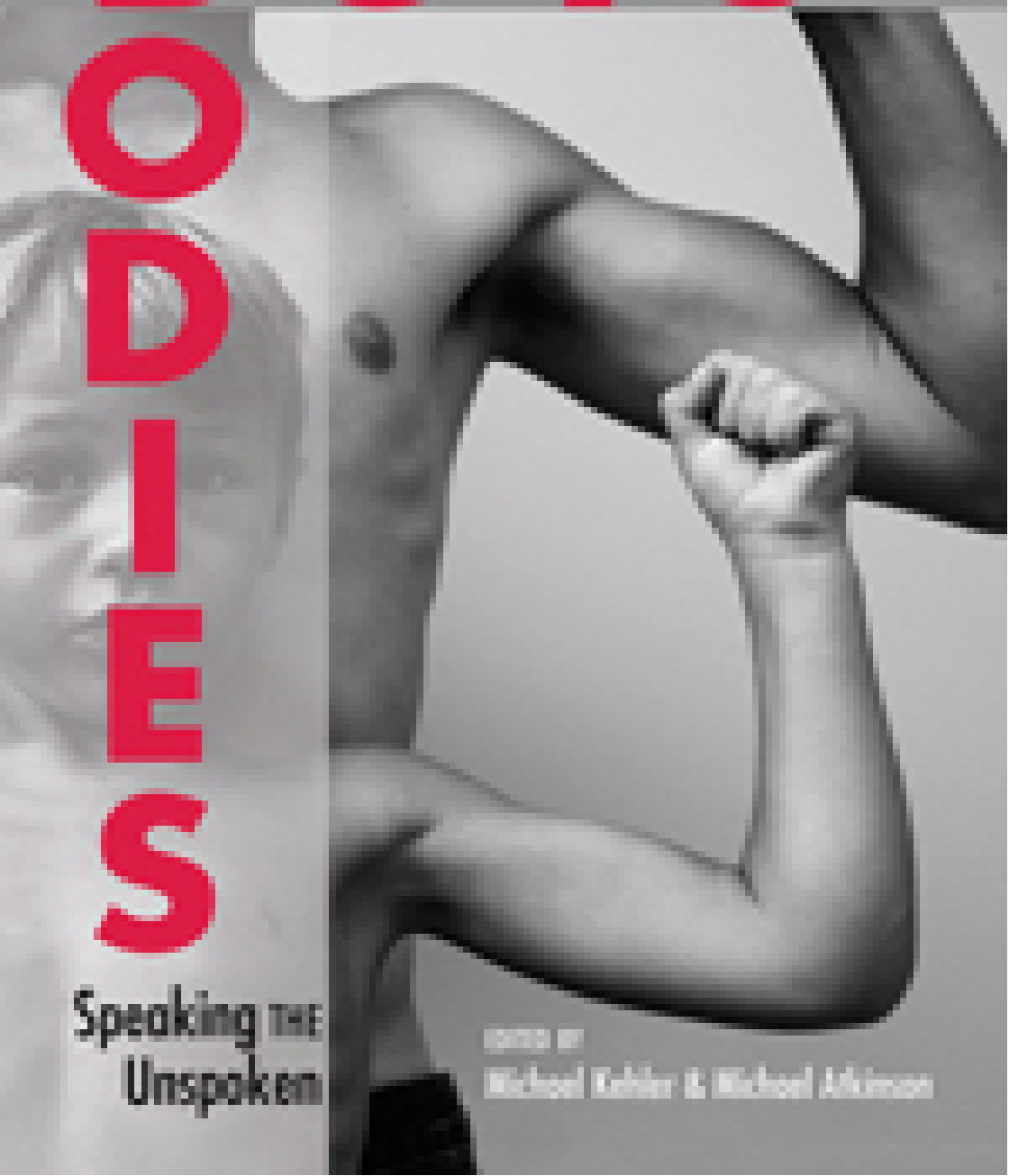
BOYS' BODIES



Speaking the Unspoken

EDITED BY
Michael Kehler & Michael Atkinson

Thinking about Boys, Bodies and Health

Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson

In the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, parents, educators and health care professionals have expressed heightened concern about inactivity and obesity among youth. Current efforts to address obesity and inactivity among youth in schools have been remiss in acknowledging how cultured gendered identities play a role in both processes, and specifically the link between a culture of masculinity and an increased visibility of boys and their bodies. A little more than a decade ago, Kirk (1998) demonstrated a clear link between the practices of school sport and physical education, and broader public views of the body and gender-appropriate behaviour. In large part, this study and others (see Drummond, 2001; Gard, 2001; Gard & Meyenn, 2000; MacPhail, Gorely, & Kirk, 2003; Ricciardelli, McCabe & Ridge, 2006) considered school sport participation and the privilege associated with groups of boys. Wellard (2009) explains that school experiences of sport and physical education have a significant impact on adolescent development of a masculine identity as well as future participation in sports. The central positioning of the body and reading of the body among adolescents, particularly in confined and prescribed spaces such as a gymnasium or locker room, significantly impacts the way the masculine body is navigated and managed. There is an ongoing and understood status accorded to "the active, able bodied, athletic male body which in turn subordinates other bodies, particularly those which are associated with physical weakness" (Wellard, 2009, p. 110). Gard and Meyenn (2000) similarly

acknowledged the body as one level at which new understandings of gender might emerge.

Given the extant, albeit spotted, research on boys, bodies and masculinities, current efforts to increase physical activity among youth has not fully addressed the bodily dividends and trade-offs associated with male participation in physical activity. This and other issues are raised in the following chapters as central to how educators might better engage and respond to all boys, not only those privileged by muscularity and physicality. We hope that by raising critical questions and proposing alternative ways for understanding inactivity among adolescent males in the physical health and education domain, educators may better respond to the valuing of bodies and particular ways for knowing and understanding masculine physical culture and its many dimensions.

