledge that may be of pedagogical value.

While Tinning and Fitzclarence clearly have an interest in youth culture, what they call 'postmodern youth culture' seems mainly to consist of media images. The literature on youth culture teaches us that there are many youth cultures that are continually being remade and feature different engagements with often-divergent forms of media text and commercially produced artefacts. However, these texts and artefacts do not equal youth culture. Media texts as youth culture only matter to the extent they have significance in the lives of young people. For example, Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (1972) sought to understand how young people came to know themselves as 'deviant' and develop practices of subjectivation that are, in fact, performances of this idea. Cohen argued that popular media depictions of young people's tastes can feed into practices of subjectivation or, alternatively, provide imperatives for resistance to dominant

depictions. The ways in which youth might take-up or dispute media depictions are central to Cohen's thesis on the production of deviant adolescence. In the context of this article, we might also suggest that just as crucial are the ways in which commentators, such as teachers and academics, read and relate to young people's engagements with media texts.

A point that is clearly made in the cultural studies of youth literature is that young people often communicate non-verbally (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). Learning to understand the non-verbal 'voices' young people speak with is a matter of learning to read them through the modes of signification, identification and subjective investment that matter to them. Hall and Jefferson's (1976) collection *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* introduced the concept of subcultures as a way to understand the material literacies young people use to communicate. Sub-cultures are sets of practices; styles and systems of meaning that are 'subordinate' to 'parent cultures'. While sports have been described as vehicles for the reinscription of class through the development of taste, the idea of sub-culture allows us to understand how young people's interests in sports and other practices take on meanings that are specific to certain times and places. For example, Corrigan's (1976) chapter in *Resistance Through Rituals*, titled 'Doing nothing', discusses talking about soccer as one of many possible expressions of the locally popular and 'common pursuit of doing nothing' (p. 103). The sub-culture of 'doing nothing' is what gives soccer meaning for Corrigan's boys. Soccer knowledge is not utilised to play better soccer; it is a resource for young people to experience belonging which is achieved, in this instance, by 'doing nothing'.

Hebdige (1979) extended the idea of sub-culture through his exploration of the meaning of style as a form of non-verbal communication. He saw the formation of style as a critical component in youth sub-cultural identity and argued that style could be a site of resistance to dominant narratives of youth, such as those expressed by the media texts Tinning and Fitzclarence discuss. For Hebdige, '... youth culture constitutes a bricolage of elements which ultimately combine to form a distinctive, expressive sub-culture' (Lewis, 2008, p. 231), the point of which is to critique a parent culture or to respond to, and engage with, the dominant narratives of a parent culture. Thinking with the idea of sub-culture in relation to physical education, then, young people's enjoyment of physical activity outside physical education classes could be seen as the sub-cultures of physical education.

Another insight from scholarship on youth culture is that young people's non-verbal communication and capacity for discrimination, or 'critical literacy' (taste) is always already gendered. Angela McRobbie's scholarship of girls and girl culture articulated an important early neglect of girls' interests, textual consumption and the formation of their own sub-cultures (for example McRobbie & Garber, 1976). Through examples such as 'Teeny Bopper' culture among pre-teenage girls, McRobbie reminded readers of the importance of attending to male *and* female bodies and tastes as specific sites of cultural production and resistance, a point taken up by feminist physical education scholars such as Wright (1996). More broadly, we might consider the fact that gender both influences and is remade through young

people's body work, through the kinds of physical activity they participate in and their tastes in the consumption of sport.

The work of Johanna Wyn and Rob White in Australia is worthy of mention for its pragmatism. Focusing attention on the political landscapes in which the lived dynamics of youth culture occur, White and Wyn (2008) consider the ways youth policies shape the experiences of young people:

> ... despite the wide range of policies affecting youth, there are common themes. One of these is futurity—the valuing of young people for what they will become. This tendency underlying many youth policies is inevitably in tension with the increasing acknowledgement that young people should participate in policy decision making. Underlying this tension is contestation about the extent to which young people can be regarded as citizens in any sense, or whether they are simply citizens in training. (p. 103)

