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Exploring Touch in Physical Education Practicum in a Touchy Latin Culture

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Abstract: The decrease in touch has been explored in recent literature in relation to child protection discourses and no touch policies and it has been suggested that Physical Education (PE) has been weakened by the lack of touch. Significantly, the issue of touch has remained largely unexplored in Latin societies, which are characterised by an amplified tactile approach to people and comparatively little personal space. This paper examines how a group of pre-service PE teachers in Spain responded to, acted and negotiated touch with primary school students. It draws on data generated from body journals and the concepts of risk society, surveillance and moral panic. The findings indicate that touching school students is still common practice in Spain and was considered something positive. The influence of other individuals and certain spaces was also noted by participants, who felt more surveilled and distressed on particular occasions and some of them strategically introduced touch with students in a progressive manner. The results of the study invite us to reflect on the possibility of doing more harm than good by presenting topics about touch to pre-service teachers and how pre-service teacher educators may need to provide PE students with proper resources and understandings to successfully negotiate touch with school students.

Keywords: touch; Physical Education; practicum; Latin culture; risk; surveillance; moral panic

1. Introduction

Within Physical Education (PE), physical contact is often considered ‘normal’ or embedded in the profession [1–3]. PE teachers utilise different techniques that involve bodily touch connected to specific traditional purposes such as guidance, encouragement and safety [2,4–6]. However, in prevailing social discourse, physical contact has become associated with sexual intentions and/or connotations [1]. Touch in PE and sport contexts has come under question and studies suggest that PE teachers experience confusion and concern about how to act in particular situations [5]. When physical touch is sexualised, teachers are at risk of being accused of molestation or sexual harassment [6].

Western societies have evidenced increased levels of anxiety in relation to the abuse and protection of children in recent years¹ [7] and research has proposed that PE and sport pedagogy have been weakened by the lack of touch [3,8]. Young children, who often consider teachers to be ‘parent substitutes’, may want to show affection towards their teachers and try to hold their hands, sit on their laps, or hug and kiss them. Some children may be fascinated by a teacher’s clothing or shoes and

¹ For example, in most countries, including Spain, professionals who work with people under 18 years of age are required to undertake police checks that confirm the lack of sexual assaults prior the commencement of their jobs.

attempt to touch them [9]. However, when a teacher is in constant threat of being misinterpreted or accused of abuse, many think that “no touch at all” is the safest option [10].

The decrease in touch over the last few years has been explored in recent literature, particularly in Anglo Saxon and Scandinavian contexts in relation to child protection discourses, current no touch policies and related movements, such as #MeToo. Teaching practices in different countries have adapted to no touch policies to varied extents [2,4]. For example, Owen and Gillentine [11] explored how primary school teachers in the US were fearful of being falsely accused of inappropriate behaviour while simultaneously understanding the benefits of touching. Piper and Smith [12] warned that many schools and childcare settings were becoming ‘no-touch zones’ in the UK. Similarly, Jones [9] illustrated New Zealand primary school teachers’ apprehensions about touching children. Researchers from Sweden have been working recently on the project ‘Don’t touch!—Pedagogical consequences of the “forbidden” body in Physical Education’ (e.g., [2,4,6]). Likewise, the special edition of the *Sport, Education and Society* journal, titled ‘Hands off! The practice, policy and politics of touch in sport and educational settings’ [7] should be recognised.

Particularly in PE settings, the issue of touch is even more problematic during practicum situations, given that pre-service teachers are in a unique position: they are not considered ‘students’ by the school students with whom they work, yet they are not ‘teachers’—which may be recognised by school students as carrying less authority and experience. Significantly, the issue of touch has remained largely unexplored in Latin societies. The context of Latin societies is particularly interesting, as Latin culture is characterised by an amplified tactile approach to people and comparatively little personal space [13,14]. The fact that Latin America has often been considered a more tactile culture, together with the first signs of pre-service teachers being afraid of touching students in educational settings as demonstrated in the data collected, warrants further examination. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how a group of pre-service PE teachers in Spain responded to, acted and negotiated touch with primary school students.