The World Health Organization (2000) has identified gender (masculinity in particular) as a significant factor shaping body expectations, behaviours, and health practices. Yet, as we strive to illustrate in the chapters of this book, little is being done within the academy to address this relationship and its connection to a decline in participation in physical health education classes across many Western nations.

Considerable research has already established schools as 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 from dominant, negotiated and marginalized cultural perspectives. The current physical culture of masculinity and climate of homophobia in many schools, for example, has a potentially damaging impact and further contributes to the suppression and silencing of anxieties about body image among men and boys. At the same time, school sport consistently exalts and elevates a particular brand of 'dangerous' and ruggedly traditional masculinity; namely, one of muscularity and competitiveness. In very public and visible ways, the schooled male body, not unlike the female body, becomes a representational marker in a gendering process that valorizes certain forms of masculinities while marginalizing others. Recent calls from institutional health communities have lobbied and pressured schools to implement practices that promote healthy and active life practices "for all." Our response to concerns for youth and specifically young men who struggle with the increased attention focused on physicality, masculinity and body image, has led us to canvass the insights and recent research of national and international scholars with varied experience and expertise regarding how boys' bodies are managed as matters of public order, cultural ritual and population health.

Contributing authors to this book reflect a diverse set of research interests and backgrounds. Each has added to this book with a shared understanding

that the aim is to disengage from a mainstream health discourse that threatens to simplify both the practices and policies currently being developed to respond to inactivity among youth, masculine physical culture, concerns held by young boys about their bodies, and their marginalization within schools and elsewhere. As editors we offer this book as a vehicle for showcasing the relatively unexplored spaces of secondary school physical health and education as zones of male (physical) disciplining and contestation. Our aim is to probe the nooks and crannies of locker rooms to the recesses of the gymnasium for the narratives of a relatively unexplored population of men; namely, the boys who navigate in and out of the shadow of popular boys, and who have historically dominated and controlled these spaces. As such this book offers research-based evidence and compelling stories from the often unregulated zone of PE classrooms to provide a nuanced and textured analysis of policies, practices, and problems underlying the current rush to solve "the battle with blubber" among adolescent youth.

