

PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOL: A LOOK INTO THE BODY

A EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA NO ENSINO MÉDIO: UM OLHAR SOBRE O CORPO

LA EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA EN LA ENSEÑANZA MEDIA: UNA MIRADA SOBRE EL CUERPO

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Keywords:

Body image.
Physical Education.
Aesthetics.
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Abstract: The aims of this study were to investigate which aspects concerning to the body are stressed by teachers and to find out how they would be approached in high school Physical Education classes in Rio de Janeiro. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews with 21 teachers from distinct schools. Appearance and health were the most valued aspects concerning the body. These themes seem to appear in discussions about habits and practices related to health, sexuality and body diversity during high school physical education classes.

Palavras chave:

Imagem corporal.
Educação Física.
Estética.
Adolescente.

Resumo: Os objetivos deste estudo são investigar e discutir quais aspectos relacionados ao corpo na contemporaneidade são destacados pelos professores, assim como verificar de que maneira seriam, eventualmente, abordados nas aulas de Educação Física do ensino médio de escolas do Rio de Janeiro. Os dados foram obtidos mediante aplicação de entrevista semiestruturada com 21 professores de diferentes instituições. Observou-se que a aparência e a saúde sobressaíram como os aspectos mais valorizados no corpo. Essas temáticas parecem ser contempladas nas aulas de Educação Física no ensino médio, a partir de abordagens sobre práticas e hábitos relativos à saúde, à sexualidade e à diversidade corporal.

Palabras clave:

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Resumen: Los objetivos de este estudio fueron investigar y discutir cuáles son los aspectos relacionados al cuerpo, en la contemporaneidad, que son destacados por los profesores, además de verificar de qué manera serían, eventualmente, abordados en las clases de Educación Física de la enseñanza media de escuelas de Rio de Janeiro. Los datos han sido obtenidos mediante entrevista semiestruturada realizada a 21 profesores de diferentes instituciones. Se detectó que la apariencia y la salud son los aspectos del cuerpo más valorados. Estas temáticas parecen ser contempladas en las clases de Educación Física en la enseñanza media a partir de abordajes sobre prácticas y hábitos relativos a la salud, la sexualidad y la diversidad corporal.

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1 INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly argued that the body, in addition to its biological dimension, is built through social and cultural integration and influenced by that historical process. Le Breton (2011) highlights the extent to which culture marks the body and its practices. For Ortega (2008, p. 210), “although there are structural and anthropological invariants of human corporeality, the inseparability of body and environment affirms the importance of the social, cultural and historical environment in human experience”. Thus, the influences of social, economic and cultural environments on man’s ways of seeing his and others’ bodies enable a number of variations on how to understand and treat the body.

Physical Education teachers can be considered social actors who contribute to define meanings and significances that historically permeate the body (LÜDORF, 2008). In education, Physical Education is one of the disciplines devoted to promoting an understanding of values and meanings that are implicit in body practices present in society.

According to literature in the area (Soares *et al.*, 1992; BRACHT, 1999; CASTELLANI FILHO, 2003; SOARES, 2004), the field of Physical Education has undergone historical influences that ultimately shape currently coexisting views on the body. Authors such as Russo (2005) and Lüdorf (2010) stress the need to rethink Physical Education at an educational level, considering issues related to the body in contemporary times, since young people are again interested in topics such as health, physical activity, body care, appearance, among others.

Dissatisfaction with one’s body during adolescence, for example, raises more and more interest within the scientific community. Damasceno *et al.* (2006), Conti *et al.* (2009), Matias *et al.* (2010), Palma *et al.* (2013), Fortes *et al.* (2013) found worrying levels of body dissatisfaction, especially among girls. Matias *et al.* (2010) state that teenagers’ view of their own bodies should be handled carefully so as to avoid later problems such as eating disorders, bulimia, anorexia nervosa, obesity and depression. Maldonado (2006) and Palma *et al.* (2013) suggest that School Physical Education’s approach to topics involving the current body standard might create opportunities for reflection among young people about their bodies.

National documents also argue that issues related to the body should be addressed in high school. Although the National Curriculum References for Secondary Education (BRASIL, 2000) have not directly stressed the need to address the body and its patterns at that education level, the National Curriculum Guidelines for Secondary Education (BRASIL, 2006) advocated that Physical Education teachers should debate the issue.

