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Implementing meaningful, educative curricula, and assessments in complex school environments

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Abstract

This commentary uses the lens of curricular implementation to consider issues and opportunities afforded by the papers in this special edition. While it is interesting to envision innovative approaches to physical education, actually implementing changes in the complex institutional school environment is exceptionally challenging. These authors have done an excellent job presenting viable solutions and foregrounding challenges. Yet, without a concerted effort to invite teachers to engage with us in this process, our implementation initiatives may not enhance the meaningful and educative process that these scholars envision for physical education.

Keywords

Implementation; Curriculum; Complexity; Innovation; Teachers

Each of the authors contributing papers to this volume tackles a complex web of challenges that currently face physical education as it is implemented in many schools in the UK, Australia, and the USA. Conceptualizing innovative approaches to curriculum that can refresh, revive, (re)socialize, and (re)personalize physical education continues to engage our thoughts as we attempt to address the meaning, educational mission, and value of physical education. These scholars have articulated visions for innovation and change in physical education that are exceptionally well informed. They provide cutting edge suggestions and creative questions that lead us to consider new possibilities to conceptualize school-based physical education. I believe the curricula and assessment innovations presented here will benefit millions of children who need democratic, autonomous, and supported physical education. Our children throughout the world need to find personally meaningful, engaging, and reflective approaches to be ‘in’ movement. These programs will be boundless, integrated, and cross-disciplinary with pedagogy and assessment woven as one seamless educative enrichment. Assessments will be authentic and provide information *to students* about their progress and improvement. I agree wholeheartedly with these authors’ visions for physical education, and I, like other readers of this volume, sincerely want them to become reality.

Implementing programmatic innovations, however, is a tremendously challenging task in the complex social and institutional settings found in schools. The complexity inherent in understanding traditional perspectives, posing alternatives, and implementing change within the complex world of physical education pedagogy and assessment presents opportunities that are both intellectually stimulating and fraught with challenge and frustration (Doll, 2008; Ennis, in press). Certainly, the authors in this volume have given voice to a host of challenges that reflect school complexity (Davis & Sumara, 2006). In this brief commentary, I will focus specifically on the complexity inherent in *implementing* the innovations proposed.

No shortage of challenges

As a profession, we must find ways to bring children's meaning and learning to many physical education programs worldwide. We acknowledge, too, that each of us has been privileged to partake, observe, or perhaps even convey physical education programs to children, adolescents, and adults that they perceived were meaningful, authentic, rich, and fulfilling. We know reflective and educative physical education when we see it. We can even describe it. We know it is possible—but it is extraordinarily difficult to implement on a large scale.

Relevance and meaning are at the center of Brown's article in this volume lamenting the loss of Arnold's perspective on learning 'in movement.' Brown's attempt to refocus the field on Arnold's original thesis is admirable and well suited for tackling the complexities necessary in engaging many students in physical education. Arnold's US contemporary, Ann Jewett (1983), also envisioned a personal meaning curriculum following John Dewey's (1916) ecological perspective (Jewett & Ennis, 1990). Jewett *et al.* (1995) reminded us that:

Persons are holistic beings, continuously in the process of becoming, who can intend what they will do...and for what purpose. The primary concern of physical education is the personal search for meaning by the individual moving in interaction with the environment. (p. 271)

She encouraged us to trust that students will select and engage in movement they find personally meaningful. As Ann Jewett's doctoral student, Linda Bain (1995), explained, reflection and mindfulness are central to integrating movement deeply into physical education and life.

Themes of meaning in physical education curriculum, however, are as illusive as they are compelling. Unfortunately, designers of meaning curricula in physical education rarely focus on the complex process of implementation, instead, relying on the intuitive appeal of relevance and intrinsic value. Like self-actualizing or personally interesting approaches to physical education curriculum, the multidiverse, yet ultimately personal, conceptualizations inherent in these approaches suggest that implementation of individual meaning curricula in a physical education class of 20, or unfortunately 50, 90, or 120 students as we are observing in physical education today, is a challenge that even complexivists are reluctant to tackle.