This call to develop policy that is responsive to youth voice is echoed in discussions of curriculum development and is a theme we take up in the following section of this article. For White and Wyn, the importance of youth voice is largely utilitarian. They think youth voices can matter in adult worlds and on adult's terms. That is, they are less concerned with knowing how young people come to value their own voices. Thus, their project is strategically very different from the cultural studies enquires canvassed earlier. For White and Wyn, young voices matter because they can be used to inform dynamics of youth policy and their absence is implicated in widening social inequality, be it based on class, gender, race or geographical location. Drawing on the concept of governmentality, they identify a tendency for policy to place responsibility on young people and their families without first listening to them. They argue that youth policy and, by extension, curriculum policy and pedagogical practices, need to be more attuned to youth voices.

This very brief sampling of youth cultural studies suggests a range of ways for thinking about youth culture, institutional responses to it and implications for pedagogy. One potential conclusion is that while Tinning and Fitzclarence saw young people as 'bored' by physical education, perhaps the situation is more serious than this. A more politicised view of youth culture might actually wonder about the ontological status of physical education in the first place and the sense in which it represents a form of oppression to be resisted. Here we might re-read Giroux's (1994, p. 279) suggestion that we strive to understand:

> ... the ways in which our vocation as educators supports, challenges, or subverts institutional practices that are at odds with democratic processes and the hopes and opportunities we provide for the nation's youth.

We wonder if is there something about our positions as educators *per se*, or institutions of schooling, that are the problem. Perhaps any attempt to refashion the image or the idea of the teacher, be it in the garb of youth culture or anything else, is beside the point? In fact, might any attempt by physical education to strategically colonise youth culture be counter-productive and represent, or be read as, only a slight variation on the same unwanted medicine? This certainly seems a more likely

scenario if youth cultures are understood, as with some of the authors cited earlier, as produced by young people as a form of resistance.

Also, even if these questions seem a little melodramatic, some fundamental and unavoidable dilemmas remain. First, it is pretty clear that authors like Tinning and Fitzclarence saw youth culture as, to some extent, something that needed to be resisted. As a result, an important dimension of their ideas about a postmodern curriculum sought to arm students to critique, resist or at least manage the culture they were now a part of, rather than simply being swept up in it. But this is surely not the same thing as seeing the relevance problem in terms of a need to *draw from* youth culture, of trying to be more 'up-to-date' or 'in tune' with youth culture (see Sandford & Rich, 2006 for an extended discussion of this literature). In short, when scholars talk about the need to be 'relevant' to 'youth culture', what kind of relationship do they imagine? Antagonism? A partnership? A surrender on the part of 'traditional' physical education to the cult of the new?

Second, from a certain angle the term 'relevant' can seem unhelpfully vague. So when Tinning and Fitzclarence say that students are 'bored' by physical education, it is still not clear what kind of a problem this is, although they state firmly that they do not mean that physical education simply needs to be more 'entertaining'. One reading of their paper is that 'relevance' in this context means trying to understand why young people do or do not participate in physical activity and then, presumably, to act accordingly. This seems a perfectly reasonable suggestion except that it does not sound very postmodern, nor is it clear how this knowledge (about young people's participation in physical activity) would lead to a different kind of physical education. After all, Tinning and Fitzclarence conspicuously avoid repeating the regularly made claim that today's young people are less interested in physical activity than earlier generations. We think this leaves physical educators in a rather awkward position; do we, as Tinning and Fitzclarence suggest, need to understand the reasons why young people do or do not participate in physical activity or do we, instead, need to understand why they do or do not participate in physical activity *in physical education classes*. The latter question is, to our mind, a radically different one from the former and one for which we currently have imperfect answers.

Last, the study of youth cultures reminds us that there is no single youth culture. It is noticeable in the 'crisis' literature that disaffection with physical education is usually characterised as near on universal. This either means that what is similar about today's young people is much more salient than what divides them (otherwise, how could they all be disaffected at the same time?) or that physical education manages simultaneously to disaffect different groups of young people in different ways. Also, while the former would seem much more likely than the latter, it leads unavoidably to the somewhat perverse conclusion that differences in youth culture hardly matter. In other words, a brave new 'relevant' physical education would not be a highly differentiated entity, but would be appealing to most students for the same reasons.

