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Special Section on Bodies in Motion

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## COMMENTARY

# SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON KEY ISSUES SHAPING THE FIELD

ALAN OVENS

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One of the things that I have most enjoyed about my job as a lecturer in teacher education over the past few years has been the opportunity to visit a number of schools and observe physical education lessons. Admittedly, such visits occur in my capacity as a visiting lecturer, which means my impressions of school physical education tend to be filtered through my observations of student teachers. However, such lessons are still embedded within the practices of the school and inextricably marked by student teachers' interactions with their associate teachers. These visits allow me to provide advice and guidance to student teachers as well as an opportunity to experience, compare and reflect on how contemporary physical education is practiced in school settings. It is from this perspective that I offer the following opinions on the current state of physical education in New Zealand secondary schools.

It would be remiss of me not to begin by highlighting the complexity of the teaching role and my admiration for the job that teachers do. Amongst a myriad of other ongoing demands, teachers plan and teach lessons, mark assignments, counsel students, organize and coach sports teams, write reports and do playground duty. All this is filtered through the day-to-day requirement of focusing and guiding the energies of young adolescents and appreciating their diverse and individual needs. Frequently facilities, equipment and resources are either in short supply or have to be shared with others. The vagaries of weather create another dynamic difficult to plan for. It gives rise to a unique set of pressures that few in other professions and even subjects can appreciate. While on a good day the job can be extremely rewarding, the constant pressure can be likened to being pecked to death by a flock of ducks – continuous, demanding and exhausting. On a bad day it is more like paddling up a rapid – despite your best efforts, you realize that you are completely powerless to stop yourself from slipping backwards. It is this complexity that is so often over-looked and under-appreciated when people discuss curriculum and teaching in physical education.

In addition to this immediate existential context, teachers have had to accommodate an ongoing raft of changes over the past ten years. Most significant amongst these is the evolution of the qualification framework for the senior secondary school year levels. Physical education has fared well in this process and is now well established in years 11, 12 and 13. Assessment practices have also radically changed, with various new ideas coming and going before the acceptance of both Unit Standards and the National Certificate of Achievement Standards (otherwise known as NCEA. See Turner, 2003, for an overview of these terms and development). Less significant (in my opinion) was the introduction of a new curriculum statement that shifted the focus away from what was to be taught and,

instead, prescribed the outcomes to be achieved. Its key feature was not that it foregrounded a health promotion focus (since this has been core to the physical education message for over a century) but that it reified a separation between health education and physical education. In a positive sense, the ideological work the new document did for curriculum practice in schools was to broaden concepts of health and move the focus away from deficit models to more embodied and positive versions.

Of course, over the past 10 years there have been many other changes teachers have had to also accommodate. The rapid growth in information communication technologies has fundamentally changed the nature of society through its ability to connect us to a globalised culture. Students now come from the "options generation" (Mackay, 1997). Savvy in the virtual world and consumers of media images and messages, adolescents are now faced with a broader range of options for developing and expressing their identities but perhaps in evermore more need of guidance in doing so (Giroux, 2000). Moreover, the political context of social life has changed. A neo-conservative trend has seen a centralization of control over aspects like the curriculum, while a neo-liberal trend has increased individuals' expectations of being able to exercise choice and have their needs met.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of all this change is not just that it is profound and rapid but that teachers have been given limited amounts of professional development and support to address the nature and pace of such change. Set against the backdrop of a changing society, teachers have had to cope with significant changes in curriculum, assessment and forms of qualification with limited opportunities and resources for understanding and keeping abreast of such changes. Education budgets (both national and school) spare little for ensuring teachers are adequately trained to cope with change. The social cost of this is plain to see but not well researched. From my anecdotal observations, I suggest a large portion of the physical education teaching community has less than five years experience with recent graduates averaging around two years before leaving. Those who have been in the job for a while have to be admired for their ability to deal with the complexity of the job and their passion for working for the education of young people.

