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'Break the rules or quit the job': physical education teachers' experiences of physical contact in their teaching practice

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ABSTRACT

Physical contact between teachers and students in physical education (PE) has been a troubling, complex and unsolved issue. Research has shown that PE teachers struggle with high levels of fear, insecurity and anxiety when it comes to physical contact with students. However, most of the research conducted so far has focused on a few countries and in regard to the dominant no-touch societal discourse related to sexual connotations. Research from other countries on PE-related touch and other non-sexual physical contact topics is still missing from the literature. This paper aims to explore touch within the PE arena in Argentina and France. Data were generated with a group of eight PE teachers, four from France and four from Argentina. Results suggest that even though teachers were well aware of the widely spread discourse regarding sexual harassment, they discussed the concerns of touch in PE in different ways. Touch was considered necessary for both emotional support and the avoidance and treatment of injuries. In some cases, teachers were concerned about the admissibility of touch involving students with religious beliefs, and some acts of violence. The conclusions of this study reveal a shift in the 'risks' surrounding teacher-student physical contact, and the less-discussed presence of risks other than those related to sexual implications when considering other countries. The conclusions also revolved around the changes of PE teachers' professional subjectivities over the last few decades.

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Introduction

The overall interest of this article is to identify the tensions evident concerning touching behaviours in physical education (PE) contexts. There has been an increasing public preoccupation with inter-generational interaction (Piper et al., 2006) and the subsequent 'problematic' implications associated with physical contact between teachers and students. A climate of fear, risk, moral panic and blame have largely guided behaviours in educational contexts (Bauman, 2000b; Beck, 1992; Douglas, 1994; Lash et al., 1996), leading to an 'anti-touch trend', which influences both policy and practice. PE teachers need to be constantly arguing now for the benefits of having physical contact in their classes, not just for pedagogical reasons, but also for humanistic arguments. Empathy, care and developing as a human being include physical interaction (Öhman, 2017), and by suppressing physical contact, we might be at risk of creating a de-humanised society.

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The production of a 'safe child' and a 'safe teacher' has become a dominant feature of the daily work within schools, and PE teachers are confused about being around the young people they teach (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Fletcher, 2013; Öhman, 2017; Piper, 2015; Piper et al., 2013a). A main concern for PE teachers is the fear of being suspected of inappropriate touching behaviour or being accused of sexual harassment and molestation (Fletcher, 2013; Öhman, 2017). Sexuality creates sexual imagining (Nayak & Kehily, 2006), which serves to define the 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate'; 'normal' and 'deviant'; and 'moral' and 'immoral' (Piper et al., 2012). The no-touch discourse has been received differently in Western societies, and research shows that concerns about physical contact and levels of anxiety vary in different countries (Piper, 2015; Piper et al., 2013a). There is also more research on the field of intergenerational touch in the U.K. (Piper & Smith, 2003), the U.S. (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008), New Zealand (Jones, 2004), Australia (McWilliam, 1999) and Sweden (Caldeborg et al., 2019; Öhman, 2017) than in other countries, such as Argentina and France. Notably, in Spain, touching school students is common practice and considered as something positive (Varea et al., 2018; Varea & González-Calvo, 2021). Field (1999) also conducted a comparative study of touching in primary school environments in France and the U.S. and noted that North American children are touched less by adults, and are generally more aggressive than their French counterparts.

For a PE professional who teaches in the U.K. or U.S.A., the risks are higher when it comes to false accusations regarding physical contact with students than for a PE professional who teaches in countries such as France and Argentina, both of which are more accustomed to a higher proximity culture. When exploring different cultures, it is also necessary to understand tolerance levels towards harassment. Nevertheless, the issue of touching or no-touching remains a troubling, complex and unsolved issue in PE. In line with Andrzejewski and Davis (2008, p. 793), we agree that there is a need for research that focuses on how teachers assess and negotiate risks, and that 'connections between touch behaviour, teacher-student relationship quality, and student achievement need to be explored'.