Hearing voices

Given this long list of not easily resolved questions, some scholars have sought answers by talking to students themselves. Similar to Tinning and Fitzclarence, scholars working in this vein argue that despite many attempts at reform, school physical education has changed far less over the past 30 plus years, than young people have changed, so that physical education and schools are out-of-step with youth culture. That is not to say that physical education scholars have not tried to listen and learn from students' perspectives. On the contrary, as a result of a wave of interest in student perspectives that began in the mid-nineties, we now know quite a lot about what students think, feel and believe about their physical education experiences. Students have repeatedly said that they do not like doing stupid and boring stuff (Graham, 1995; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010); nor do they like compulsory physical education kit (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Williams & Bedward, 2002). We know that many students do not see the point to fitness testing, and do not find competing against an external standard motivating (Hopple & Graham, 1995). Students have told us that being a low-skilled pupil is not a happy experience and that low-skilled and disengaged students often blame themselves for their lack of success, rather than the curriculum or the pedagogical experiences with which they are expected to engage (Portman, 1995; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010). We have also learned that many students like to be in control of what they do (Pope & Grant, 1996), spread their interests across a range of activities (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001), engage in leadership opportunities (Hastie, 1998), work as a team, cooperate, learn new skills (Carlson & Hastie, 1997), have fun (Garn & Cothran, 2006; Smith & Parr, 2007) and appreciate positive encouragement (Kinchin & O'Sullivan, 2003); all design features which are often absent from their regular physical education. Students have told researchers loudly and repeatedly about the design flaws they see in dominant forms of physical education (Kirk, 2010). These design flaws are so serious that they cause some young people to fake a variety of illnesses and injuries in order to avoid physical education, and others to avoid out-of-school physical activity because of negative experiences of being physically active they have had in school (Martinek & Griffith, 1994; Ennis, 2000; Cothran, 2010).

It is one thing to listen to student voices but quite another to decipher their implications for practice. For example, on the whole it appears that researchers have sought students' perspectives with the intention of modifying existing forms of content and instruction rather than stimulating radical reform (Locke, 1992; Kirk, 2010). More often than not students are asked to comment on what is, rather than to imagine what might be. Adult researchers usually frame the design and questions that guide student perspective research, and adult teachers and researchers recommend or construct various curricular and pedagogical responses that they deem appropriate.

Therefore, while the rhetoric of student perspective work supports a student-centred philosophy, the reality is that often much of it is subject-centred and mediated by adult perspectives and priorities, and by the institutional practices of

schooling. The result is that students have limited engagement in decisions and actions designed to improve their physical education experiences. All too often, efforts to listen and respond to student voice have been tokenistic, knee-jerk reactions to student disengagement and alienation and resulted in only a surface-level engagement with students and youth culture.

The emergence and development of the activity choice model which seeks to offer student choice from a greater breadth of activities is a case in point. Green (2000) found that teachers offer activity choice as a response to the pragmatics of coping with older students rather than a philosophical or ideological response to a change in young people's lifestyles. This coping strategy becomes even more problematic when the teachers involved are out of touch with the interests of their students. Claire, one of the students in Flintoff and Scraton's (2001, p. 97) study remarked:

> They do try and give us a good choice, it's just they are picking from their generation and they just don't know what we want to do and they don't ask us. They don't know what we do out of school, it's just what we get to do in the gym.

In other words, the idea of physical education moving with the prevailing tide of young people's leisure lifestyles, a conviction increasingly shared by students and scholars alike (Kretchmar, 2000; Green, 2004), is often compromised by adults' beliefs, interpretations and competencies.

Interestingly, and somewhat ironically perhaps, possibilities for more radical or transformative approaches to physical education are also sometimes constrained by the students themselves, a point illustrated by some of the student voice orientated research in physical education. Here we are thinking about research that attempts to go beyond simply describing students' thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values by focusing instead on the challenges and possibilities for students actively shaping their own learning experiences in physical education. An example of this alternative approach, Participatory Action Research (PAR), has been used as a critical pedagogical tool which can also support adult allies as they attempt to listen and respond to student voice (McMahon, 2007; Fisette, 2008; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010; Oliver *et al.* 2009). Amongst the various benefits students have reported following their active involvement and curriculum negotiation in these physical education PAR projects are: increased opportunities to be physically active, opportunities to name and challenge physical activity provision and participation inequities that students identified, opportunities to effect real change, ownership over physical activity practices and increased relevance and meaning of their curricular experiences. The students in these studies also reported improvements in class content, teaching and learning, assessment practices and student–teacher relationships.

