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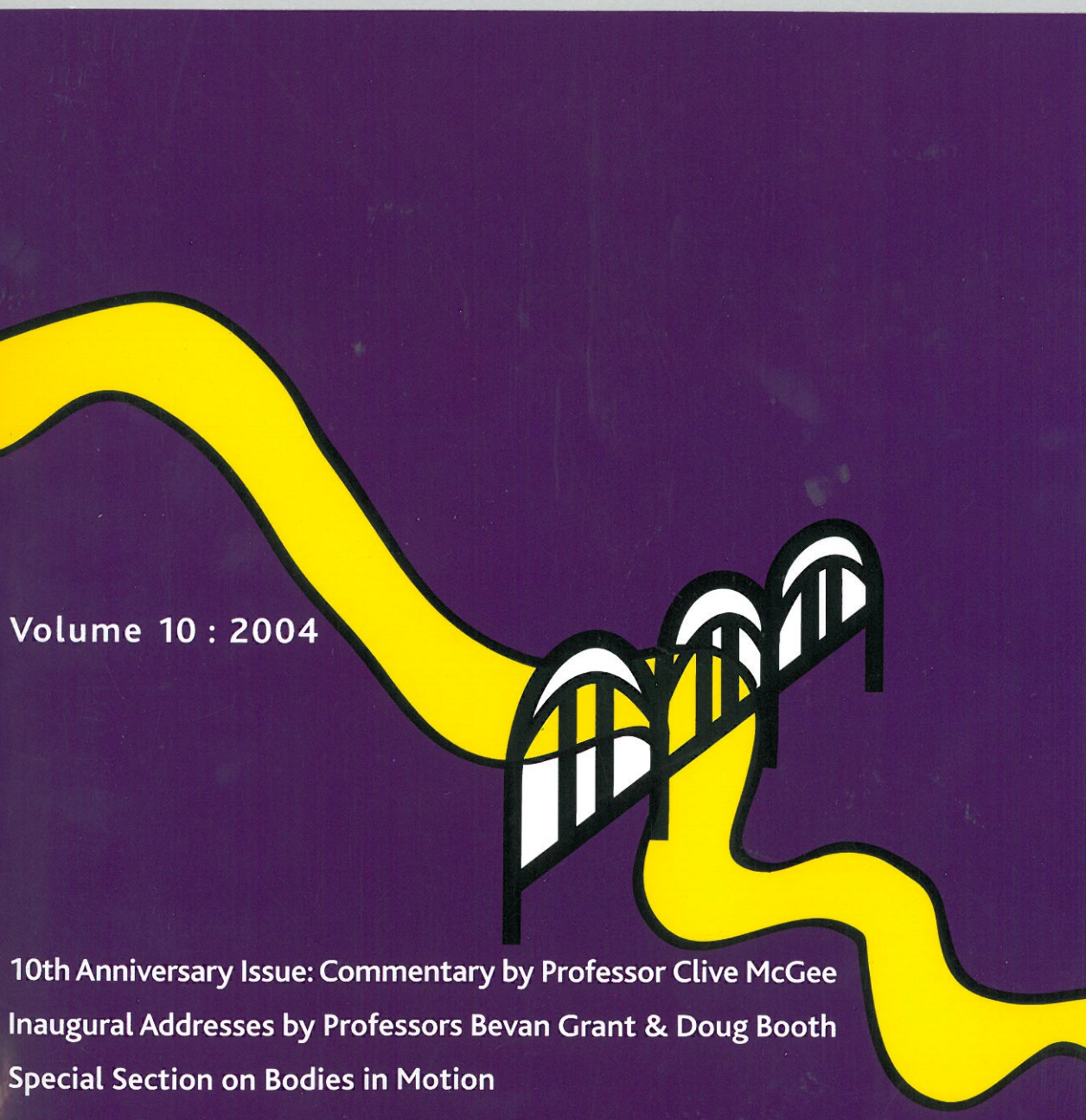

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Special Section on Bodies in Motion

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# COMMENTARY

# PHYSICAL EDUCATION AS HPE: 'RATIONAL' REFLECTIONS OR RUEFUL RUMINATIONS?

**RICHARD TINNING**
*The University of Queensland*

When I trained as a PE teacher in the 1960s what constituted PE seemed rather straightforward. But of course it wasn't. There was, for example, the contestation between the child-centred, humanistic inspired movement education approach and the sports and games oriented teacher directed approaches. Often these contrasting approaches were characterised as differences between PE for primary schools and PE for secondary schools. Sometimes it was characterised along gendered lines with movement education being more often associated with female teachers.