Given all of the above, our aims in developing this book are:

- To promote a critical examination of issues related to physical activity among adolescent youth, specifically, body image, masculinities and the intersection of these issues in the context of secondary schools.
- To foster a more nuanced and complicated picture of the types of responses to youth inactivity with a specific focus on media attention, education policy, and school curricular initiatives.
- To offer to teacher educators, teachers, policy makers, and health care professionals, a series of both practical and theoretical responses to the "obesity epidemic" debate.
- To provide an examination of the latest research-based evidence of body image research intersecting health, physical fitness, masculinities, and schooling.

In Canada, a recent report titled "It's time to unplug our kids" (2008), reflected a powerful message of how and why an increasing number of youth are inactive. Unplugging and (re)tuning our kids into a physical and vibrant world around them is imperative. The report, produced by Active Healthy Kids Canada, noted that while participation in *sport* among girls remains stable, rates of sport participation among boys is steadily decreasing. The decline of boys participating in sport, though modest, is nonetheless significant. The author speaks to sport participation. He notes that overall, in Canada, boys participate in sport at higher rates than girls. The trend, however, as youth enter teenage years, is that there is a decline in participation and an increase in inactivity among adolescent youth. The question the author raises is, "How do we engage children and youth who are already suffering

with obesity, without creating anxiety around body image?" In the chapters that follow in this book we argue, in part, that we need to extend our view to include youth who struggle to participate in physical activity but who find the barriers too formidable to step onto centre court. Adolescent men routinely bear the brunt of knowing they are somehow not made for athletics. The ability or inability as it were to demonstrate a ripped, buff or shredded masculine body leaves many boys vulnerable and open to scrutiny by a privileged and powerful few. "The approval of and respect from other men, which is the ultimate accolade of masculinity, may be withheld if the boy cannot produce a body worked to a lean muscular form" (Frost, 2003, p.67).

It is not surprising, given the increased public preoccupation with why Canada, the United States and many other nations are seeing a reduced physical activity among youth, that a book such as this has emerged. What is perhaps surprising, though, is the fact that we address issues intersecting body image, masculinity and inactivity among adolescents amidst the current discourse swirling about an "obesity pandemic." Morgan (1993), reflecting on history and the ability to problematize the gendered or embodied subject, reminds us that "it is the relatively powerless who find themselves reflecting upon their identity in society. . .only under certain situations of crisis do the relatively powerful find themselves engaging in similar processes of reflection" (p. 73). He later explains that virtually all sites or arenas are embodied by the very fact that gender, power and bodies interact in those locations. The locker room, the physical health education arena and the like are just such sites intersecting men, bodies, and the power with which they are imbued. The private domain of the locker room, the open spaces of the gymnasium, school fields and fitness zones, and the public domain of the auditorium require different types of bodily performance. We will not debate here the distinctions between the private and public domains but rather want to suggest, similar to Morgan, that some sites are open to scrutiny and the form of surveillance that imposes, defines and restricts codes of masculinity through bodily performance and expressions. How and to what degree these spaces are gendered and embodied spaces is not up for debate. Our intent is to argue that in gendered spaces such as the locker room and gymnasium, the bodies of adolescent boys and young men is integral if not central to how and what forms of masculinities are negotiated. In describing the social and psychological price athletes pay for membership in their elite cultural club, Messner (2000) argues that institutionalized racism and class intersect in schools where poor and ethnic minority males are channeled into more dangerous and oftentimes combative sports. A masculine identity, it is argued is established though aggressive sport while privileged males tend to have more options available to them and thus gradually opt out of sport. In current times many adolescent young men are opting out of physical education health but

this does not always reflect racialized or classed existences. In fact, while health reports routinely indicate a range of reasons for inactivity among youth, very little is being said about the intersection of masculinities as an explanatory factor why some boys are opting out. The prevailing assumption is that all boys enjoy gym and are actively engaged in physical education and health. Boys are *natural* athletes. Yet, as Messner (2000) reminds us, with the "decline in the practical need for physical strength in work and in warfare, representations of the muscular male body as strong, virile and powerful have taken on increasingly important ideological significance in gender relations. . .Though an athletic body is popularly thought of as natural, it is nevertheless the product of social practice" (p. 149)