Indeed, engaging with student voice in these examples has meant renegotiating the definitions of and boundaries between the roles of student, teacher and researcher (Bragg, 2007). One of the students in Enright and O'Sullivan's (2010) study, Levi, astutely referred to this redefinition as 'a bit of a flip-flop'. Fielding (2001, p. 130), an eminent student voice scholar, has referred to this flip-flop as radical collegiality,

and spoken at length about the possibility and desirability of improved dialogic encounters between students and teachers, 'in which the interdependent nature of teaching and learning and the shared responsibility for its success is made explicit'.

This change in pedagogic relations certainly implies openings for aspects of youth culture to inform physical education experience and thus address the problem of relevance to students' everyday lives. Scholars working in this area argue that possibilities exist for students to find, articulate and make space for their own meanings in physical education and physical activity, but that these possibilities are curtailed by the tight hierarchical patterns that reproduce teachers' authority in the classroom (Mirón & Lauria, 1998). As has been alluded to previously however, this potentially radical and transformative approach to physical education is not always well received by students. In two of the aforementioned student voice projects the adult allies were surprised by the conservative engagement, and influence of some students on the PAR process (McMahon, 2007; Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010). Cook-Sather (2007, p. 868) has suggested that sometimes:

> Researchers who are faithful to researching 'with' young people may be constrained in their more transformative intent by their commitment to negotiate a shared interpretive space; their views would be tempered by the need to find some kind of agreed perspective with students who may not share their more democratic and equitable goals. This conflict is analogous to that posed by some theorists; that liberatory pedagogy can be impositional.

As we have already noted, Tinning and Fitzclarence were understandably tentative about what a more relevant, 'postmodern' physical education future might look like. But although research into 'student voice' is a quite recent phenomenon, some interesting insights already suggest themselves. The idea of radically increased student control may interest some but not all students and there is the risk that these initiatives will be most enthusiastically embraced by already socially powerful or vocal students with unpredictable consequences. Perhaps more thought provoking are the kinds of physical education experiences students will construct for themselves given greater license to do so. In Enright and O'Sullivan (in press) a group of young female participants formed themselves into a club that participated in regular visits to health clubs and gymnasiums. The activities they chose were 'aerobics, boxercise, walking, swimming, Khai Bo and going to the gym'.

This is not particularly surprising, perhaps least of all to scholars like Tinning and Fitzclarence who made much of the emerging pre-occupation with the 'body as project' in what they call postmodern culture. On the one hand, these activity choices would no doubt please those who see physical education's purpose as primarily about promoting health and fighting obesity. On the other, some readers will notice the appearance of a quite startling convergence. While anti-obesity minded scholars tend to see physical education as a potential bulwark a*gainst* the dominant culture of technology, fast-food and reduced physical activity that they see young people inhabiting and reproducing, it may be that working on the body is an important aspect of that same culture. Put another way, while some scholars see listening to the voices of young people as a way of tapping into youth culture, sometimes these voices

will take us back to the same adult culture that we imagined ourselves moving beyond. Maybe what some young people want is what adults do.

Still, if we agree that listening to young people is a good thing, a new problem emerges. Yes, the literature that we have cited here calls for the roles of teachers and students to be 'renegotiated' but what *will* the postmodern teacher *do*? It needs to be recognised here that the physical education teacher as a kind of 'recreation resource manager' is not a new idea (for example, see the essays in McFee & Tomlinson, 1997). This is a vision of PE Tinning and Fitzclarence appear to reject on the grounds that it stems from a shallow desire to entertain students rather than teach them anything, and yet it seems one of the most likely outcomes if/as the physical education teacher's job becomes one of facilitating the wishes of their students. In this context, what becomes of the idea that a teacher has something new to impart, something that students do not know or understand and something that might profitably enlarge the lives of students? Blending youth culture, democracy and the idea of teaching will be a difficult trick, and perhaps part of the challenge of doing it will be understanding when and where it cannot or should not be tried.

