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Physical Education and the Educative Value of Sport and Physical Activity: Distractions and Confusions

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The purpose of this paper is to conceptualise physical education and its meaning in the Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum (HPE) (Ministry of Education, 1999); discuss and attempt to clarify thinking around physical education, physical activity and sport as they relate to the curriculum; and discuss barriers that may impede curriculum learning and programme implementation in schools.

The HPE curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) sets out with the intention of developing a new teaching/learning paradigm for physical education that attempts to:

- define learning outcomes for physical education which encourages an holistic approach based on a socio-ecological perspective;
- encourage greater integration and balance between the socio-cultural and physical-biological sciences;
- contextualise physical education with a set of attitudes and values that signify the importance of movement as a valued human practice;
- draw on critical theory to address critical learning dimensions that have been largely lacking in previous curricula and physical education pedagogy and practice;
- engender awareness and debate around the discourse of healthism, particularly given the debate surrounding obesity and physical inactivity;
- centralise and acknowledge that the individual, in his /her search for personal meaning, once educated in health and physical education, would be able to make positive contributions to the enhancement of society;
- integrate pedagogical practices of both national and international cultural orientations (adapted from Culpan, 2005).

In attempting to achieve the above, the HPE curriculum has as its centrality, a movement context. Despite this centrality, initiatives by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in collaboration with Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) have created confusion between the use of terminology in physical education, its meaning and implementation responsibilities (MOE, 2005; SPARC, 2004; SPARC 2005). The manner in which such terms as: physical education, physical activity and sport, have been bandied about by the bureaucracy has resulted in significant ‘muddled thinking’ around the whole movement area.

On analysing SPARC’s documentation it becomes clear that their conceptualisation of physical activity relates to three areas of interest: health, economic development and social connectedness (SPARC, 2004; SPARC, 2005). While these areas strengthen the importance of physical activity and its use as a policy development tool for wider society, there is little attention devoted to articulating the educative function of physical activity. This is a concern given SPARC’s involvement in physical activity initiatives in schools (MOE, 2007). While such initiatives strengthen the argument for physical activity across the lifespan, the challenge is for MOE and SPARC to continue working together to ensure such initiatives in schools have a clear and coherent education purpose. At present this clarity and coherence is lacking.

To help clarify the confusion and muddled thinking, it is important to turn to the HPE curriculum to determine what it is saying about the relationship between physical education, sport and physical activity. The curriculum identifies Physical Activity as a Key Area of Learning that includes:

- movement skills for physical competence, enjoyment, self worth and active lifestyle;
- personal and inter-personal skill development;
- knowledge and understanding of scientific and technological influences on physical activity;
- knowledge and understanding of cultural practices associated with physical activity;
- knowledge and understanding of the significance of social influences on physical activity;
- personal values, attitudes, behaviours and actions in physical activity settings (adapted from the Ministry of Education, 1999).
Taking the curriculum’s philosophical position then, physical activity within the framework of physical education has a clear educative function. First and foremost it is a medium used in becoming physically educated. Through physical activity, physical education encourages:

- active use of one’s body;
- the promotion of active lifestyles;
- skill development across a range of areas;
- knowledge and development around scientific, technological, cultural and social understandings of movement;
- the development of positive attitudes and values.

Physical activity on the other hand can be just “energy expenditure through skeletal muscle movement” (SPARC, 2004, p.33). However once it becomes part of the school curriculum and scheduled in timetabled time, physical activity’s function must be educative and its contribution is encapsulated within physical education. Taking this explanation into account, the curriculum therefore conceptualises physical activity both as an entity which provides its own meaning and has its own outcome and one that is also a medium for learning. Of course this raises the question of where and how sport fits into this position.