Hastie, Rudisill, and Wadsworth's paper presents an exceptionally compelling, highly documented case for student autonomy and support. Clearly, there is a preponderance of evidence that supports the advantages of structuring lessons to promote student voice and decision making. Nevertheless, I suspect that while readers of this volume have logged extensive hours in many different schools, rarely have they observed naturally occurring environments with the level of student support and autonomy that Hastie and his colleagues argue is essential for significant, sustained student achievement. Often quite the opposite is true. Physical education is characterized by teacher control at all levels. This includes excessive class management, lack of educative curricular choices, and minimal opportunities for self- and peer-assessment. In some classes, even relaxing control to permit students to engage in constructivist Think, Pair, Share strategies is perceived as a waste of activity time, resulting in heart rates tumbling out of the Target Heart Rate Range.

The paper contributed by López-Pastor, Kirk, Lorente-Catalán, MacPhail, and Macdonald gives a similarly compelling message in the carefully articulated critique of traditional versus alternative assessment environments. Clearly, there is almost unanimous pedagogical support for the value of alternative and authentic assessments; yet, the complex nature of schools and the physical education environments interact to hold traditional assessment practices stable and highly resistant to change. López-Pastor and colleagues' review heightens our awareness of many of these issues and points to the difficulty of destabilizing the dominate, traditional assessment approach that privileges effort and uniform (kit) at the expense of more meaningful and educational formative assessments in school-based physical education.

In physical education, we arguably have the most diverse content in the school. We can focus on the aesthetic, adventurous, competitive, social, skillful, fit, and cooperative—just to name a few! Achievement can be conceptualized in so many alternative and authentic ways; yet, physical education seems only to be able to plod forward checking socks and subjectively assessing students for the level of effort they are willing to expend on mundane tasks.

Penney's excellent article examining points of tensions identifies significant and compelling barriers that we must acknowledge and negotiate in educative environments. She conceptualizes a relatively unbounded physical education in which students stop to reflect about the fairness of the game, the opportunities of all participants, and the nuances of cooperation that made that last score possible. Physical activity can be an intrinsically meaningful physical effort. Helping all children to feel able and enabled is an exceptionally worthy goal.

Penney employs Bernstein's theories to foreground the bounded, stable context of schools as complex institutional systems fraught with cross-purposes. Bernstein (2000) is perhaps the master of pedagogical complexity, articulating the processes by which individuals struggle to break free. However, the initial acts necessary to destabilize bounded systems, though difficult, are comparatively easy when juxtaposed with the commitment, philosophical restructuring, and resource reallocation necessary to restabilize and sustain large-scale innovations. The boundaries Penney frames as 'points of tension' provide opportunities to

develop shared meanings and provide equitable practices around movement experiences that are meaningful to students.

Implementation of an equitable physical education environment has been a particularly challenging task in a profession in which many leaders, themselves, have thrived as dominant players in an inequitable world. By and large, many physical educators feel most comfortable teaching lessons in which *they* as youth would have been highly successful. The fact that only a small percentage of twenty-first century students are 'like us' leads to sites of resistance in the implementation of 'like us' physical education. Clearly, the isolation and marginalization experienced by teachers and students in physical education perpetuates inequities. Furthermore, the pressure faced by many secondary principals to hire physical educators based on their team sport coaching credentials can perpetuate inequitable environments for students who lack skillfulness or interest in multi-activity team sport curricula. Certainly not all coaches are elitist and many subvert their competitive spirit in physical education to *teach* children who are 'not like us.' They push back on the pressures and are agents of change. Nevertheless, many conscious and unconscious decisions directly impact students in physical education, stabilizing the multi-activity team sport curriculum while simultaneously marginalizing students who might benefit from the innovations that the authors of the papers in this volume propose. If as Penny argues, 'all curriculum is social,' then how can we engage together to enhance students' experiences within a meaningful and educative curriculum?

Gard, Hickey, and Enright take a different approach to innovative programming by beginning with the *context* of youth culture and then examining various perspectives in physical education that can place youth culture at the center of curricular decision making. This innovative approach addresses many of the complex issues that mask or liberate student relevance and meaning, while pointing out the sometimes negative and often transient nature of youth culture. Youth culture may be the only phenomenon that changes faster than technology! Building a curriculum on youth culture, today, is ripe for prehistoric status tomorrow. Gard and colleagues present their scholarship with an eye on implementation complexity. Though certainly physical education curriculum developers should be sensitive to the current hot spots in youth culture, they would be wise to identify a core of crosscutting themes to provide more stability to the curriculum, at least in the short term.