Forty years on, much of what stands for PE in schools has changed considerably. For example, nowadays it makes no sense to talk about PE (in government schools at least) independently of the Key Learning Area (KLA) of HPE (Health & Physical Education). In the 60s and 70s our teaching was oriented by objectives. In the 2000s we teach for outcomes. Both the development of learning areas and outcomes-based education are manifestations of major contextual shifts in Australian education over the last 30 years.

In what follows I outline a few major issues that I consider to be both representative of, and implicated in, the creation of the current context for physical education. These issues may be thought of as 'dots' that can be connected in order to gain a sense of the bigger picture (after Klein, 2002). I will conclude with a few concerns over the picture 'painted' by connecting the dots.

**Dot 1: The Rise of the Lifestyle Culture**

We live in a social context that gives unprecedented attention to the body (see Petersen, 1997), to sport and physical activity (see Gruneau, 1997) and to health (Lupton, 1996). Indeed fitness, as one specific potential outcome of sport and physical activity, is now widely promoted as an opportunity to create the body you want and avert certain health risks. For many physical educators this might seem to be a positive situation. It is in this contemporary social context that HPE must teach students to manage their lifestyle such that health risks are avoided or reduced. Indeed, risk identification and management is a key tenet in the conception of 'the new public health' underpinning contemporary HPE in Australia and New Zealand.

However, HPE, as a school 'subject', is increasingly losing its influence on the lives of young people. Indeed, popular culture is seen to play an increasingly

significant part in the lives of young people as advertising, TV soap operas and lifestyle magazines have come to replace much of the traditional authority of education (Rose, 2000). The mission of HPE to create active healthy citizens is far from uncomplicated. Although there is more information about, and images of, healthy lifestyles provided by contemporary media, there are also more contradictory messages. Making sense of these messages and helping young people navigate through a landscape characterized by the tensions between media advocacy to simultaneously consume and abstain (Petersen, 1997) is a real challenge for school HPE. As corporate pedagogues (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) and market logic (Kenway & Bullen, 2001) become increasingly influential in the lives of young people, the potential for HPE to realise its mission (read delivery on its outcomes) becomes increasingly difficult. If HPE is to be judged on achieving its outcomes it might be engaged in mission impossible.

**Dot 2: Raison D'être and the Proliferation of Purposes**

PE is now subsumed within the mission or the raison d'être of HPE. And HPE itself is subsumed within a broader educational mission.

How we think about physical education as part of HPE must be located in the context of major educational discourses. Currently in Australia our educational system is charged with the task of educating for a 'clever country' in which future citizens are multi-skilled, competent with information technology, literate and numerate in order that they play a productive part in a globalised economy. Education is becoming increasingly conceptualised and driven by a logic underpinned by "a now internationally rampant vision of schooling, teaching and learning based solely on systemic efficiency at the measurable technical production of human capital" (Luke, 2002, p. 1).

In addition, citizens of our 'clever country' should also be *healthy citizens* who are self-regulating, informed, critically reflective and capable of constructing their own healthy lifestyle and minimising risky behaviours. Healthy citizens are good human capital.

It is the task of HPE teachers to 'make' the healthy citizen (Tinning & Glasby, 2002). This explicit health oriented mission may or may not fit comfortably with the personal raison d'être of many teachers who enter the profession principally to teach sport and games (see Tinning, 2004).

Thinking about the work of PE teachers as 'making' certain types of citizens is certainly not new. The purpose of the drill and mass exercises of the early 20th century PE was explicitly to 'make' docile and healthy children (see Lawson, 1993; Kirk, 1993; Stothart, 1987) What is new, however, is the relatively recent (circa early 1990s) construction of the KLA of HPE which subsumes the previously separate subjects of health education, physical education, home economics and outdoor education within a framework that is underpinned by an explicit commitment to a social view of health, and a socially critical orientation (Macdonald, Hunter, Carlson & Penny, 2002).

In most state versions of the KLA there are three distinct curriculum strands; one oriented towards health education outcomes; one oriented to physical activity and sport outcomes; and one oriented to personal development outcomes. The HPE teacher's task is to help students achieve outcomes across all three strands in an integrated way. Such a challenge is not without its dilemmas, not the least of which is that participation in physical activity might be given less attention in the

process of trying to achieve multiple outcomes across multiple strands (see Tinning, 2000).