We want to shed new light on the question of touch by focusing on two countries, Argentina and France, where there is a lack of English-published research on the field of intergenerational touch. In this sense, this paper aims to contribute to both the literature on intergenerational touch and a more multifaceted understanding of physical contact in PE. The research questions that guided this investigation are: In what ways are teachers' fears, dangers and concerns regarding physical contact expressed? What risks are present regarding the use of physical contact in teaching situations?

Background

PE teachers have, in general, demonstrated great awareness in relation to physical contact with students. PE teachers are indeed aware of the public debate concerning physical contact between adults and children in educational settings and the risks of touching (Fletcher, 2013; Garratt et al., 2013; Öhman, 2017; Piper et al., 2013a). There is often confusion and worry about what is acceptable in terms of physical contact, and there is a growing fear of being accused of sexual harassment and the possible consequences if there is any misunderstanding (Fletcher, 2013; Öhman, 2017). PE teachers are sometimes confused and fearful of their own practice due to contemporary guidelines in relation to the prevailing no-touch societal discourse (Piper et al., 2013a, 2013b). These teachers are also insecure within their own practice, in regard to how they should behave around and interact with the children they teach.

There is evidence to suggest that although both male and female PE teachers are aware of the constructed risks related to physical contact, this fear is more accentuated among male teachers (Öhman, 2017). Men's vulnerability is clearly identified in a number of studies (e.g. Johnson, 2000, 2013), and male PE teachers often have a higher level of fear in relation to possible allegations of sexual harassment. Male teachers also seem to be more 'on guard' than their female counterparts (Öhman, 2017). However, several studies point out that physical contact with students is also a growing problem for female PE teachers (Piper et al., 2006). The contemporary climate of fear and

anxiety stems from guidelines and policies regarding the safety of children, child abuse and no-touch discourses in society. That is, the fear and anxiety of being viewed as suspicious, or being falsely accused of inappropriate behaviour (Garratt et al., 2013; Öhman, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016).

Some PE teachers have shown resistance to the child protection discourse and no-touch policies by incorporating downplaying-oriented strategies in relation to physical contact, such as acting as though physical contact is a natural part of the subject (Öhman, 2017). Physical contact is also clearly considered both highly relevant and necessary in teaching PE. Teachers have claimed that physical contact is needed 'to get it right', for safety (e.g. support in gymnastics and protection against accidents), communication, caring, relationship building and to show compassion (Anderson et al., 2018; Öhman, 2017; Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017).

The field of proximity has historically investigated the differences regarding proximity, touch and personal space among countries. Researchers in this field have concluded that Latin Americans prefer closer social interaction distances than individuals from North America or Northern Europe (Aiello, 1987; Aiello & Thompson, 1980; Altman & Vinsel, 1977; Sussman & Rosenfeld, 1982). Further, Freedman (1975) claimed that '[w]hites in the United States, Canada and England stand far apart, Europeans stand somewhat closer and South Americans stand closer still' (p. 72). Similarly, Schefflen and Ashcraft (1976) stated that Latin Americans tend to huddle together at a very close distance. Significantly, while there are major differences regarding physical contact and proximity in different cultures, most of the research related to PE and sport contexts has been conducted in U.S.A., U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Sweden. In so doing, countries that may have other proximity culture, such as Argentina and France, are still missing in the literature.

'Risk' and the shift of risk

As early as 2003, Piper and Smith claimed that one possible way of understanding the phenomenon of (no-) touching in educational settings was to consider this issue in terms of Beck's (1992) account of a risk society, where the logic of wealth production has been replaced by risk avoidance and management. Beck (1992) first described 'risk society' as an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialisation involving hidden politics, ethics and morality. Over the decades, risk and blame have largely been implemented in Western contexts (Bauman, 2000a; Douglas, 1994; Lash et al., 1996) to discipline this potential danger by manipulating and eradicating ambivalence (Bauman, 1991) so that life's eventualities are subjected to human control in the attempt to avoid all risk (Giddens, 1991). According to Beck (1992) the 'risks' are managed – not by managing and distributing the 'goods' (e.g. the benefits of touching children) – but by managing and distributing the 'bads' (e.g. false accusations), and the subsequent actions are very much focused on danger (e.g. avoiding touching children).