Therefore, it is important to discuss, among other issues, aspects related to appreciation for young people’s appearance. According to Assis *et al.* (2003) and Kraye, Ingledew and Iphofen (2008), physical, sexual, cognitive and emotional transitions occur during youth. Apart from these adolescent characteristics, Lipovetski and Serroy (2013) say that today’s society dedicated to hyperconsumerism promotes self-disruption in lifestyle and disorganization of eating habits, while stressing the thinness standard. Such paradoxes coexist today, since the ideology of health and body perfection suggests that health problems stem from character flaws, lack of will or even individual weakness (ORTEGA, 2008).

Such issues become worrying, particularly with regard to adolescence, when concerns about the body gain magnitude because of the changes associated with it. Thus, Physical Education teachers also play a key role in questioning and discussing those issues as part of the educational process. However, studies focused on Physical Education teachers' views about the aspects involving the body in contemporary society and also the ways to approach them in class are still incipient in literature. Although today's somatic culture is a current and extremely important issue to be discussed, few studies on high school Physical Education look into it.

Therefore, this study aims at investigating and discussing which aspects related to the body in contemporary society are stressed by teachers, as well as observing how they would be possibly addressed in Physical Education classes at Rio de Janeiro' secondary schools.

2 METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS

Mainly characterized by in-depth analysis, qualitative research is primarily concerned with meanings, opinions and representations about a certain phenomenon (TURATO, 2003). This investigation used the interpretative approach from its data collection to its analysis, as well as researched-researcher interaction, which essential for understanding certain research questions (THOMAS, NELSON, SILVERMAN; 2007).

In an attempt to know the opinions of high school Physical Education teachers in Rio de Janeiro, taking into account the variability resulting from aspects such as location, type of school (public or private), gender, among others, a strategy was developed to approach teachers as described below.

Firstly, we asked relevant agencies involved with educational institutions for permission to conduct the study (State Department of Education – SEEDUC/RJ, federal and private schools). After we obtained access to school units, direct contact was made with coordinating bodies and relevant sectors in order to explain the study and obtain indications of Physical Education teachers working with secondary education. It is important to mention that we visited private and public schools in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro in order to reflect the possible social, economic and cultural differences existing between neighborhoods in South Rio, North Rio, West Rio and the Baixada Fluminense, in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Secondly, we invited to participate in the study teachers who fulfilled the following criteria: having graduated in Physical Education, working in public and/or private schools, and having at least one high school class.

Of the 21 teachers¹ who agreed to participate, eight graduated from private institutions and only four had no graduate level training. We also observed the prevalence of male teachers (15 volunteers), as the following table shows.

¹ In data discussion, 21 teachers were identified by alphanumeric codes (T1 to T21).

Table 1 – Profile of subjects

Teacher	Sex	Age	Graduate studies		School	Time in teaching (years)	Region
			Shorter (certificate)	Longer (diploma)			
T1	M	46	X		State	25	North Rio
T2	M	46	X	X	State	8	North Rio
T3	M	42	X		Federal	20	South Rio
T4	F	43	X	X	Federal	25	South Rio
T5	F	48	X	X	Federal	25	South Rio
T6	M	51	X		State	26	North Rio
T7	F	29			Private	3	North Rio
T8	M	25			Private	1	Baixada Fluminense
T9	M	40	X		Private	25	Baixada Fluminense
T10	M	45	X	X	Federal	23	South Rio
T11	M	45		X	Federal	23	North Rio
T12	F	35	X		State	10	North Rio
T13	F	59			Private	34	West Rio
T14	F	50	X		Federal	28	South Rio
T15	M	42			State	21	West Rio
T16	M	37	X		State	14	North Rio
T17	M	50	X		State	29	North Rio
T18	M	49	X		Private	25	West Rio
T19	M	48	X		Federal	21	North Rio
T20	M	31	X		State	10	Baixada Fluminense
T21	M	46	X		State	23	Baixada Fluminense

Source: Authors

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain teachers' statements. The question script² was previously validated with participation of PhDs holders specializing in the object of the study. A pilot survey was conducted later to verify the adequacy of the script to the desired goals.

The criterion to define the number of respondents was the principle of "saturation", which determines interruption of inclusion of new subjects in the study when information started to be repeated, i. e., data variation is reduced (GASKELL, 2003).

Data was treated through content analysis proposed by Turato (2003), based on the principles of repetition (frequency with which the topic is mentioned) and relevance (not always the most commonly mentioned, but important for the purpose of the study).