Sport is essentially a contextualised meaning of physical activity. As for physical activity, the HPE curriculum has clear statements about sport. It conceptualises sport within the framework of Sport Studies which is a Key Area of Learning and in a similar manner to its treatment of physical activity, the curriculum stresses the educative value of it. Sport Studies requires more than just participation in sport. It is more than sports performance. Sport Studies requires the holistic study of sport from a range of perspectives similar to the physical activity points listed above. If schools offer organised school sport programmes in addition to the mandatory scheduled timetabled physical education, then like physical activity within physical education, sport needs to be conceptualised and practised as having an educative function consistent with the philosophy of the HPE curriculum (Culpan, 2005). As New Zealand scholars, Grant and Pope (2000), Smithells, (1974) and Stothart, (2000) argue, sport has significant educative value and if one looks at the spectrum of sport and moves beyond mere sport performance, then the study of sport has particular relevance for physical education.

Given the confusion over the meaning of physical education, sport and physical activity and its function in the HPE curriculum, barriers to the successful implementation of physical education have arisen. These include:

- out-dated thinking around physical education and its possibilities;
- a lack of the philosophical understanding of the curriculum;
- a lack of critical thinking that is informed by widely accepted evidence, based on theoretical and conceptual understandings and models;
- poor understanding about the educative function of physical education and its possible meanings;
- the confused messages that exist around the role of sport and physical activity;
- muddled thinking by central agencies.

To rectify this situation, clear long term, educationally coherent and research informed strategies need to be developed, implemented and adhered to. These strategies need to be developed within a collaborative framework between relevant government agencies, particularly the MOE and Ministry of Health, teachers and teacher education providers, and interested organisations, e.g. SPARC and Physical Education New Zealand (Culpan, 2005).

A further barrier to effective implementation is the quality of physical education teacher education programmes (PETE). New thinking in PETE programmes in NZ is needed. Regarding PETE, the following questions may be useful in the re-conceptualisation of teacher education programmes:

- to what extent do programmes examine philosophical positions in physical education?
- to what extent has teacher education changed to accommodate learning around pedagogies that are emancipatory in nature?
- to what extent are teachers held accountable for understanding pedagogical theories applicable to the curriculum?
- to what extent do teacher education programmes foster balanced development of physical education content beyond scientific functionalism?
- what do our students know about the epidemiology of physical activity and its relationship to the obesity debate?
- what do our students know about growth and maturation and the consequences of physical inactivity?
- what do our students know about the relationship between physical education and sport performance?
- what do our students know about becoming critical participants within the movement culture and understanding the educative and social functions and significance of sport, of physical activity and physical education?
- what do students know about initiatives around active schools?

(adapted from Culpan, 2005; Culpan & Bruce, 2007)

While the HPE curriculum has been conceptualised from a socio-critical perspective the State has driven initiatives that have the potential to create uncertain and muddled thinking around sport and physical activity and their relationship to physical education. This paper has briefly discussed the curriculum’s position on physical activity and sport and has attempted to provide clarity to the use of such terms. The discussion has emphasised:

- that both physical activity and sport can have educative value and through physical education this value has relevance for schooling and needs to be capitalised on;
- that sport is a contextualised form of physical activity and if offered in schools as co-curricula, it needs to have an educative value;
- that physical activity can be viewed from different perspectives. It can be an entity in its own right, and it can be used as an outcome and as a medium or process for achieving learning within physical education.

In making the above three points, it is important to be very clear that physical education can, by using both physical activity and sport, utilise rich, potent and powerful consciousness raising avenues by which individuals and groups can make sense of the world. However in trying to achieve this, barriers to curriculum learning and programme implementation have been identified. These may be summarised as:

- thinking that is either essentially outdated, or ill-informed;
- messages emanating from current State initiatives which may cause confusion;
- inadequate teacher training and teacher support.

Given this situation it is concluded that while the MOE and other related agencies have given support to improving curriculum implementation, and some progress has been made by teachers, more thought, fresh thinking and more informed judgments around physical education are needed if the physical education puzzle is to become considerably less muddled.

References