Following Beck (1992), there must be a distinction between already destructive consequences and the potential element of risks. Risks essentially express a future that is to be prevented. For example, in relation to physical contact between adults and children in educational contexts, we can understand (through Beck's framework) what is happening in school PE, where there have been cases of abuse, physical violence and sexual harassment. While this must be prevented to happen again, the risks are now both real and unreal, as they include the projected danger of the future. We become active today in order to prevent problems and crises of tomorrow, that is, the 'not-yet event' as a stimulus for action (Beck, 1992). While this is understandable and to some extent sensible, we need to examine the collateral consequences of purposefully avoiding the risks and dangers that may arise in the future.

Physical contact between children and adults can at times be considered a potential threat to children's security. Therefore, touching a child has become risky behaviour (Fletcher, 2013; Öhman, 2017; Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017; Piper, 2014) and, by extension, teaching has become a risky business (Jones, 2004). In a hyper risk-aware era, school staff and administrators have been influenced by the societal move towards a narrative of prevention, and thus educational practices

have undergone extreme changes in adhering to contemporary imperatives of restriction (Fletcher, 2013). In so doing, schools are taking measures today to prevent or thwart tomorrow's problems and crises, and as a consequence, the society is in a constant state of concern. Accordingly, we are generally interested in exploring which risks are present regarding the use of physical contact in teaching situations. We are particularly interested in how PE teachers from France and Argentina deal with the risks that they face, and in what ways are teachers' fears, dangers and concerns expressed.

Methods

Two male and two female PE teachers from each country (Argentina and France) with different ages and years of experience were selected for the interviews. The participants were teaching a variety of levels in both, middle and high school. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 25 years and schools were from low and middle socio-economic backgrounds.

The contact with these teachers was facilitated because of our extended networks in these two countries. Four broad questions were used to guide the dialogue, but the interviews were largely conversational in style. Some of the questions asked included: 'In what way has the public anxiety associated with physical contact between children and adults affected your work as a teacher?'; 'In which types of pedagogical situations do you think physical contact and touching are pedagogically relevant, necessary and reasonable in a PE context?'; 'When do you use physical contact in your teaching?'; and 'What do you think would be lost if we were given a set of rules that prohibited physical contact in PE?'. Interviews were conducted both online and in-person between 2017 and 2019.

Since research on intergenerational touch has mainly been carried out in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, U.K. and U.S.A., we want to shed new light on the question of touch by focusing on Argentina and France. While the results are discussed based on similarities and differences, the focus is on each country, rather than doing a comparative analysis per se. Due to cultural differences, the various forms of physical contact can be perceived, experienced and understood differently. Accordingly, Papaefstathiou (2015, p. 99) claims that 'cultural differences constitute a challenging reality [...] as it seems that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach may not function efficiently'. In so doing, we want to emphasise the need for viewpoints regarding teachers' experiences of physical contact to achieve a more multi-faceted discussion and understanding of touch, risks and safety in PE teachers' pedagogical work.

Data were analysed in two phases. Inductive content analysis was employed (Patton, 2015) to identify themes from the data, using first- and second-cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2009). Then, in drawing on the relevant theoretical concepts of risk, fear, danger and concerns, a final classification process was carried out, resulting in the identification of different themes. In the analysis, we use the theoretical concepts from Beck (1992) and asked what risks, fears, dangers and concerns are at play when it comes to physical contact between teachers and students in teaching situations. For example, in the first cycle of the analysis, touch other than sexual was identified from the data. Then, in the second cycle, touch for emotional support was constructed. For example, the category 'touch and emotional support' was associated with Beck's notion of risk as avoidance and management (of touch), and to the 'not-yet event' as a stimulus for action. When teachers used phrases like 'extremely careful', 'issued a claim' and 'as soon as the activity involves the body it [physical contact] becomes complicated', we interpreted these statements in line with Beck, that is, in terms of risks that the teachers face. Finally, when applying Beck's concept of risk, we discussed the risks and concerns associated to not touching each other.

Results and discussion

We constructed four main categories from the data, which are developed below. These categories are (1) Touch and injuries, (2) Touch and emotional support, (3) Touch and religion, and (4) Touch and violence.