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Public Health Studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (IESC/UFRJ) according to

² The issues addressed in the study include: 1. In your opinion, what body aspect is most appreciated today? 2. Have you had an opportunity to discuss body issues with your students? What kind of issues were discussed? Were students interested? 3. Do you think it interferes with the view that students have or should have on the body? How? 4. Have you noticed any dissatisfaction behavior in your students towards their own bodies? If this is the case, what would/did you tell them if they came to you for help?

Report 09/2010. Subjects in the present study signed a Free and Clear Consent Form to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of information.

3 DATA DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Based on the data collected, we found that **appearance** and **health** stand out as the most appreciated body aspects, according to respondents. In the word of Le Breton (2011, p. 282), “concern for health and shape becomes the cornerstone of values in Modernity”.

Appreciation of **appearance**, which stood out in teachers’ discourses, refers to strictly physical issues and is related to the ideal appearance and the search for the body considered beautiful:

[...] Today, if your body is not within the “normal model” you feel somewhat rejected, different; I think that concern real, it’s strong [...]. (T5)

In society, the body is seen only as something to be exposed and admired [...]. (T7)

Similarly, it is observed that body appearance comes as an important element for social belonging. Teachers’ statements suggest body perception as something separated from man, which needs to be constantly improved and cared for, as already pointed by Le Breton (2011).

In addition, body standards established by the media about the body image to be built are considerably influent. Castro (2007) and Mahmud and Crittenden (2007) corroborate that view when they comment that the media influences individuals’ beliefs about their own bodies, and those who do not condone that pattern of beauty can be neglected or stigmatized by society. According to Goldenberg (2006), body beauty is also an ideal to be pursued by subjects in contemporary society.

Such social imposition of standardized body model(s) would apparently define types of bodies to be developed for achieving success in social relations, which is somehow criticized by teachers:

[...] We live in a society where there is pressure for a perfect body, especially in Rio, where people go to the beach, that which kids famously call “the beach test”: to see who is “fatty”, to see who is “chubby”. That’s pressure from society [...]. (T3)

[...] appearance is highly appreciated today; being beautiful, being in perfect shape, being well, that is appreciated by the media that impose it on our society today. I think it affects young people a lot. (T8)

[...] that perfect body, that model we realize that is imposed on us. Not only in TV programs related to sport; it’s general: soap operas, movies [...]. (T20)

Appearance concerns with physical perfection has been the subject of many studies (GARCIA, LEMOS, 2003; GARCIA, 2005; KOWALSKI; FERREIRA, 2007; LACERDA, 2007; MENDES, 2009). Teacher’s discourses are apparent critical to today’s concern with appearance. That is consistent with Lüdorf’s (2008) view on a socially imposed beauty standard that should be criticized by Physical Education teachers in their professional work.

Thus, the cult of the body is censored by respondents as their discourses deny it or ironically mention that they do not share that quest for the body considered perfect. For example, they use Brazilian slang for body shape such as “*sarado*”, “*tanquinho*”, “*bumbum arrebitado*”, “*cheinho*”, among others. Given that scenario, it is clear that the Physical Education teachers studied criticize the phenomenon of cult to the body.

According to teachers, another aspect valued in the body is **health**, addressing the conditions of being and staying healthy:

[...] I already see that some people are more concerned about this health thing. Health used to be something of that guy who was sent by the doctor. [...] Not today. Today they come looking for (physical activity) for the sake of health. So (the pursuit of health) increased a little and I think that's good for us. (T18)

These speeches are usually linked to a search for health as a result of medical recommendation or other habits related to it. Therefore, the health ideal to be pursued emerges in a positive way in teachers' discourse, so there is social appreciation of the desire to be and feel healthy. Therefore, Bagrichevsky (2009) says that today health takes on the status of "lifestyle", where all risk behaviors should be avoided.

However, discourses of teachers T14 and T18, for example, which fit this category, include the need to oppose health and appearance, i. e. appreciation of health is usually linked to non-appreciation of appearance. Thus, Castro (2007) argues that, by and large, care for health is something to be proud of, while concern focused essentially on physical beauty can be considered futile. Therefore, there seems to be greater social acceptance when "being healthy" is more important than "appearing beautiful". Silva, Palma and Lüdorf (2013) also found that Physical Education teachers often see health as something more positive than appearance.