1.1. Physical Contact in Latin Contexts

The first studies investigating proxemic behaviour across cultures were conducted in the 1960s, mainly by Edward Hall. In his influential book, *The Hidden Dimension*, Hall [14] concluded that personal space was smaller amongst individuals from Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe and Arabic contexts and larger amongst those from Asia, Northern Europe and North America. Latin and Arab societies are also often classified as ‘contact cultures’ and Northern European and North American societies as ‘noncontact cultures’ [15].

Hall’s [14] explanation of the personal space differences was based on the sensory exposure to and exploration of each culture but no concrete measures were taken at the time. Subsequent research studies have supported Hall’s [14] qualitative observations that Latin Americans prefer closer social interaction distances than individuals from North America or Northern Europe (e.g., [13,16–18]). Further, Freedman [19] 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 [20] established that Latin Americans tend to huddle together at a very close distance of about 61 cm.

The body orientation of the speakers in space also seems to be more defined by culture than by age or gender [21]. In a study conducted by Beaulieu [21], which measured interpersonal distance and body orientation in space in a cross-cultural environment, Latinos adopted a face-to-face position and used a more direct approach than Anglo Saxons. Proxemic [14,22] and collectivist theory [23,24] identified Anglo, Euro American culture as the archetypal individualistic, noncontact culture and they posit that individuals from high-contact, collectivist cultures prefer more proximate social interaction [15]. Latin culture is considered an example of high-contact proxemic culture [14] manifesting a variety of collectivist over individualist tendencies [23,24]. While there are some disagreements regarding which countries constitute Latin America [25], for the purposes of this study, we have considered Spain as a

Latin American country. The conceptual frameworks of risk society [26], surveillance [27] and moral panic [28] are used to explore the data and are described below.

1.2. Risk Society, Surveillance and Moral Panic Contexts

Risk and uncertainty are characteristics of Western democracies [29] and risk has become a prevalent concept within our lives. According to Giddens [30], our concerns with risk are not necessarily related to life-threatening events but are rather more concerned with the use of surveillance and monitoring systems to measure risk. Beck [26] first described 'risk society' as an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialisation involving hidden politics, ethics and morality. Risk and blame have largely been implemented in Western contexts over the decades [31–33] to discipline this potential danger by manipulating and eradicating ambivalence [34], so that life's eventualities are subjected to human control in the attempt to avoid all risk [10,30].

Risk society is a socially constructed phenomenon, in which there is a greater possibility that some individuals are defined as 'at risk' than others [35]. Lately, there has been a profound change in conceptions of children and young people, their relationship with risk and how associated risks may be prevented [7]. Physical contact between children and adults is now considered a potential threat to children's security. Therefore, touching a child has become risky behaviour [2] and, by extension, teaching has become a risky business [9]. In a risk-aware era, the play of spaces, lines and screens in schools intensifies in the name of child and teacher safety [9]. In this way, schools have been influenced by the societal move towards a narrative of prevention and educational practices have undergone extreme changes in adherence to contemporary imperatives of restriction [5].

In the apprehensive and suspicious present [26,36], when all adult-child touch—and even adult-child proximity—generates anxiety and suspicion, teacher visibility is required as a precondition for innocence [9]. Ironically, as Jones [9] pointed out, '[t]eachers require the "witness of nothing" as a necessary protector but a witness is also a potential accuser . . . In other words, even in public view, no teacher can be immune to accusation' (p. 58). Adults who work with children are often viewed with suspicion and are consistently required to justify their intentions [5]. They are subject to explicit and implicit scrutiny that has become a normalised aspect of their careers [37,38]. Foucault [27] noted that being subject to the gaze of others leads subjects to internalise the gazes and regulate their behaviours and identities towards a specific norm; in this case, not touching students. Different physical spaces, including schools, classrooms and virtual spaces, are locations in which people are monitored and from which new forms of normalising practices emerge [39]. Surveillance, therefore, functions as a technique of power given that it perpetuates, creates and prescribes behaviour according to some norm of social life [40]. Normalisation processes use surveillance as a mechanism to try to achieve 'the norm', such as not touching students during PE lessons.