Touch and injuries

Teachers stated a need to touch their students beyond pedagogical reasons. For example, teachers considered it important to have physical contact with students to avoid or to treat injuries, and they were concerned about their students getting injured:

The situation has changed a lot throughout the years. We have moved ... from something normal that for me was to help someone to do a headstand or a roll on a wooden box ... and throughout the years, those situations changed and we took extra care for students not to have an accident or get a bruise. Before, when that happened, we talked to the parents and it was fine. Now, if a kid gets knocked about ... we have to give more explanations and parents are more alert so as to see if they can cause trouble, a trial, something of the kind and at this point, I try to be extremely careful. The contact was very normal, and it helped the boy or the girl, but now ... you can either be issued a claim or risk an accident, so, it [gymnastics] is being lost. (César, 58 years old, Argentina)

César (above) is providing an experienced and almost nostalgic view of old times. He minimises injury ('knocked about'), and he suggests that current risk of litigation is resulting in loss of educational experiences. Among teachers, there exists a fear to be confronted by the parents or the principal if a student gets injured. What César expressed is a change in relation to parents: from a feeling of safeness (i.e. 'we talked to the parents and it was fine') to a feeling of uncertainty (i.e. 'we have to give more explanations') because there is a risk of incurring a complaint (i.e. 'you can be issued a claim'). Simultaneously, teachers need to constantly consider the ultimate consequences of taking the risk to touch a student to prevent an injury, or otherwise, not touching the student because of the widely spread discourse on sexual harassment or molestation. Below, a teacher offers an example of what might happen if he does not employ physical touch to assist an already injured student.

Touch is necessary if there was any injury, where you had to touch them [the students] to see what happened. If they sprained their ankle or hit themselves somehow. You need the physical contact to assist them ... When you help someone who is hurt, impartiality is not against you because you're helping someone who is hurt. So I'm not worried about that ... I know how, and how far I can assist. I know the limits. I'm more afraid about not doing anything. I fear not doing more because there could be serious consequences. For example, if a girl breaks her ankle and the ambulance hasn't arrived yet, if the girl moves, the fracture could become aggravated and if the teacher does nothing, maybe afterwards the girl won't be able to walk with that foot. So there are serious consequences. I prefer having the father tell me: You touched my daughter's leg. Yes, I did so to restrain the fracture. Not because I wanted to touch your daughter's leg. (Raúl, 37 years old, Argentina)

Raúl's fears and risks regarding the current no-touch discourse seem to be the opposite of that of most teachers from previous studies. With that said, we can also see that Raúl is aware of the limits of physical touch (i.e. 'I know how, and how far I can assist. I know the limits'). So even though Raúl is showing that he is conscious of the current no-touch discourse prevalent in today's society, he is more concerned about the possible injuries on students. It is also worth pointing out that Raúl is a qualified first aid assistant. Therefore, Raúl's comments are undoubtedly influenced by his educational background and his call of duty as a First Aid Assistant.

Touching students for physical support during activities and to avoid injuries is particularly problematic in France, as, according to the French syllabus, PE teachers are required to teach gymnastics and acrobatics. This is difficult to teach without the use of some physical contact to avoid accidents:

I think it's a double problem. [Touch] is linked with safety because in gymnastics you have to do it [touch students]. For the teacher, if you don't do it [touch students] and the children have an accident, it's your fault. If you do it [touch students] – but touch a sexual part accidentally – it's your fault too. (Belle, 49 years old, France)

Belle expressed a dilemma in which PE teachers in France are facing contradictory and complex situations. On the one hand, teachers must protect their students from getting injured. On the other hand, there is always a fear of inadvertently touching a sensitive body part that can be interpreted within a sexual framework. In this sense, when it comes to safety and touch, particularly while teaching gymnastics, there is no advantageous situation that exists. The twofold risk for the French teachers is always present, in the form of either not touching students and potentially subjecting them

to a risk for injury, or touching the students and putting themselves at risk for potential sexually related complications or repercussions. Not being at risk is simply not an option for the teachers involved in this study, as Claude explains:

