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## Developmental discourses in school physical education

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*Developmental  
Discourses  
In  
School  
Physical Education*

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

From

The University of Wollongong

by

Lisette Burrows

BPhEd, BA, PGrad Dip Arts (Education) (Otago)

Faculty of Education  
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## *Abstract*

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This poststructuralist study critically examines the nature and function of developmental discourses in New Zealand school physical education. Since the inception of formal schooling in New Zealand, physical educators have insisted that physical education can and does assist children to develop their physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual selves. These disciplinary claims provide the conceptual foundation upon which the profession rests. They legitimate particular professional and research practices, dispositions toward children and relationships between students and teachers. This thesis explores the historical and contemporary discourses about child development that physical education theorists and practitioners have drawn on to argue for a central role for physical education in the development of children. Despite the resonance of orthodox disciplinary claims with our commonsense understandings about child development, there are good reasons for subjecting these claims to close scrutiny.

Drawing extensively on poststructural social theory and the insights of Michel Foucault, in particular, the thesis interrogates the 'regimes of truth' which have contributed to the incorporation of developmental discourses in school physical education throughout history. It argues that developmental explanations of human change have shaped the way contemporary physical education theorists have come to think about the 'child' and his/her 'development'. It also argues that when discourses of child development are examined within different social, cultural, political, economic and historical contexts, the truth status of those regimes is substantially ruptured. Appealing to a relatively recent branch of psychological study - critical psychology - this thesis problematises orthodox conceptualisations of the twin objects of developmental psychological enquiry - 'the child' and 'development'. The study shows how commitments to an individualised conception of 'the child' and a sequential, hierarchical pattern of 'development' construct the child at the centre of physical education practice in ways which privilege one, narrowly conceived version of 'childhood', over the possibility of multiple, diverse 'childhoods'.

A detailed analysis of two recent New Zealand physical education syllabi is used to show how ideas about who children are, and how they develop, remain embedded in the practices of contemporary physical education curriculum writers. This analysis suggests that developmental discourses are not merely intellectually interesting, but also yield consequences in the realm of practice. Discourses of 'child development' construct particular subjectivities and power relations in schooling which normalise and exclude many children.

Results of the study indicate that although developmental discourses remain entrenched in much of the practice of the discipline, there are 'spaces' or 'conditions of possibility' opening up in new physical education syllabi which may enable teachers and students to experience and practise child development differently. In addition, the study suggests several theoretical and empirical research routes which could assist in a re-conceptualisation of the *raison d'être* of school physical education - the 'developing child'.

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