We should also note the historical moment/context in which a social actor becomes a key element in discussions involving the most appreciated aspects in the body today. Teachers claim that the importance of what we think about health today can be compared to that promotion of body beauty that used to be exalted long ago.

Thus, although appreciation of appearance and health emerged in the discourse of teachers as today's most appreciated body aspects, discussions conducted by them in high school vary when it comes to the body.

Surprisingly, when asked about the existence of opportunities for discussions related to the body with their high school students, with very few exceptions, teachers said those moments were not included in class planning. Rather, discussions take place only when they arise in daily classroom situations, as a result of issues raised by the media, such as anorexia, steroid use, some kind of body dissatisfaction or general doubts related to Physical Education that are raised by more than one student. That is, such factors seem to drive debates on body topics only occasionally.

When they occur, those talks focus primarily on **health practices and habits**, i. e., discussions are focused on teachers' guidance on several behaviors and attitudes that students should have in their everyday lives, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

[...] I try to raise issues (with students). I've just spoken about anorexia, so now, with the recent death of that model, which was all over the headlines, [...] I try to raise issues, talk to them, show; they come to me. I try to leave that channel opened (teacher-student relationship), and they come to me for their doubts. (T1)

[...] Earlier this year they worked on a project about energy, food consumption [...] then they did a survey on food, vitamins, good things and bad things that certain foods provides, if you don't eat or if you eat too much of it, that is, trying to raise their awareness. (T7)

[...] We work with [...] a book that speaks about physical activity related to some specific cases [...]: diabetes, osteoporosis and such, so we talk about all that, and

since they are high school students [...] and are very concerned about their college entrance examination, they show great interest, even because of the relation of those issues with biology. (T9)

Kunz (2007) suggests that Physical Education is justified mainly through teachings involving notions of health, which, according to Bracht *et al.* (2005), would possibly drive students away from so-called risk behaviors. To Devide (2003), school age, that is, when they are still young, is the ideal time for the critical incorporation of healthy practices and habits towards a healthy adulthood.

Practices like being physically active in order to mitigate and/or prevent disease, taking care of the body throughout life, being concerned with posture and a balanced diet are some examples of “being healthy” that teachers said they discuss in their classes with high school students:

I try to say that it is important for them, especially that they should prepare, so that if they have a weight problem [...] it is important that they are aware of that and try to solve that problem in the best possible way so that they can have a healthy life. [...] Nutritional re-education, postural re-education, physical activity [...]. (T1)

What I try to tell them (students) is that they should always take care of themselves, not only when summer is coming, they should have regular physical activity. If you are working on your health, if you are being properly oriented [...] appearance will end up happening naturally. (T3)

Therefore, the discussion on health practices and habits in high school is consistent with teachers' apparent perception about the most valued aspects in the body now, as seen in the previous discussion on health. Therefore, teachers try to address, albeit not systematically, contemporary topics (thinness, obesity, etc.) in their classes, often from a future perspective of care after students' leave school. The growing concern for health can lead subjects to devote increasing attention to their bodies and other practices involving the rhythm of life (LE BRETON, 2011).

Furthermore, body appearance is mentioned again to argue in favor of health, probably because teachers mention that the pursuit of an ideal body might threaten young people's health. The National Curriculum Guidelines for Secondary Education (BRASIL, 2006) point out that one of Physical Education's educational challenges at that school level is precisely to enable young people to become critical towards exaggerated cult of the body.

In addition, **sexuality** also emerges as another issue connected to the body that has been addressed by high school teachers:

[...] I talk to them (students) about pregnancy, especially early pregnancy, boy-girl relationships [...]. (T1)

[...] they (students) often speak of the body's relationship with dating. (The student says :) “I just want to date cute girls”. Girls only want to date “cute”, “strong” boys, right? And that's a requirement, man! It's amazing, that's a central issue, you know? (T3)

[...] I usually explain how (students) have to use their bodies, they have to know how to use their bodies, including the sex part, hygiene [...] they have [...] sex matters [...] the topic obviously arises, but I'm not a sex education teacher, right? But body hygiene helps to understand it. I even explained the difference between men and women regarding, so to speak, the body. (P13)

[...] I give them tips (warnings) about sexuality, because their bodies are going from childhood to adulthood. Their bodies are changing, so you have to give tips, what can be done, what can't, each thing at its time. (T15)

The idea of sexuality addressed in this study is similar to the approach of Prado and Ribeiro (2010, p. 409): “[...] it can be best understood as an (overlapping) set of biological aspects, beliefs, ideologies, desires, affections, sexual manifestations and practices’, which are largely defined by social and cultural aspects”. Therefore, we seek to extend the concept beyond the essentially biological view of the body linked to sex because, according to Heilborn (2003) and Grossi (1998), sexuality’s meanings may differ among distinct social groups.