As soon as the activities involve the body, it [physical contact] becomes complicated, whether it's gymnastics or swimming ... the head of the school or the pedagogical inspector give advice or issue warnings to the PE teachers because there are different cultural communities, and they say 'do not [physically] support in gymnastics: either the girls or the boys ... Use the other students to do the supporting'. But this is problematic because sometimes for certain activities not all pupils are able to properly provide support, or they don't have the technical skills or physical power to do it in a safe manner, so it has become dangerous. (Claude, 46 years old, France)

Allowing students to support one another can be seen as risky in two aspects. First, as the students are not qualified PE teachers, the risk of injury among students can increase, and second, there is a danger that the teaching profession and its professional identity could be impoverished by permitting students to perform the teacher's job. By allowing students to do what has previously been considered the teacher's role – because teachers are now afraid of potential false accusations – teachers are quitting their duty of care because their fears take precedence over their chosen role as teachers. Furthermore, in this scenario, the risk of touch related to sexual connotations is shifted from the teachers to the students. By supporting each other, students are the ones who are at risk of being accused of sexual harassment or molestation. In so doing, the teachers are putting their own safety first by putting the students at risk.

Touch and emotional support

The Argentinean participants stated the importance of touch for emotional support, especially in schools from low socioeconomic backgrounds:

If I see that a student is down [emotionally], I always say that a hand on the shoulder eases a student more than a long conversation. When a student is sad and you touch them on the shoulder, they react [positively]. I think it's very important. That's how I work. (María, 46 years old, Argentina)

The objective of the school [a school with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds] ... you see in the hallways students engaging with the tutors, joking around with them. The teachers go inside the classrooms with their arm around the students ... On the one hand, [the teachers] are trying to get them into the classroom, but, on the other hand, they are also hugging and chatting with them, saying that they should behave. It is like if you are 'a cold person', you don't fit in that school. And even if you are 'a cold person', I think the students would change you there. They need so much affection that even 'a cold person' is going to end up hugging and chatting with the students ... There are several students that greet me with a kiss [on the cheek, which is common in Argentina]. Maybe the ones that know me well. Still, I try to keep my distance, so they respect me and I keep the student-teacher relationship intact. (Malena, 36 years old, Argentina)

Malena's statement illustrates her impression that without physical touch, students' apparent need for affection could be compromised and thus could ultimately lead to a palpable decrease in a sense of humanity within the PE environment. In the teachers' work arena, according to Malena, physical touch is often used to establish a visceral, yet perhaps unspoken, distinction between 'a cold person' and 'a warm person'. The importance of physical contact in terms of emotional closeness is described by another teacher from Argentina in the quote below. She finds it absurd to place restrictions on touching one another, and further states that in not touching, 'we stop being humans'. She goes on to say that in eliminating touch, there also arises the risk that certain types of learning completely lose their significance. This learning, she continues, includes a variety of basic fundamental aspects, from body development to love and comfort.

Physical contact must exist and there's nothing wrong with it. I don't think this is being given the importance it should. They [government bodies] see it as 'be careful'. And it's the other way around. In my opinion ... The biggest organ is the skin, so imagine that we cannot touch each other. It's absurd. We stop being humans ... Not only do we deprive ourselves from helping the students to work on their body development, in playing sports or games, but also in loving each other, and comforting each other. If we stop doing it [touching] in a

game, how are we going to do it naturally when you have to hug a friend who has a problem? Or when you celebrate something? (María, 46 years old, Argentina)

This particular teacher went on to explain how it is 'just normal' to have physical contact with students, whether it is to attend to a student's injury or to simply say 'hello' with a kiss on the cheek.

