

A picture of health in schools

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Feeling comfortable and confident in sport, health, or PE can be very difficult for some young people who can be seen as a 'risk' of becoming obese. Young people from ethnic minorities, especially girls, are more likely to be physically inactive and unhealthy.

This perception needs to be addressed and challenged in school physical education (PE) according to research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which shows how school provision could make use of visual approaches in developing [young people's](#) critical learning about the body.

When Dr Laura Azzarito served as Senior Lecturer at Loughborough University, she worked with 14 and 15 year olds in multi-cultural [urban schools](#) in the Midlands using digital cameras to compile 'visual diaries' of their experiences in health and [physical activity](#).

Parts of the findings have been presented at school-based art exhibitions, community-based arts centres, and the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester. These exhibitions included students' own photographs and words that captured their ways of seeing, discussing and reflecting upon the significance of physical activity in their everyday lives.

A key theme that emerged from the research is the ways in which young people saw and talked about themselves as 'sporting bodies'. Typically, one male student selected photographs of himself in which he displayed shooting skills in basketball and ball control in football. Another student provided a technical narrative, with his pictures portraying him

performing different tennis strokes as might be found in a training manual or magazine.

By contrast, the diaries of South Asian girls did not tend to include images of themselves participating in sports that were organised, competitive or required highly specialised actions. Instead, their diaries showed how, for example, they move in the world with friends and family, or bond with girlfriends through recreational sport and physical activity.

These accounts highlighted visible gender, race and social class boundaries. All of the South Asian girls saw themselves as recreational, contrary to stereotypically passive or subordinated South Asian ideas of femininity. More generally, the boys and girls taking part in the study saw themselves as 'moving bodies' given the educational and economic resources available to them, rather than the 'bodies at risk' associated with health scares.

Azzarito commented: "Despite calls for a curriculum that encourages greater physical literacy, schools don't provide educational spaces in which young people can think critically about the messages they receive concerning body, health and physical activity. School PE provision could make good use of the visual in developing young people's learning about the body and in their imagining of who they want to become. It could be used by teachers to help young people understand the role of the media on the development of their physicality."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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