In this sense, the rules that govern teacher behaviour imply that teachers as a group are potential sexual predators of children [9]. This presents significant issues when teachers and coaches need to touch their students. What was once accepted and unnoticed pedagogical practice is now associated with connotations that position the adult within an exploitative role due to the influences of fear-based and moral panic discourses [5,7]. Moral panic has led to the production of guidelines and practices that are concerned with protecting children from abuse and adults from false allegations but where the needs of children are lost [6,10]. Although physical support for specific exercises was previously considered natural or normal in PE classes, it is no longer obvious in today's context [6]. Pre-service teachers face a contradictory position regarding touch at the intersection of PE practices and contemporary surveillance culture.

2. Materials and Methods

The participants in this study were 15 pre-service PE teachers, of whom seven were male and eight female, studying at a university in Spain. All participants were Spanish by birth, were aged

between 21 and 24 at the time of data collection and were enrolled in the fourth and final year of their undergraduate degree programme.

According to Connelly and Clandinin [41], humans are narrative in nature at an individual and social level and, simultaneously, their lives are also narrated. In this study, narratives were used to give voice to pre-service PE teachers as experts of their own embodied lives. The use of body journals assisted these students to reflect on their practicum experiences, thereby developing their capacity to problematize their embodied subjectivities [42]. Data were generated from body journals that students were requested to complete during their primary school practicum², which lasted for 12 weeks (see [43]), from September to November. During this period, the students were required to write about situations which they felt were significant regarding the embodied dimension of teaching and to send their written reflections to their university tutor. The tutor read their narratives and, according to the content of each, made suggestions for further reflection. Students were first given two broad instructions to complete their body journals:

Pay attention to your body during the practicum (e.g., how your body reacts and adapts to different circumstances).

Whenever you 'feel your body', pay attention to it and write down what happened and how you felt.

The body journals assisted these students to reflect on their practicum experiences and have proven to be an effective tool to reflect on their embodied subjectivities as pre-service PE teachers [41]. The journals used for analysis were selected by two of the authors according to the rich description of the narratives. Journals were analysed using a content analysis approach [44] to order, reduce and question the data [45]. Data were coded and themes and consistencies were identified at a latent level [46] to find meaning in participants' narratives. The specific steps undertaken in this process were the following, drawing on the work of Sparkes and Smith [45]:

1. Immersion: a general sense of the body journal narratives was developed after several readings and familiarisation with the data, allowing the researchers to adopt an empathic position.
2. Search for and identification of themes: several raw data themes were identified, which were later ordered in a table.
3. Connection and ordering of themes: the clusters of raw data themes were organised into six meaningful categories: 'Appreciating and fostering touch', 'The discomfort of touch', 'Acknowledging emotions and feelings', 'The influences of others', 'Negotiating touch?' and 'Touch changes throughout the practicum'.
4. Cross-checking: the data themes and clusters were thoroughly re-examined to verify that all themes and categories were represented.
5. Confirmation: one of the authors who was not present during data collection but has expertise in qualitative research, reviewed the analysis.

Students elected to participate in the study voluntarily. Ethical approval was received from the university and all names used in this paper are pseudonyms. At the outset, students were given three options for completing their narratives. They could elect to (1) complete narratives that would not be shared with anyone, (2) complete narratives to share with their tutor, or (3) complete narratives which could be utilised for research purposes. Only the final group of narratives is included in this paper.