Some girls give you a kiss [on the cheek] or they show you where they hurt when they have pain. For example, when they bump into each other, it's normal to ask them to show you where they hurt themselves, to ask them to pull up their shirt to see if there is a bruise. I still do that, and I will keep doing it, even if there comes a law to say otherwise. If a kid falls, you have to check if he hurt himself, if he broke something or if there's a scratch. I mean, if there is a rule, you would either have to break the rules or quit your job. (María, 46 years old, Argentina)

Pre-service PE teachers in Latin countries are often quite emotional (González-Calvo et al., 2020) and the Argentinean teachers' excerpts above evidenced this. They considered physical contact as beneficial and necessary for emotional support. Humanistic and emotional aspects of physical contact are developed in several studies and are often seen by teachers as both a human necessity and an expression of care and sympathy (Andersson et al., 2018; Jung & Choi, 2016; Öhman, 2017; Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017). Physical contact is used to create feelings of comfort, warmth and trust between teacher and student. Hence, in terms of a non-touch relationship with students, it is easy to understand María's statement 'break the rules or quit your job'. The risk for Maria lies not in being falsely accused but in the notion that 'we stop being humans' and how dehumanised society would be in this scenario. In our study, the use of touch for emotional support was found mainly among Argentinean PE teachers, while the French counterparts focused their concerns of touch on navigating religious traditions, as explored below.

Touch and religion

Touch restrictions and concerns in the PE framework were also associated with religion in the schools where the French teachers worked, particularly given the high number of Muslim students. For PE teachers, the complex issue of physical contact in relation to the religious beliefs of some students must take into consideration the issue of 'who can touch whom'.

My first teaching experience was in the north of Paris where there is a lot of immigration: what we call a deprived school area. And I was 22. The first time when I had to tell the students 'be quiet', I touched them [male students]. And my colleague told me 'stop, you shouldn't touch them because for them it's difficult' ... And in this particular school, there were a lot of Muslims boys. I am a woman, so for them, it was very hard that a woman would touch them ... there are six or seven million French people who declare that they are Muslim. And these people are not all recent immigrants. They are immigrants, but maybe [some are] the third or fourth generation. (Belle, 49 years old, France)

In this case, as opposed to the general prevailing discourse of sexual implications in touching students, the concern with physical teacher-student contact originated with a female PE teacher touching male students. This is because no male-female physical contact is allowed at all in Islam. This case, however, is the opposite in most of the available literature published in English, which concerns male teachers' fear of touching female students because of the possibility of being accused of sexual harassment. In most cases, however, the teachers have developed an innate gut feeling as to which students are comfortable with physical contact and which students are not. Of course, making a wrong assessment carries with it a risk. To assess or know 'the right thing' to do in a particular situation means to rely on knowledge or sense that is implicit, and even emotional, rather than explicit and logical (Friesen & Osguthorpe, 2018). What Belle expresses about teacher-student physical touch is a balancing act, as the teacher must always consider a student's religious background. Teachers must thoughtfully evaluate any form of physical touch, or even 'announce' their intention of touching a student before they actually perform the act of touching, as Belle explained:

Belle: ... When I am going to touch ... now I say before I do it: 'I am going to touch you'.
 Interviewer: So you actually explicitly say to the pupils 'Ok, we are doing a handstand, I will touch you'?
 Belle: Yes.

Physical contact between two bodies can be coded in different ways, dependent in part upon the education and outlook of those who experience it. However, the 'announcement' of touch before it actually happens can result in a risk of 'denaturalising' a situation that was previously considered ordinary, that is, teacher-student physical contact in PE lessons. The representation of touch as a concern because of religion was found only among the French PE teachers in regard to mostly Muslim students. Camille, based in France, further elaborated below on the influence of religion in her PE classes.

In this school, [touch] is linked a lot to religion ... There is not a lot of sexual thinking because sexuality is taboo [within Islam], given the religion and the cultural background of some of the students ... As sexuality is taboo, we are not confronted with the problems of sexual harassment, etcetera, since they don't talk about it. And even in biology class, it's very hard to talk about sexuality with these students ... the issue here is more about violent contacts ... It's more violent than sexual. (Camille, 30 years old, France)

Camille's statement illustrates that among a particular religious group within the students at her school, physical contact does not typically carry with its sexual connotations because of the apparent absence of sexual undertones implicit in touch. Therefore, according to Camille, the issue of a suggestive relationship between touch and sexuality is not 'the big risk' in the case at her school. As mentioned by Camille, touch can also be perceived as a violent act, particularly in the case of schools from low socioeconomic backgrounds, an idea that is developed further in the next section.