That category covers sexuality-related topics that are addressed by teachers with their high school students, such as teen pregnancy, sexual relations, body hygiene, information on anatomical differences between sexes, body changes in adolescence, as well as discussions about prejudice related to sexual choices.

Thus, body appreciation often re-emerges in teachers’ discourses as an important element in affection relationships between young people, while student’s concern with appearance crosses sexuality issues as body attraction becomes crucial in interpersonal relationships during puberty.

Therefore, although Physical Education teachers seem to play an important role in clarifying issues involving sexuality, they focus on informal moments and individualized conversations rather than on actual class discussions. For Goellner (2010), addressing the issue of sexuality means favoring the establishment of subjects’ identity – in this case, students. However, Prado and Ribeiro (2010) argue that there is still little discussion on the topic in Physical Education.

Another issue discussed with high school students, according to teachers, is **body diversity**:

[...] Look, we’ll talk with students about what is possible. [...] So [...] when conflict arises, when we do some activity where some kind of conflict emerges [...] or bullying, with the “chubby” student, the “big one”, the “black” student, the “toothy” kid, we use those moments to work on these contradictions. [...] We try to work on self-assertion, on improving self-esteem, working with them on body awareness, that they have different bodies [...] (T10)

[...] If a classmate makes any mistake, three, four, five students will criticize that colleague right away. They will say that he or she was weak to throw the ball, his serve was weak, because he’s not strong, he didn’t get the ball because he is clumsy, because he can’t run, because he’s no good, because he’s a “shorty”. [...] So we have to stop and show it to them. [...] So if my student says he’s short and I don’t I take that moment to talk with him [...] I often stop the activity, I stop the game to call students’ attention on talk about something they said about others [...] we have to stop, because in Physical Education students are exposing themselves all the time. And what they often fear is just that. (T17)

Teachers’ discourses show their intention to discuss, during high school Physical Education classes, issues involving body acceptance (of self and others), respect for differences, whether they are physical, intellectual or related to skills, and demystify socially preconceived ideas that cause conflicts between genders. That practice is consistent with otherness – a principle that informs the intercultural perspective of education proposed by Oliveira and Daolio (2010), focused on fighting prejudice and sectarianism on understanding physical diversity.

Therefore, attention should be paid to the previously observed importance given to the body as a means of social acceptance. The “body type” seems to define an important aspect to be discussed with high school youth at puberty, whose concern with the body can be considered inherent to the physical changes common to that period of life (DAMASCENO *et al*, 2006). To Lüdorf (2008), by working with values inscribed in the body and rooted in culture, and by not

being restricted to technical and biological references, the Physical Education teacher would be practicing precisely the principles that govern what the author calls “socio-bodily education”.

As can be seen, stereotypes such as thin vs. fat, high vs. low, beautiful vs. ugly, skilled vs. unskilled, among others, appear to be the scenario for debate in the process of teaching and learning Physical Education in high school.³ Thus, reductionism of seeing “others” only for their visible characteristics (physical attributes of purely aesthetic ideals), which create stereotypes, may be addressed with students through dialogue about values and attitudes based on respect for difference (OLIVEIRA; DAOLIO, 2010).

4 CONCLUSIONS

In seeking to understand and discuss what aspects related to the body in contemporary times are stressed by teachers in high school Physical Education classes, from the perspective of teachers’ themselves, appearance and health stand out as the currently most appreciated aspects in Rio de Janeiro’s reality.

Therefore, those issues seem to permeate discussions about the body that occasionally take place in the discipline of Physical Education in different schools. In addition, some themes stood out, such as health practices and habits, sexuality and body diversity.

While these issues are demands of today’s society that deserve space in classes offered by Physical Education teachers and are in students’ interest, and are somehow addressed by teachers interviewed, such discussions do not occur systematically nor are they part of the discipline’s planning in high school. Instead, they are treated informally or in individual conversations.

Therefore, we suggest that further studies investigate field observations in order to verify the emergence of possible elements that justify, explain or confirm the relationship between discourses and effective educational practice.

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³ Bullying sometimes arises as a backdrop to raise students’ awareness about body appearance ideals.

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