

*Healthy bodies, boys and body image: An examination of male students' reluctance to participate in compulsory grade nine physical education classes.*

*Michael Kehler*

**The problem:** Internationally, studies indicate youth are less active and overweight. Absent from the debate and response to increase physical activity among youth is any attention to the relationship between gender and specifically masculinity and physical activity. The World Health Organization (2002) has identified gender and masculinity in particular, as a significant factor shaping men's expectations, behaviours, and health, yet little is being done to address this relationship in physical health education classes. Research has already established that schools are a site of masculinising practices through which boys learn particular codes of masculinity. Practices of masculinity are directly related to beliefs, attitudes, and understandings of what it means to be a man. The current culture of masculinity and climate of homophobia in schools contributes to suppression and silencing of anxieties about body image among men and boys. At the same time school sport has exemplified the exaltation and elevation of a particular masculinity, namely one of muscularity and competitiveness. In public and visible ways male bodies, not unlike female bodies, become representative of a gendering process that values certain masculinities while marginalizing others.

Recent curricular initiatives to increase physical activity among youth and respond to an "obesity epidemic" fail to address evidence-based research linking gender and healthy body practices. And while structured physical activity is now mandatory for most students, the significance of gender as a determinant of health, and moreover masculinity as a primary causative factor for the health disparity between men and women remains a striking omission in curricular approaches. At a time when the physical body is becoming increasingly visible and public because of increased obesity rates, it is particularly salient to better understand how and to what degree bodily practices are encumbered with gendered knowledge related to masculine identities.

**The Research Questions:** This research investigates why some high school boys reluctantly participate in grade nine physical education classes. Central questions of this research include: To what extent does the media and concerns for obesity and bodily health among adolescence, contribute to boys' perceptions of their bodies? How are diverse masculinities valued and devalued in physical education classes? How are boys' perceptions of masculinities linked to (dis)engagement in healthy bodies and healthy life practices? Which understandings about boys' bodies intersect with knowledge of being a boy? What do perceptions of adolescent masculinities reveal about how boys (de)value bodily health?

**Potential Contribution:** Research examining girls and body image is well established, yet very little research explores the relationship between adolescent masculinities, body image, and physical health education. The proposed research breaks new ground intersecting the sociology of the male body of adolescents with health and education. A critical sociological analysis examining adolescent masculinities, body image, and healthy lifestyle practices extends previous research (Grogan & Richards, 2002; Kehler, 2007; Kehler, Davison & Frank, 2005) while addressing concerns linking long term health and adolescent masculinities not previously studied in Canada. Methodologically this research aims at ensuring boy's narratives are heard and not written behind their backs, as in past research. Using interviews, secure blog sites, and field observations across three provinces allows for national and regional differences as well as a diversity of experiences among boys to emerge through a safe research protocol. The findings promise rich descriptive data of young men's lives in addition to contributing new knowledge and insight from those voices largely absent from studies of adolescent masculinities. Finally, with written support from research review panels at the Ontario Physical Health Education Association, The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario and a local school board, the impact of this research are keenly anticipated and far-reaching because of its potential for changing how young men experience and learn about physical health education in schools.