To summarise to this point, the nature of contemporary school physical education has been profoundly influenced by the rapid and profound changes taking place in society in general and the education system in particular. Consequently, the nature of teaching has become more complex as teachers balance the exigencies of curriculum and assessment with the needs and expectations of students, parents and schools. I would now like to turn my attention to some of the key issues that I believe are shaping the practice of physical education. Many of these issues overlap and relate to the changes and pressures teachers must face. The first issue relates to the rise in what Jesson (2000) calls "the managed professional". As stated above, teaching finds itself in 'new times' where issues of globalisation, tradition and uncertainty create a changing and increasingly reflexive context. Within a world of increasing uncertainty brought on by the dislocation of knowledge and control, there has been a political shift towards managerialist and economic-rationalistic forms of government (Tinning, 2000). A key consequence of this has been the changing employment context for teachers as schools have adopted business-like models of employee accountability and control. The managed professional is constrained within a network of legal, financial, curricular and power structures operating within the

schooling context. Individually, none of these factors mandate against the possibility of alternative action but collectively they can effectively impede the agency of the teacher. Such conditions ensure that the nature and role of teaching is changing: a role less guided by professional judgement, as in “public intellectual”, and one more controlled by mandated requirements as in “educational technician”. Such new age professionals are less concerned with the details of the knowledge they impart than ensuring compliance with prescribed assessment expectations.

Any brief survey of schools quickly reveals the effects of such a shift on school programmes. From my observations it is now difficult to find anyone doing anything different. Certainly, there is a broad range in the quality of the teaching being done but this variation only occurs within a standard paradigm. Physical education is now, more or less, the same in each school, with very little variation in either what is taught or how it is taught. This has not always been the case. Through the 1980s teachers were allowed to make curricular decisions and develop programmes that were officially recognized by what was then the Department of Education. Even with the early introduction of Sixth Form Certificate PE, teachers had a degree of autonomy over what and how to assess their students. However, gradually this freedom was shifted away from teachers who were allowed to make fewer and fewer decisions in relation to their courses. The danger in this “sameness” is not just that it fails to meet the needs of all children, which I feel it doesn’t, but that the ability to exercise professional judgement becomes a vestigial ability that is no longer applied in the best interests of children. Teachers are losing the skill of being able to create meaningful and relevant programmes for their students.

The second issue relates to the growing number of locations where students can be physically educated. Once the bastion of schools, physical education has now diversified, expanded and is now prevalent in many forms beyond the school gates. These locations might include sports clubs, swimming pools, dance institutions, private businesses and holiday recreation programmes. In some cases, it appears that these forms of physical education take precedence over school physical education. For example, it is now commonplace for students to learn to swim through lessons at their local swimming pool rather than their school. Of course, to a degree this is a middle-class phenomenon that requires a certain set of values and discretionary spending power but the fact remains that the development of core physical competencies for many children, particularly at the primary school level, is increasingly being done after school rather than during it.

In my opinion there are several lessons that the schooling sector can learn from this trend. I believe such trends demonstrate that physical education continues to be highly valued by society. The inability of schools to effectively deliver these learning opportunities has meant that many people have sought them outside of schools. Furthermore, it is important to note that many of these programmes are oriented around achieving an outcome. In the case of swimming, students go to lessons to learn to swim and often continue till they have a level of proficiency that makes them safe in and around water. The teaching in such programmes is based on a pedagogy that often foregrounds strong subject matter knowledge (the teacher is often an expert in the topic), sound instructional practices, careful assessment related to student learning and attention to student grouping (small groups often differentiated on ability). There is also an appreciation that the development of physical competency takes time, even years to develop. A further point to observe is the way such programmes provide a

setting that is meaningful for the student. The student's own self-selection into the activity and the desire to develop physical competency often drives learning in such settings.