² These undergraduate students were required to teach PE and other subjects in schools to complete their degree programme. This professional practice period is commonly known as 'practicum' or, in its short form, 'prac'. Students undertook pracs at primary and early childhood levels. During this time, participants engaged with classes from different levels. However, they were requested to focus primarily on one group for their reflective exercises.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Appreciating and Fostering Touch*

Participants reflected on the importance of touch, including how they touched their students and their feelings related to this. For example, Paul, Sarah and Ann wrote:

We are working towards the festival and the students are rehearsing the choreography. I approach them [students] and there is physical contact, as I pat them on their shoulders . . . sometimes we dance together, grabbing our hands . . . In those moments, I feel relaxed. (Paul, male, week 3)

I am getting to know students better now and that makes me want to show that I'm closer to them, patting them on their shoulders or backs when I talk to them . . . I feel very comfortable with students now, as they have showed me trust. They tell me about their stuff, their interests, etc. I show that I'm close to them patting them on the shoulder or making a joke, so they realise they can trust me and that I am an accessible person. (Sarah, female, week 3)

After observing early childhood students, I realised the importance of being close and touching young children. The teacher needs to be close to them and needs to be available for them at all times. (Ann, female, week 2)

Paul reflected above on how he felt 'more relaxed' while touching his students (i.e., grabbing their hands to dance together). This is significant as it demonstrates a contradiction with other literature exploring touch in PE and sport contexts. Although several studies have shown that (pre-service) teachers may feel more stressed when having physical contact with their students [7,38], Paul felt the opposite. Sarah also stated that touching was a sign of trust and a way to demonstrate that she wanted to be close to the students and be an accessible person. Ann reflected on the necessity of touch, particularly in early childhood and how teachers need to be available for the students. In this sense, these participants concurred that touch is necessary and beneficial.

Some participants, who reflected on the beneficial side of touch, even conducted activities during their lessons to facilitate physical contact. For example, Cathy and Mary wrote:

We have done an activity where we cover our eyes to work on textures and touch with the students. I think this is a bodily aspect that is quite forgotten in PE lessons and in our daily lives too. I participated in the activity; touching the students and they also touched my hands . . . those forms of touch mean being closer to them. (Cathy; female; weeks 4, 5)

I'd like to be a close teacher who fosters trustworthiness in the classroom, that's why I believe that physical touch is fundamental. The fact that touch might be seen incorrectly may modify my practices and how I am with the students. (Mary, female, week 3)

Cathy, who considered touch to be beneficial for teaching-learning practices, also explicitly facilitated touch through one of her activities. Mary, as demonstrated above, not only considered touch to be beneficial but a fundamental aspect of teaching practices.

3.2. *The Discomfort of Touch*

While most participants reflected on touch as positive (and necessary), they were also aware of touching and/or being touched at certain times when they did not know how to react or second-guessed themselves. For example, Mary, Paul and Gareth reflected:

Generally, when I am touched, I feel tenderness and I appreciate that students do that, as it makes me feel appreciated. But sometimes a lot of students come to hug me at the same time and I feel a bit overwhelmed and I'm not sure how to respond or act. (Mary, female, week 2)

Kristen is running towards me! I notice how her small hands touch my back and she hugs me very hard in front of the whole class . . . and I'm not sure what to do! I felt out of place . . . I didn't know how to move her hands. I blushed, I was shaking and my forehead was sweaty. I grabbed her hands and pulled them away from my back slowly, as I wasn't sure about the distance that I should keep from her. I asked her, 'Is there something wrong, Kristen? Are you okay?'—'Yes, *profe*³', she replies—'Okay, so sit down Kristen, we need to continue with the class'. Have I done the right thing? (Paul, male, week 3)

There was a moment when a girl had a question about an exercise and, as the teacher was busy with another student, she came to me to check the exercise. My first instinct was to touch her arm and pat her head but as this is my first week I thought twice about it and I just asked her to wait in her place for the teacher. (Gareth, male, week 1)

While these participants reported not feeling comfortable touching their students at specific times during their practicum, they had different reasons for feeling that way. Mary felt uncomfortable when subjected to sudden physical contact from several students; this may have been attributable to the associated physical discomfort, including a lack of air or pressure on different parts of her body. However, the discomfort that Paul felt may have derived from the relative positioning of his and the student's bodies at the moment of the physical contact (i.e., front to front). This kind of touch is the most 'dangerous' of all, given the location of humans' (and particularly men's) genitalia. Furthermore, Paul was aware of the possible gaze of the other pupils and adults, as he highlighted that the student hugged him in front of the class. In this sense, Paul felt surveilled and possibly judged by others and was unsure of the most acceptable course of action.