Keeping it real

It would probably be unfair to note that within the physical education scholarship that has thus far attempted to include the voices of students in curriculum design, we do not see much evidence of emerging forms of physical expression that exist within youth culture itself. Part of the problem here is that 'new' dance practices like 'krumping' and 'flash mobbing' are now not all that new and, besides, these are practices that require expertise that few teachers or students have. Moreover, youth culture is not very much like school; it regularly celebrates the marginality of certain practices because of the way they create niches that reject the mainstream. On the other hand, the dance education work of this paper's first author in North America and Australia has often found, of all things, line-dancing and old style ballroom dancing to be by far the most palatable forms of dance for hard-to-please teenagers. In parts of Canada, for example, popular night clubs exist for the purpose of young people meeting, drinking and doing line dancing. If nothing else, this reinforces that trying to be new may not necessarily be the best way to reach contemporary youth.

Of course, 'underground cool' is only one way to understand youth culture and, by way of concluding this article, we turn to sport because of its enduring broad appeal to young people. Sport, particularly professional sport, is a form of physical culture that has had to reinvent itself in order to maintain market share and, in a sense, relevance. This has not been easy. As the salaries of players have ballooned and the cost of consuming the product has steadily risen, professional sport has had to find ways to minimise the alienation and cynicism these developments produce. Using a wide variety of sporting practices and artefacts as data—including media coverage, sports marketing, biographies, fanzines, forms of on-field player celebration and rule changes, Gard (2010) has proposed that the modern sports industry is a form of

melodrama in which players are constructed as both super-human and super-real. Thus, a huge amount of time and energy is expended by the people who sell sport, including the players themselves, in cultivating an image in which we can both celebrate athletes as highly paid celebrities while simultaneously believing that they are just like you and me, playing not for the money but because they love what they do. As the economic and cultural divide between players and fans has increased, more and more labour goes into closing this gap on a symbolic level. As a result, in a constant reminder of what their sport 'really' means to them, players now express emotions on the field in ways that would once have seemed offensive; footballers routinely cry as they announce their retirement; and advertisements tell us that player X really is doing it for 'you'.

In short, modern professional sport must be both theatrical spectacle and 'authentic'. Gard argues that the construction of extreme emotional performances and responses is the very life-blood of big money sport—they are, in the end, *the* product that sport sells—but that these performances can only work so long as they can be made to appear 'authentic'. This, then, is why modern sport has been hyper-theatricalised; the 'real' must constantly be over-performed lest we all stop believing.

The reasons why young people enjoy watching sport are clearly very different from the reasons young people choose to participate in sport; they might like both but might not. But if the mega spectacle-cum-soap opera that televised professional sport has become can tell us something about why some young people consume sport as popular culture, it is that the search for 'relevance' may ultimately be profoundly misleading. This is certainly the case if 'relevance' is taken to mean *reflecting* one's life back at one. If professional sport is 'relevant' to the lives of young people, it is partly in the sense of being an escape from the real into the hyper-real; an escape in which intensified forms of 'authentic' emotional experience might occur. As our discussion of Corrigan's work suggests, following professional sport also offers instances of belonging for young people, of sharing investments in cultural practices.

In 1992, Tinning and Fitzclarence saw physical education's problems in terms of not being able to understand youth culture. In particular, they railed against capitalism's role in generating new forms of consumer culture upon which physical education had no purchase. They sought to deflate the thrills that consumption promised and, in so doing, oddly echoed Thurston Moore, lead-singer of grunge-rock band *Sonic Youth*, who in the early 1990s famously mused:

> People see rock and roll as youth culture and when youth culture becomes monoplised by Big Business, what are the youth to do? . . . I think we should destroy the bogus capitalist process that is destroying youth culture.