The third issue relates to a changing focus from fitness to physical activity. In part this is caused by the realization that the technological advancements enjoyed in contemporary society have significantly reduced the amount of incidental physical activity people engage in, thereby creating the need for some form of regular, deliberate exercise as compensation (Hardman & Stensel, 2003; Jakes & Wareham, 2003). On the other side of the coin has been the appreciation that the physical activity needs of young people are different to those of adults. It is now apparent that the exercise prescription model focused on developing fitness is inappropriate for children (Corban, 2002). Related to this is the problematic nature of measuring and promoting fitness in children because of the way age, maturation and heredity also influence physical performance (Bouchard, 1993; Corban & Pangrazi, 1990). This change in focus, from fitness to physical activity, is subtle but significant for physical education practice.

From my observations in schools, it appears that fitness promotion continues to be standard practice. It is not uncommon to observe students involved in fitness testing or units of work to improve their fitness. Moreover, it is the standard practice that students participate in such practices rather than attempt to move to some level of independence or take responsibility for their own physical activity needs. Perhaps the key to a shift needs to occur in moving attention away from what students do in lesson time to examining how physical activity can be promoted in schools. The main settings for physical activity for young people are in walking or cycling to and from school, informal play during school breaks and after school, and participation in sport (Fox & Harris, 2003). It would appear that advocacy for safe environments and procedures that enable physical activity in each of these settings would be of greater value to the health needs of young people than in-class fitness activities currently done in schools.

A final issue relates to the rise in socio-ecological theories of learning. While I readily admit to the fact that educational researchers have struggled to adequately produce a knowledge base that teachers can effectively apply to their teaching, it does appear that the current surge in interest in socio-ecological theories of learning has the capacity to inform some of the pedagogical issues facing teachers. Socio-ecological theories (also known as situated learning theories) focus attention on the fact that knowledge and learning are both dynamically constructed and situated within social contexts (Scott, 2001). A focus on context allows reflection on the activities in any learning situation and the learner's ability to construe them as authentic, relevant and meaningful activities. Such theories also foreground the importance of the learners' participation and recognise that learning is an active process in which learners develop their competency in relation to the specific problems presented in a given situation (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998).

With reference to the teaching of physical education, such theories shift our attention to the types of contexts we create for learners and how teachers embed learning situations with a degree of authenticity and relevance. For the local swimming teacher, this is less of a problem since the motivation of the learner and the intention of the teacher effectively contextualizes the learning situation with clear purpose and relevance. However, for the schoolteacher, the typical lesson is very different because of the artificiality of the situation promoted by a lack of a common understanding of and commitment to the purpose of the lesson. Consequently, the way school pupils make sense of their involvement in such a

physical education lesson as well as the nature of their participation may not be conducive to building competency in the content being taught.

Fortunately, within physical education there are teaching and curriculum models that teachers can utilize. Although these have been around for a while, it is only now that the “theory” has started to catch up with what has been trialled and debated in schools for some time. The two most well known are the Teaching Games for Understanding model (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Kirk & MacPhail, 2002) and the Sport Education Model (Siedentop, Hastie & Van der Mars, 2004). Both of these approaches give consideration to the context that learning takes place in and recognize the need to situate learners in authentic game situations as the basis of their learning. Hopefully, as teachers adopt and fine-tune such models to their students’ specific needs there will be less emphasis on developing game techniques in decontextualised activities. The orthodox pedagogy has been the teacher-directed technique-centred lesson but with the rise of socio-ecological theories of learning it is my hope that teachers will have a sound basis for re-thinking their practices.

In conclusion, what I have tried to capture is a sense of the state of contemporary physical education in New Zealand schools and, specifically, the changes and issues that are impacting on the practice of physical education. As I have tried to outline, the nature of teaching physical education has changed and will continue to do so given some of the fundamental issues driving such change. Whose interests are served by such constant change is debatable. However, it is evident that teachers, who are at the critical intersection of how curriculum is practiced and lived, need much more support and professional development to ensure school practice is relevant, meaningful and effective. It still remains an essential principle that school physical education is one of the key locations for students to be introduced to, participate in, and learn through the broad practices of the movement culture. For this reason I believe that physical education remains as one of the core elements of a good education.

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