Most articles in this volume provide interesting possibilities for curriculum and assessment and daunting challenges for implementation. Lorente-Catalán and Kirk, however, present an alternative perspective within a micro context. Instead of offering an abstract vision for physical education, they provide a scenario for change in PETE instituted by one committed teacher with students who are constructing their understanding of democratic assessment. Rather than cower over concerns about student responsibility and integrity, these scholars conceptualize challenges as teachable moments, persuading students to act responsibly, autonomously, and honestly. Although some students come to the experience more willing or better prepared to self- and peer-assess, the authors describe a detailed process through which teachers *teach* these skills and ways of thinking and acting. The implementation protocols evolve to match the commitment to these forms of instructional autonomy and justice. This is a teacher who is acting as an agent for change.

This article reminds us, yet, again that physical education and PETE can successfully and equitably undertake many innovations with knowledgeable, committed, energetic teachers working as change agents within a supportive institutional structure. Like students, teachers who are ‘able and enabled’ using Penney’s phrase, can comprehend pedagogical possibilities. They can articulate student-supported purposes that lead to commitment, and marshal the physical and intellectual energy to persist and sustain the innovation, sometimes within exhausting environments. These qualities appear keys to successful innovation, implementation, and change. Although dedicated and enthusiastic teachers can accomplish many things, preparing and nurturing teachers to be mindful, strive for equity, and use instructional tools and strategies effectively appears central to institutionalizing *any* change within complex school systems.

López-Pastor and his colleagues remind us quite eloquently, ‘alternative assessments are complex and require teachers who have the time, resources, and expertise to construct worthwhile tasks, embed those tasks into the teaching and learning process, and implement them in valid and equitable ways.’ (p. xx–xx)[Typesetter: Please set page number for this extract.]. I would also add that those teachers need to have the curiosity, energy, and commitment to think deeply and reflectively about the opportunities students *could* have in physical education. In the USA, where there are few high stakes physical education tests, government inspectors, or curricular documents, teachers can be change agents. Unfortunately, creating and implementing innovative versions of meaningful and educative physical education takes enormous effort. Most who are willing to try, must go it alone as they create physical education lessons, motivate their athletic teams, and care for their families. Many are exhausted; yet, we ask them to dream of liberating curricula that are meaningful and relevant to youth who exist simultaneously within multiple cultures.

In most of the articles in this volume, voices of physical educators are silent. Rarely can scholars, alone, impact policy adequately to implement large-scale changes. It is one thing to write a national curriculum, quite another to actually observe those changes in the gymnasium. As scholars we need to invite teachers to join the conversation. And we *need* them to accept this invitation, agreeing to engage together with us in every aspect of physical education revisioning. Scholars (including me) have envisioned boundless curricula with student-supportive environments and tightly matching assessments. However, implementing large scale programmatic innovations is a tremendously challenging and exhausting task in the current complex social settings found in schools.

Who or what is stopping physical educators from implementing the ‘right’ curriculum in the ‘right’ context for the ‘right’ students at the ‘right’ time? I do not think the fact that we have diverse visions for physical education is the problem. That diversity is essential to address the multiple ways our students in countries around the world conceptualize meaning. However, the actual implementation of the innovations proposed in this volume is very challenging, indeed. Teachers are essential players in this process.

Teachers, however, first need to *want* these changes AND then receive training, support, commitment, resources, and energy to implement them. Currently, teaching the multi-activity approach to physical education is *easier* than any curricular or assessment option we

have generated. I am unaware of any physical education curriculum that is *less* work than multi-activity—at least as typically taught. Engaging *all* teachers, not just the expert, motivated teachers with whom we typically collaborate in our research, is critically important for the future of meaningful and educative curriculum. Developing new approaches that are effective and can be implemented in complex physical education settings is one of the next great tasks for our teacher-scholar partnerships.

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