It is difficult to see how an engagement with the 'bogus capitalist process', at least on some level, could be avoided if physical education means to draw itself closer to the ebbs and flows of youth culture. Regardless of which direction you address it from, youth culture is a manifestation of advanced capitalism while, at the same time and in some eyes, a direct challenge to it. It seems to us that Tinning and Fitzclarence would at least agree with us on this point; that the question of physical education's

'relevance' is tied up with its capacity to answer the kinds of pleasures that young people derive through consumption. One line of thinking is that this calls for more autonomy for young people in designing their own educational experiences. That is, they should be allowed to choose their physical activity experiences in similar ways to the choices they make as consumers. An alternative approach is that physical education strive for experiences that are emotionally transcendent rather than settling for the mundane instrumentalism of fighting obesity and endlessly banging the healthy lifestyles drum. In other words, perhaps the problem is that physical education strives too hard to be relevant—rather than not hard enough—and needs instead to explore its creative, fantastic and theatrical sides.

A third possibility, drawing from our discussion of cultural studies, is that physical educators see young people as 'wise in their own way'. That is, rather than committing to a potentially never ending process of curriculum re-invention, our palette of pedagogical possibilities could be enriched by a knowledge of how young people 'do culture'. As we said earlier, there is a difference between trying to be responsive to youth culture (curriculum) and being relevant to youth (pedagogy). Rather than trying to convince them to resist particular aspects of physical culture, *a la* critical pedagogy, we might take more seriously the things young people want from culture and, most important, learn from the techniques they use to navigate it. For us, this suggests less of an emphasis on what some physical education scholars have called 'body cultures' and less anxiety about the more obvious aspects of media driven popular culture. Instead, in this article we have tried to argue that what transforms any young persons' engagement with a media or popular cultural text into 'youth culture' is the *politics* of youth consumption and re-appropriation, a process we might describe as the formation of taste. Developing pedagogies that read the wisdom young people have about their bodies and foster the application of this knowledge in physical activity is one way in which physical education might respond to youth culture.

A final possibility would be to suggest that physical education should simply try harder to be educative—that is, to actually teach something—rather than being satisfied with occupying students or offering them a range of experiences. In Australian secondary schools, physical education has to a large extent become recreational such that the nature and educative intent of the experience is essentially indeterminate. The impulse to teach has faded as, it seems, has the excitement of being physically active at school. Perhaps there is a message in this. In fact, a shifting tide away from trying too hard to understand who students are and back towards an interest in instruction (for example Rowe, 2006) is underway in some educational research circles and is likely to reach the shores of physical education soon.

Taken together, these musings about the future suggest a diminishing focus on the *identity* of students. While the ideas of greater student voice and more explicit instruction may look like polar opposites, they do both relieve teachers of some of the burden of having to 'know' their students. Likewise, a focus on creativity, emotional intensity and fantasy (for example through dance and certain kinds of sporting experience) might just as easily prioritise who students want to be rather than who

they are. However, we accept that there are both inconsistencies as well as dangers in all 'solutions'. More student involvement in the construction of curriculum seems a compelling and fresh line of practice and research to explore further. At the same time, in this article we have tried to push the logic of co-construction and to see solutions and problems emerging simultaneously within it. Above all, and with the benefit of 20 years worth of hindsight, we have tried to 'solve' the 'relevance problem' that Tinning and Fitzclarence drew attention to by interrogating some of its apparent core assumptions, while also trying re-invent the problem in terms of the field's engagement with capitalism, popular culture and youth culture.

Throughout this article, we have intentionally avoided discussing the meaning of the word 'postmodern'. For the most part, the word 'modern' might easily have sufficed although we acknowledge that for Tinning and Fitzclarence, writing in the early 1990s, the idea of the 'postmodern' was emerging as an important lens through which to see the world. What *has* been central to this article is the idea of culture, its entanglement with capitalism, and its relevance to physical education. Have we made too much of culture or, as some cultural studies writers have it, not enough? Also if we are to address young people's culture, which part of it is most important? The artefacts or the states of mind? Sports shoes or a desire for autonomy? The heart or the head? Above all, our argument has been that we are still not clear what 'relevance' means or whether it's a good or bad thing. What is clear is that the answer/s is/are tied up in how we see particular manifestations of culture and whether we are inclined to understand, demonise, celebrate or dismiss them.

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