Distinctly, Gareth suppressed his first instinct to touch a student, partly because it was his first week of prac. Unlike the two previous examples, in Gareth's case, the instinct to touch was his and not that of the student. While Gareth could have provided verbal advice to the student, he opted for the 'safest option' and told the student to wait for the teacher.

3.3. Acknowledging Emotions and Feelings

Closely related to physical contact are emotions and feelings. In this study, participants reflected on their own and their students' emotions during PE lessons. Joan, Christopher and Alfred wrote in this regard:

There are different types of hugs. Gratitude hugs are often warm, last for a few seconds and move you inside. Joy hugs are more energetic and unexpected; they are stronger and the hugging back is solid too. Those hugs wake you up and energise you. There are some other hugs for protection, for example, during a game. During those ones, I notice how the little ones [children] surround me looking for a place to hide. They are shaking with emotion and nervously laughing . . . it's contagious so I start laughing too and get involved in playing. There are also crowded hugs, those ones that overwhelm you. First one child, then another and another . . . it ends up in a massive hug and the ones in the middle feel a bit distressed. (Joan, female, week 9)

PE has an emotional component. Bodily expression and closeness are important aspects of those emotions. There is a need to work on this bodily closeness, particularly in today's society, where social and mass media do not promote ideal personal development. (Christopher, male, week 2)

³ Students from Spanish-speaking countries often use the term '*profe*' to refer to teachers at all levels (i.e., primary, secondary and tertiary) in an affectionate way. The term comes from '*profesor*' but it does not refer to the 'professor' title used within Anglophone academia. Rather, it refers to all teachers, lecturers and tutors.

I don't think teachers need to hug their students if they don't feel like doing that. But I do think it is important to show that you're physically close to the students and, to a certain extent, allow emotions and energy to run freely and that there is an atmosphere of love in the classrooms. (Alfred, male, week 3)

In his comments, Christopher advocated the need to work on bodily closeness, which he considered part of the emotional component of PE. He also claimed that social and mass media are responsible for promoting inadequate understandings of personal development. While Christopher did not clarify what he meant by personal development, aspects related to emotions and closeness were included in this idea.

Alfred, on the other hand, did not feel that teachers were obliged to hug their students if they did not wish to do so. However, this comment should be seen within the context in which Alfred was operating. Alfred recognised that it is seen as normal for teachers in Spain to hug their students; however, he took a stance against this expectation. Alfred also highlighted the importance of the teachers appearing 'physically close' to students, as a sign of human interaction, emotions and love and this is consistent with Maturana's [47,48] research on the influences of emotions and human interaction in educational settings. In doing so, Alfred contradicted prevalent studies which suggest that physical closeness to students should be avoided in a culture which construes all types of touch and closeness as negative and potential cases of sexual harassment.

3.4. *The Influences of Others*

The pre-service teachers reflected that they felt under surveillance in certain settings, which influenced their physical contact with students. For example, Mary and Gareth wrote:

In certain spaces, I feel more watched than in others. I feel more exposed and that people may misunderstand the touch with students. Usually, those are the more open spaces, where parents and other teachers are present. (Mary, female, weeks 4–5)

School breaks are pretty uncomfortable. I am 'bodily limited' and I never know what to do. I don't know if I should keep moving all the time to avoid students surrounding me, or if I should stay quiet and deal with all their hugs and questions. In the classroom, it's easier to limit their actions and be more distant. During the break, it's harder and there are also people looking at you and that makes me feel even more uncomfortable. (Gareth, male, week 2)

While Gareth did not explain what he meant by 'bodily limited', it is assumed that he was referring to the fact that he was not able to behave or move in the same way he would normally do in other spaces or moments. Both Mary and Gareth referred to how space conditioned them in terms of touching students and how they felt more vulnerable and 'at risk' in certain spaces—usually the 'open spaces' within the school. These reflections concur with Foucault's [49] claim that 'space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (p. 361). Foucault's work on space has been used by researchers to demonstrate how the construction and production of space influence the disciplining of individuals (e.g., [50–52]).