Touch and violence

Touch was also present in violent physical gestures. Teachers commented on the influence on students' families on this matter:

[Some of] my students have a different relationship with violence. I have already seen some fathers or big brothers hit students in front of me, and for the student it was very normal ... And probably that is the reason that they are also violent with you ... I learned to take some distance to avoid violence. (Camille, 30 years old, France)

Camille experienced a shift in risk from the 'common' risk associated with teacher-student touch – that of being falsely accused of sexual harassment – to the explicit and direct risk of being hit by a student. While these are two different manifestations of touch, there are obvious risks involved in both touching actions, even though they are different kinds of risks. A similarly violent situational risk was also expressed by a PE teacher working in a low socio-economic background school in Argentina.

Every day is different, you never know what's going to happen. Some say that the students are all violent, but then you see who their parents are and you understand. They repeat what they see at home ... (Malena, 36 years old, Argentina)

In this sense, and as illustrated above, Malena is also positioned at risk of being hit by students (or parents), and the risk was present in both countries:

The students try to communicate to the teacher because they encounter difficulty more on the act of violence, verbal violence or touch violence ... they have a closer relation with us. They don't have the words, they speak really bad French, so it can be in a very pure emotional way just as in a physically violent way. They touch me often ... in ways that are more or less violent or a bit aggressive ... I never saw that before. (Camille, 30 years old, France)

One student was throwing punches at the air while saying 'Do you want to fight, Miss?' Like he was throwing punches in front of my face. And I laughed and said: 'Luis, why do you want to hit me? What did I do to you? Do I mistreat you? Do I hit you?' And he said: 'No, no, Miss. I'm kidding. I'm just playing'. I was watching how his fist came close to my face. I was seeing if he was going to touch me, so I could then punish him. (Malena, 36 years old, Argentina)

In the comments above, the idea of the teacher being 'at risk' has shifted from what previous research has shown in relation to the risk of being falsely accused of sexual harassment, to a tangible

risk of being physically harmed by a so-called violent student or parent. Interestingly, one of the Argentinean teachers commented on a case in her school where the origin of the violent act arose from the teacher, not from a student.

... The teacher that was ... well, it is not about contact. They [some of the students] are a wild group, you want to make contact with them, but the violent kind, they drive you crazy. You have to be very patient. The last teacher was older ... they say that he picked up one of the kids by the neck against the wall and asked him to be quiet because ... outside school they weren't teacher and student. He was very riled up. Well, we shouldn't reach those extremes. I know about this because his classmates told me. They had to separate them, so they didn't hit each other. He was driven mad and, well ... we shouldn't go that far. (Malena, 36 years old, Argentina)

In this particular case, the student was the one positioned as 'at risk' and not the teacher, and this demonstrates another shift in risk. This instance also represents a shift in terminology concerning who is 'at risk' (i.e. the teacher or the student). PE teachers often work under precarious conditions, particularly evidenced in schools with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. According to Kirk (2020), precarity refers to the prominence of the detrimental effects of living in poverty, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing. To live in precarity is a condition that does not often lend itself to the promotion of wellbeing, and this is evidenced in both the teachers' and the students' quotations above. To be exposed to a precarious condition is risky and hazardous (Kirk, 2020), but it is clearly a different risk than the well-publicised PE teacher-student risk discourse that links touch with sexual harassment.

Conclusions

Results from this study suggest that teachers experienced concerns about physical contact in PE in different ways than the prevailing discourse between PE teachers and students regarding touch and sexual harassment. The teachers in Argentina and France considered physical contact necessary for emotional support, as well as for the avoidance and treatment of injuries. They were also concerned about the boundaries surrounding touch because of the students' religious beliefs, and acts of violence. We witnessed how the idea of risk related to touch is different in these particular cases in France and Argentina, as compared to the predominant published research. As such, there might be a shift in 'risk' when considering touch between a PE teacher and their students in different countries, and this risk could be associated with injuries, violence, religious beliefs and lack of emotional support. In so doing, the theoretical lens of Beck helped us to uncover how risk regarding physical contact in PE is not just about sexuality, and how other aspects should also be considered in this matter.