In her examination of the contemporary connections and debates in physical education Penney (2007) draws further attention to the "ways in which young people are able to express gender identities in and through physical activity and sport and the pressures and expectations to express *particular* (emphasis in original) gender identities" as "highly significant aspects of the impact of physical education on lives, lifestyles and well-being" (p. 12). Her critique acknowledges a need for a greater level of inclusivity in which "physical education and sport need[s] to be a space and place within which young people are able and encouraged to openly express and celebrate their (gender, class, ethnic, cultural, sexual, embodied) identities" (p. 20). In a time when there is both private and public concern for the physical health and well-being of youth, it is not surprising that she relies on the professional responsibility of "physical education teachers and teacher educators as uniquely positioned to either disrupt or reaffirm established understandings of health, fitness, physical activity and physical abilities that typically fail to embrace the complexities of gender, ethnicity, class, and culture" (p. 20)

The first meta-section of our book concerns two main streams in physical cultural studies: obesity and body image. Chapters in the section home in on how boys in a variety of social locations and contexts internalize and embody codes of masculinity, and whether or not extant research and moral panicking about problematic (boys) bodies bears any empirical fruit. In chapter one, **Michael Gard** outlines the political dimensions of the obesity epidemic, and how the supposedly objective science of fatness is indeed replete with ideological sentiment and practice. To be sure, Gard's chapter sets an important critical and sceptical tone for the entire book. Gard carefully acknowledges worrying empirical trends in body shape and size in the United States and elsewhere, while illustrating how the rise in size and shift in body composition of some children is far more biologically, psychologically, socially and culturally complex than portrayed in pseudo-scientific obesity discourses.

Chapter two presents an impressive meta-analysis and quantitative study undertaken by **Ryan, Morrison, and Ó'Beaglaoich** on the relationship

between boys, body image and personal development over the life-course. In particular, the authors critically analyze what constitutes contemporary knowledge about the effects of mass mediated images of masculinity on physical culture by administering the Male Body Image-related Media Messages [M-INT] amongst a sample of boys. Ryan, Morrison, and Ó'Beaglaoich conclude that the drive for muscularity among young boys shows an interesting correlation with their consumption of media messages about ideal men. Inasmuch, they advocate for increased media literacy interventions at the level of school system and elsewhere. In the final chapter of this section, **David Kirk** provides a useful historical examination of physical education teacher education in Britain. His snapshot from the 1930s to the 1970s is enriched by a reflective discussion of his own biographical experiences as a student of physical education during the 1970s. Kirk examines the "self-reproducing vortex of masculinity-making" that occurs in the shadows of dominant stereotypes of physical education teachers. His chapter usefully depicts a process of negotiated masculinities that have been historically tempered by contextual and curricular restraints.

The second sub-section of the book, Enforcing Masculinities, contains four chapters which separately and collectively document how incredibly stereotypical and mythic codes of masculinity institutionally and culturally reproduce young boys in a variety of physical education and health settings. In chapter four, **Atkinson and Kehler** take readers inside the high school gym locker room to illustrate how it is an institutional zone replete with fear for boys who do not measure up to proto-typical male body images and standards. The chapter presents findings from a larger qualitative examination of why boys in particular schools in Ontario, Canada, drop out of gym class in high school as soon as they are institutionally permitted. The authors present experiential accounts of the locker room as a heterotopic space of anxiety for boys on the fringe of accepted masculinity; ultimately pointing to how the largely understudied manners by which boys police boys through physical education is a contributory factor to poor body image and sedentary lifestyles. In chapter five, **Millington and Wilson** similarly start from the empirical "ground up" to reveal how youth are active consumers of media messages and negotiate these messages in the context of gym class. The authors present school boys as far more media savvy and sensitive than typically suggested in masculinity research. The intesectionality of race and class with masculinity codes and media interpretation in the gym setting is shown quite starkly by the researchers. Important is how Millington and Wilson show how the culture of aggression and dominance in gym class is juxtaposed rather ironically by the boys against media messages about hegemonic masculinity. **Messerschmidt's** chapter six reminds readers how bullying and victimization is indeed a part of the lived realities of far too many young boys and girls. Messerschmidt