These participants also made reference to the people who may watch them and how others, particularly adults, such as parents or teachers, may misunderstand their touch. Ann also reflected in this regard:

When they [students] came to say goodbye, they hugged me all together and I almost fell over. I felt a bit overwhelmed for a while, I didn't know what to do. I felt watched and I haven't responded much to their shows of affection because I was embarrassed. (Ann, female, weeks 10–11)

Even though Ann did not make explicit reference to the presence of other adults, the end of a school day in Spain usually finishes in the playground, where parents and other teachers are present. Subjects being watched (or who feel they are being watched) internalise the gaze and regulate their behaviours and subjectivities towards a certain norm [53] which, in this case, was the norm of 'no-touching'. Ann also mentioned the number of students approaching her simultaneously. As stated above, this may also be related to the potential physical discomfort experienced by teachers in such situations.

3.5. Negotiating Touch?

At times, participants felt that they needed to negotiate different ways of showing affection towards students according to the circumstances. For example, Ann, Gareth and Paul reflected:

During my classes, I need to continuously communicate and interact with students and see which is the best way to approach students . . . It's difficult for them [students] to consider me their 'teacher' after their attitudes of touching my hair and hugging me. Now it's more difficult to have authority in front of them. (Ann, female, week 3)

When teachers arrive and I am introduced to them, I keep a distant attitude, crossing my arms, as I feel weird . . . I do something similar with students, I keep some distance on the first day of classes, as I'm not sure if it's something good to be close to them and have physical contact . . . When they [students] do something good, I prefer to reinforce it with a thumb up or a smile . . . Then, I progressively move to some physical contact, such as a 'high five' or I mess up their hair, when we trust each other more. (Gareth, male, week 3)

The trust that students have for me allows me to feel comfortable being close to them. I get closer to them with no issues but I keep some distance and don't invade their personal space. (Paul, male, week 2)

The lesson starts and I notice that students are overexcited. I try to deal with the situation, adopting a serious pose to avoid losing authority. I stand in front of them and I don't want to seem too approachable. I don't let them hug me and I maintain some distance. I realise it works, so I relax a bit and go back being more affectionate. (Paul, male, weeks 4, 5)

These participants reflected on their liquid [54] subjectivities; they are not teachers yet but they are 'more than students' to the school students in their classes. They also mentioned the need to try different approaches, as they did not want to seem overly strict yet they needed to demonstrate some degree of authority and respect. Ann, for example, wrote in her journal that students had hugged her and touched her hair at numerous opportunities. The (long) hair of female pre-service teachers is a common touching area for school students and many female participants made reference to this. Gareth, on the other hand, described how he usually opted for a more distant attitude with students and other teachers, particularly on the first days of prac. He also preferred to introduce touch with his students in a progressive manner, first indicating positive reinforcement with different bodily gestures and then using more subtle touch with body extremities (e.g., hands for 'high five'). Similarly, Paul explained that he was very conscious at the beginning of the prac to not step into students' personal spaces, although he felt comfortable being close to students. However, he needed to negotiate his (re)action in a specific situation in which students were quite excited and he needed to continue with the class. At that moment, Paul chose a more distant attitude until the students calmed down. Paul also established different behaviours according to the class he taught. In this regard, he reflected:

The second lesson is with a different teacher and with a different group of students. As this is not my primary group, I get close to students and sit with them but I don't have any physical contact. I don't want to invade their comfortable zone, as I'm a 'stranger' to them . . . With my primary group, I feel very comfortable. I use more gestures of closeness, such as

touching their shoulders, patting their heads and hugging them. I am closer with them and more affectionate than with the other groups that I don't see too often. (Paul, male, week 3)