The participating teachers in this study were nevertheless familiar with the societal discourse of no-touch related to sexual harassment, and they experienced contradictory opinions and constant negotiations, frustrations, exhaustion, insecurity and mixed feelings in relation to touch between teacher and student. Furthermore, teachers with more years of experience noticed changes over time in teaching practices related to physical contact. These changes include both the avoidance of some subject content (e.g. gymnastics in Argentina) and the loss of previously understood 'normal' physical contact (e.g. the use of touch when a student is hurt). When it comes to physical contact with students, it seems now that PE teachers must exercise caution.

Some noticeable differences were also found between countries. For example, in the specific cases in France, the fear regarding touch revolved around issues of religion, violence and safety (i.e. risk of injuries if teachers do not touch the students). In the specific examples from Argentina, teachers believed that physical contact is necessary as a way of showing empathy, emotions and affection. Fortunately, not all PE teachers allowed their behaviour to be dictated by increased surveillance and fear of the (often) imagined thoughts of others, and they ignored the risks of their actions (see also Öhman, 2017). This is the sentiment that inspired the title of this paper, derived from a participant's quote: 'Break the rules or quit the job'. While we are not suggesting that these teachers

need to break the rules, we are proposing that they need to be better prepared and receive more support for issues related to touch. Furthermore, we agree with Piper and Smith (2003) in that there may be no single truth about physical contact, just different constructions, and many of them are contradictory and seldom acknowledged or spoken.

Our results also provide a more in-depth understanding of the challenges and dilemmas that teachers face in their teaching environment. It is important to prepare future PE teachers for the challenges that they will have to deal with regarding the issue of (no) touching in their teaching practices. While it is important that (pre-service) PE teachers are aware of the societal discourse around touch, we cannot avoid wondering what is lost by the decrease or elimination of physical contact in PE classes. Also, while we were conducting the interviews we realised we were possibly 'waking up a sleeping dog'. That is, up until the time of our interview, some teachers had not yet thoroughly deconstructed the potential dangers in touching students. As a result of our questions in the interview, some of the teachers began thoughtfully examining their personal approaches concerning physical contact with students. In this sense, we wonder if we possibly incited more fear in the teachers through our interviews.

We can also see how the professional subjectivities of PE teachers have changed in the last few years: from being secure and proud of their profession to a climate of fear and insecurity. A strong professional identity is difficult to maintain if teachers are insecure in the teaching practice and instead, overly concerned about how they should act around the children they teach. The teachers can be said to have become 'aligned to the mechanisms of governmentality' (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 196), and now feel a pressure to act in line with updated perhaps hyper-politicised norms related to child safety so as to not be viewed as deviant.

We also believe it is imperative to ask ourselves what kind of society we are creating if touch is taboo and teachers are afraid of touching children. As a way to move forward, we believe different educational actors, including headmasters, teachers, students, parents and researchers, need to be involved in the discussions involving physical contact. This paper has demonstrated that fears and risks around teacher-student touch are not necessarily just about sexual harassment, but also about religion, violence and emotional and physical support. Therefore, we need a multi-perspective approach to tackle this issue and make the most out of the comfort that physical contact can provide. Furthermore, and as a way of disclaimer, the writing of this paper began prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of Covid-19, we have already witnessed significant changes in the way that PE teachers handle physical contact and proximity. Consequently, the pandemic only adds to the complexity of how PE teachers deal with the subject of touch with students.

In today's society, issues related to physical contact between people have become highly topical, especially in light of the multicultural society, intercultural encounters, the #MeToo movement, Covid-19, sexual harassment and increased demands for recommendations and guidelines (child protection) regarding physical contact between children and adults in various educational contexts. Given all of the 'concerns' about physical contact in educational settings, it could become a very important part of the school subject of PE. We still need to generate more knowledge on how we can better handle the issue of touch between teachers and students from a didactic perspective, particularly when those involved are from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This topic needs to be further investigated and researched, particularly by placing PE teacher's professional subjectivities in the front, and investigating the imminent and evolving changes within the PE profession.

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