uncloaks the victimization process with emotionally moving qualitative data, and paints a chilling but familiar portrait of how physical activity, sport and school-based bullying comingle in complex and deeply gendered ways. What is especially significant about chapter six is Messerschmidt's analysis of the completely arbitrary, but massively consequential, nature of gender categories and their links with social, cultural and biological "worth" in school and elsewhere. The final chapter in this section addresses the contentious terrain of men simply "being men" in sport zones. **Light and Kentel** provoke us to reconsider the pedagogical practices of physical education, and specifically the possibilities for a non-genderist pedagogy within the context of a masculinist domain, that of sport and specifically rugby in the Australian context. Light and Kentel examine how a traditional coaching method and approach is underscored by a "dominant discourse of manliness," and thus creates a discomfort and tenuous acceptance or acquiescence among a team of rugby players to "put their bodies on the line." In this chapter they begin a dialogue that disentangles traditional pedagogical practices from normative masculinity. Building on the concept of "hard coaching" and player-centered "soft coaching," Light and Kentel raise questions from within a feminist pedagogical standpoint to propose broader possibilities in reconceived pedagogies that have the potential to unsettle particular discourses of masculinity.

The third and final sub-section of the book, Emerging/Contesting Masculinities, offers a series of international case studies examining how boys resist and contest dominant messages regarding and physical cultures of preferred masculinities. Each of the chapters in this section stresses how boys encounter and negotiate marginalized masculine identities as fringe males in cultures which still privilege historically rigid traditional masculine identities. Inasmuch, the chapters centrally engage a politics of hope regarding an acceptable, fuller panorama of masculine identities across the social landscape. In chapter eight, **Kehler** examines a sample of boys who are reluctant to participate in high school physical education. He argues that the experiences and impressions of less-than-dominant boys in grade nine PE classes highlight the tensions between wanting to be healthy while also negotiating normative and restrictive models of masculinity. Kehler highlights how codes of body idiom matter just as much for boys as they do for young girls, and how PE classes provide an important cultural battleground in the fight to produce more healthy, active and developmentally beneficial spaces for boys in the middle of a contemporary health crisis. **McCaughtry and Tischler** add a useful analysis of the experiences of young men marginalized by "privileged boys" who dominate many secondary school PE classes. In their analysis of physical health education programs at two suburban schools in the Midwestern United States, McCaughtry and Tischler examine "boys' bodies both as physical

entities and simultaneously as manifestations and metaphors of the masculine self." Their insight to the experiences of the masculine body among young men is a compelling and troubling account of the routine anxiety and fears that prevented these boys from fully participating in this context. They provide a cautionary note regarding the current trend to enforce and impose physical health education without fully understanding how boys' experiences are variously constructed around and through the masculine body. Chapter Ten provides a case study of Australian males from different social, economic and geographical locations. In this final chapter of the book, **Jessica Lee** considers the intersection between masculinities, participation in physical activity, and engagement with physical culture. In her three-year study, young men from three different schools and spanning ages from 11 to 14 were interviewed to describe their past and present participation in physical activity. Lee includes interviews from several teachers along with an analysis of the school website and physical and health education and school sport policies. Her insight reveals the ways in which physical labour and the meanings associated with physicality are variously connected to classed and gendered realities in their everyday lives. Her chapter highlights the struggles of men who continue to work against the idealization of masculine bodies and the messy and unstable meanings associated with physical activity, health and fitness.

Our book is ultimately given as a partial response to absences in the current debate regarding how to encourage youth to become active, how to energise those feeling apathetic, how to mobilize the marginalized, and how to dislodge youth from whatever may prevent them from being physically active. Our intention in developing this book and collaborating with the contributors is to begin a project aimed at understanding how and why cultures of physical inactivity are mushrooming at a time when scientists, educators, policy makers, and general publics are all too aware of the health-related consequences of such activity among populations including young boys.