Paul preferred a more progressive introduction to touch with these students, as he was aware that he did not know this particular group well enough. While Paul did not mention feeling surveilled or the potential misunderstandings of touch, he still had a cautionary approach to physical contact with students. Interestingly, one of the participants, Charles, reflected on a unique experience with one of his school students. He wrote:

In one of the PE lessons with the first graders, we were going downstairs and I went to pat one of the students on the shoulder. He dodged my hand, turned around and said, 'no one touches me, only kids'. I was shocked by those words. After that, I wondered if it was only that child or if all of them were thinking the same thing and I was doing something inappropriate. I shared this with my tutor and we concluded that this child's family, or someone close to him, must have warned him that no one could touch him . . . The feeling of not knowing where the limit was scared me and since then, I have been more cautious about touching students. (Charles, male, week 6)

Charles's experience was unique, as he was the only participant who wrote about this kind of reaction from a student. After this experience, Charles self-monitored his actions towards physical contact with all students. In this process of change, from a tactile tradition towards no-touch practices, these pre-service PE teachers faced contradictory and challenging positions. On the one hand, children continued to behave very affectionately and hugged their teachers, expecting teachers to hug them back. However, early signs of no-touch practices were detected, such as the narrative described above, suggesting that some children may be instructed to not allow touch from anyone, including teachers. While it is not possible to know if this event would have been different with a female pre-service teacher, no-touch practices and discourses are certainly becoming evident in Spain.

3.6. *Touch Changes throughout the Practicum*

Participants reported how their perceptions regarding touch changed throughout their practicum, particularly according to how tired they felt at specific points. For example, Mary, Cathy and Paul reflected on the following:

When I started the practicum, physical contact with students was one of my concerns, as we have covered the topic during university classes and had some apprehensions. Also, in my case, I am not a touchy person, even less so when I don't know the people. On the first day, some students came and hugged me . . . I didn't know how to respond. However, I got used to it and I started to appreciate their affection towards a person that they actually didn't know and yet appreciated. My prac tutor was acting normal about all the touch, which helped the concerns to slowly disappear. (Mary, female, weeks 4, 5)

The last days of practicum are fast approaching and I can see the sadness in children's faces, because they know that we are not going to be with them anymore. I get emotional seeing them like that and tears roll down my cheeks . . . All the students feel like we are leaving but the youngest ones show their affection through hugs and kisses. I also think that I have been more affectionate with the youngest ones, as they elicit more tenderness from me. (Cathy, female, weeks 10–11)

I have a lot of accumulated exhaustion that I can notice in my slow movements, tired face and feeling lost in my first morning class. Because of this, I feel uncomfortable and insecure. I don't feel too touchy lately . . . because of the exhaustion but also because I'm not sure if I seem professional and that increases my insecurity levels. (Paul, male, weeks 4, 5)

According to the participants, the final weeks of prac were quite different from the beginning. Various participants, like Paul, reported feeling mentally drained and exhausted during the middle weeks (i.e., weeks 4 and 5). Feelings of stress and being overworked may overpower other feelings, having the potential to replace the positive emotions felt at the beginning of the prac, compromising pre-service teachers' sense of wellbeing and their professional practices. However, some participants, such as Mary and Cathy, also reflected on how emotional the middle and end of the practicum was. While Mary revealed that she was not a 'touchy person', she positively recognised students' shows of affection, which usually involved touch, from the beginning of the practicum period. Mary also highlighted how her prac tutor helped her to overcome her fears related to touch with students.

Paul reflected again on physical contact at the very end of the 12 week practicum period, writing the following:

The pracs are ending and everyone feels more vulnerable regarding their feelings and emotions. We hug a lot. Some students grab my leg and insist that I not leave the school. Sometimes I feel a bit overwhelmed but very happy with this show of affection. (Paul, male, week 10)

Paul demonstrated different emotions and attitudes towards the very end of the prac period. He felt more vulnerable and emotional seeing the students say goodbye to him and showing their affection. In this case, Paul's liquid subjectivity constantly changed from the second week of the practicum, when he had introduced touch but respected students' personal space; towards the middle of the period, when he felt exhausted and did not appreciate touch to the same extent as before; and, in the final week, when he felt emotional and welcomed touch again.