**Dot 3: Identity**

When I trained, the role of the PE teacher was oriented by objectives that focussed on the development of movement, games and sport related skills. However, the new HPE curriculum, the conditions of contemporary schooling and the nature of postmodern youth culture (Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992) has meant that traditional ways of *doing* PE and of *being* a PE teacher are now under threat. For teachers who are interested primarily in teaching about sports and games, the expectation to teach personal development and health education might be a serious challenge to their notion of what their job as a HPE teacher should be and, accordingly, to what they might become as a teacher.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many PE teachers have been found to have relatively similar discursive histories with respect to the central place that physical activity, sport and the body played in their identity construction (Macdonald & Tinning, 1995; Templin & Schempp, 1989). Maintaining a physically active lifestyle is central to the identity of many PE teachers (e.g., Sparkes, 1999). To a certain extent their identity as a PE teacher is based on their embodied identities as practical 'doers', physical activity seekers.

Nowadays it is common to find within HPE teacher education programs courses which offer a critical perspective of contemporary sport, rather than a taken-for-granted advocacy, and content knowledge for teaching (such as a social view of health, social justice and sexuality) that would previously have been found in courses like health education and home economics. Perhaps ironically, "many of the most contested moral issues that form part of the school curriculum [now] fall under the jurisdiction of the physical educator" (Macdonald, Kirk & Cerin, under review, p. 3). However, the congruence between the values and beliefs that many student teachers bring to their PE training and those underpinning the new socially critical HPE cannot be assumed. Accordingly, some student teachers are faced with the possibility that they are expected to become, or at least take on the persona of, someone who is quite different from their understanding of a "PE" teacher.

On the other hand, however, some teachers find the possibilities offered by the new HPE to be liberating and generative. For such teachers it seems there is congruence between their orientation to the world and the values underpinning HPE. What does seem reasonable to conclude is that the identity possibilities available within the new HPE are broadening and the 'old' PE teacher identity is increasingly seen as a less acceptable option for a career minded teacher who works within a school context that recognises that PE is no longer a 'stand alone subject'.

**Concerns Over the Picture of the 'Connected Dots'**

The picture presented by connecting these 'dots' is one of a school subject morphed into a learning area that is charged with making certain healthy citizens and often taught by teachers who are not necessarily emotionally 'connected to' the main mission of the learning area.

While the new HPE offers new opportunities for physical education, such opportunities are not unproblematic. I am concerned that HPE is presenting itself

to be the best curriculum solution to a multitude of individual and social problems. I fear HPE is trying to do too much. Trying to be too many things to too many 'stakeholders'. In the process physical education (within the HPE learning area) might be losing sight of its possible unique contributions that centre on *physical activity* as a worthwhile human experience in and of itself.

Interestingly, though combining physical education with health education might be a peculiarly Australian and New Zealand 'initiative', concerns that PE's 'reach' might be greater than its 'grasp' seems more general. In the UK, where the National Curriculum for PE includes no health education, some commentators and researchers still consider that "physical education may be trying to do too much" (p. 85) and it may have "…failed to identify a specific focus within its huge potential" (Armour & Jones, 1998, p. 85).

There seems little doubt that the mission of 'making' healthy citizens, and the nature of the HPE KLA, has profound implications for teachers and teacher education. Regarding physical education teacher education (PETE), the introduction of the HPE KLA has rendered specialist training for *physical education* (in both primary and secondary PETE programs) increasingly problematic. In Australia we need to be thinking of HPETE programs.

The new socially critical Australian HPE curriculum is a curriculum reform that offers a challenge to some of the taken-for-granted beliefs of some teachers of PE. Accordingly, the possibility of resistance (Glover & Macdonald, 1999) and knowledge disavowal (Ennis, 1994) by teachers who are not favourably disposed to the underpinning ideas of the curriculum must be seriously considered. It must also be recognised that there are some teachers who, although committed to the values of a socially critical curriculum and active advocates for social justice, none-the-less remain uncommitted to the logic of the integrated learning area.

I am not, however, suggesting we need to remove physical education from HPE and return to some misty-eyed memory of a previous time (like the 1960s). Nor am I suggesting that the "socially critical liberal curriculum" (Macdonald & Kirk, 1999, p. 140) is inappropriate. In the final analysis, whether or not HPE can deliver on its objective of making healthy, physically active, informed citizens will depend less on the sophistication of its curriculum documents and more on the ability of teachers to clearly know what they are attempting to do (the major orienting purpose of their work) and what is realistic in the doing. The present picture suggests that this is less than clear.

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