4. Conclusions

This paper has explored how a group of pre-service PE teachers in Spain responded to and negotiated touch with school students. The paper contributes to the current corpus of literature exploring touch in PE and sport settings, in a current context of moral panic, risk and surveillance. As the sample for this paper was small, it could be possible that those who participated in the study held particular views about the issues discussed. Further research is needed to see to what extent these views are evident among pre-service PE teachers in Spain and in Latin contexts in general.

The findings indicate that touching school students is still common practice in Spain and was mostly considered something positive by participants. Some participants even tried to justify themselves when they did not feel like hugging students, in opposition to the common trend from other countries such as the UK, Sweden and Australia, which are operating (almost) under 'no-touch' policies. Therefore, it seems Spain is not yet affected by these no-touch practices and discourses to the same extent.

Participants appreciated being hugged by their school students; they considered this to be positive and a way to increase their closeness with students. Some participants also reflected that students needed more touch and demonstrations of affection in today's society. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the emotional side of PE and the need to work closely during PE lessons. The influence of other individuals and spaces was also noted in their journals. Certain people (particularly other teachers and parents) and certain spaces (usually more open spaces), had the potential to cause them more distress and to feel surveilled, with the attendant fear that others may misunderstand their physical contact with students. These were among the few instances in which participants felt uncomfortable touching students; their reticence was also noted towards the end of the practicum, when they felt exhausted.

Some participants strategically introduced touch with students in a progressive manner, first providing positive reinforcement with bodily gestures and then moving to some physical contact with extremities. They also felt more comfortable with their regular groups of school students than with students they did not see often. Furthermore, participants demonstrated a change in their attitudes

regarding physical contact throughout their practicum. Some of them felt uncomfortable at the beginning regarding touch from students and tried to establish some distance. Some others looked to their tutors' reactions first, as a way to 'get approval' for their own actions. Participants then welcomed touch from students and considered it to be positive and beneficial. They were also used to having physical contact with students. Then, towards the end of the practicum, some participants experienced feelings of exhaustion and at times did not appreciate touch, particularly when the physical contact took place with too many students at the same time, which they felt to be overwhelming.

Only a few participants demonstrated awareness and moral panic regarding the current no-touch policies that are in place in some contexts. They also reflected on how that fear was generated after they covered the topic of touch during university tutorials. Certainly, having physical contact with students was innate for most of the participants. It is unclear if they felt that they needed to learn about touch, or if this was a 'natural' aspect of who they were.

Some further questions that arise from this study are whether being a 'touchy person' may influence an individual's decision to study an undergraduate degree in PE and what the sources of fear are regarding touch in PE as well as the sources to legitimize physical contact. It is unknown from the data collected whether participants were aware that times are changing when it comes to physical contact with students. Nevertheless, some of them defended the idea that more touch and emotions are needed in today's society. These pre-service teachers may have learned how to act in front of their students from their prac tutors. Interestingly, in some cases, the community may amplify moral panic present in media whereas, in other cases, the community may also act as a legitimator of touching. While previous studies have suggested that the age and gender of school students make a difference regarding physical contact, these pre-service teachers did not specify their students' age or gender. Indeed, the results of this study may have been different if the school students were teenagers and pre-service teachers could have been more careful when touching students.

We could also wonder here if we are not doing more harm than good by presenting topics about touch to pre-service teachers. Introducing touch as a topic to pre-service teachers could mean that what was observed in this study may change towards a more 'no touching' direction over the next decade. While it is undoubtedly necessary for pre-service teachers to be introduced to topics related to the potential dangers of touching students and what is happening in today's society, pre-service teacher educators may need to provide them with proper resources and understandings to successfully negotiate touch with school students.

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