

13 Re-reflecting on priorities for physical education: now and in the twenty-first century

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Introduction

This chapter begins by reminding readers what physical education is and what lies at its core. The chapter then considers priorities for physical education, within the context of the unique contribution that the subject makes to the curriculum. In the third part of the chapter consideration is given to changing priorities for physical education over time. Attention is given to the influence of physical education teachers' own values regarding priorities for the subject, based on reasoned reflection and within a societal context. A brief historical background is then given. Finally, the chapter encourages readers to consider priorities for and content of physical education in the twenty-first century in order for the subject to make as full a contribution as possible to the education of all pupils.

What physical education is and what lies at its core

When asked what physical education is, the response from many people, including many physical education teachers, is often a list of activities that comprise a physical education curriculum rather than a definition of the subject. However, in order to justify its place in the curriculum, the subject must be more than a list of activities in which pupils participate. If physical education is only a list of activities, there are other people (such as coaches) and other places or contexts (such as extra-curricular activities, community sport provision) which can provide opportunities for pupils to participate in those activities. As Thorpe and Bunker reminded us in relation to games:

The physical education teacher, in selecting a sample of games, must highlight the relationships between them and must develop them working with rule structures, increasing the tactical complexity and greater decision-making capacity. It is the ability to think and operate in this way that separates the physical education teacher from other providers of games experiences, e.g. coaches and sports leaders.

(Thorpe and Bunker 1997: 79)

In physical education, activities are the means of achieving its aims. Teachers purposefully select one activity over another in order to achieve a particular aim.

One reason that people may identify physical education as a list of activities is that there has been little consensus as to what physical education is and no single accepted definition. Lack of consensus, and of a clear definition, support views that physical education has been, and remains, contested (e.g. Evans and Davies 1992, Evans, Penney and Davies 1996, Kirk 1992, Kirk and Tinning 1990, Penney 1998, Talbot 1995). Some examples of definitions of physical education are given in [Chapters 1](#) and [8](#) of this book.

Despite lack of consensus or agreement about a definition, there is a need to identify what physical education is and what lies at the core of the subject. Talbot identified characteristics of physical education as:

- an entitlement within the education system for all children, whatever their personal characteristics, background or level of ability
- focus on the body and its movement in the physical and overall development of young people
- use of the physical beyond the merely mechanical, including demands of, and increases in, physical capacities, including physical skills, speed, stamina, mobility and physical responsiveness
- the centrality of a learning process: not only developmental processes, but activity which demands engagement, effort and attention by the learner
- the passing on of knowledge about, understanding of and respect for the human body and its achievements, both one's own and others'
- the learning of physical skill, critical reflection, refinement and improvement, working towards physical competence and physical literacy.
- an integration of the physical self with the thinking and social person
- a shared language and value system, with capacity for adaptation of practice according to children's needs: a central value would be that children and their successful development are more important than the activities in which they may be engaged
- careful selection of physical activities, to meet developmental and individual learning needs
- working towards an understanding and appreciation of the role of physical development and physical activities in personal development, health maintenance and social lifestyle.

(Talbot 1998: 107)

The Department for Education and Employment and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority identified the importance of physical education thus:

Physical education develops pupils' physical competence and confidence, and their ability to use these to perform in a range of activities. It promotes physical skillfulness, physical development and a knowledge of the body in action. Physical education provides opportunities for pupils to be creative, competitive and to face up to different challenges as individuals and in groups and teams. It promotes positive attitudes towards active and healthy lifestyles. Pupils learn how to think in different ways to suit a wide variety of creative, competitive and challenging activities. They learn how to plan, perform and evaluate actions, ideas and performances to improve their quality and effectiveness. Through this process pupils discover their aptitudes, abilities and preferences, and make choices about how to get involved in lifelong physical activity.

(DfEE/QCA 1999: 15)

Both of these descriptions of physical education identify physical development as a central feature of the subject. Her Majesty's Inspectors identified three aspects of physical development:

- the development of motor competence of the kind required for successful, controlled and co-ordinated participation in contexts of sport, dance and physical exercise
- the development of fine motor control of the kind demonstrated in the manipulative skills of writing, craftwork, painting etc., and
- a knowledge of the impact of gross muscular exercise on the body, particularly in terms of its consequences for health and for the enjoyable and constructive use of leisure time.

Although other subjects in the school curriculum cater for the physical dimension of a child's development, e.g. the development of fine motor control in Art and Music, physical education performs a unique role in catering for those aspects of physical learning identified under the first and third points made by the DES, that is, 'where whole body competence is a potential source of satisfaction for everyone for health and recreation (and an additional source of satisfaction for those capable of elite and/or professional/vocational levels of involvement in sport, dance and exercise contexts)' (Piotrowski and Capel 1996: 187).

Priorities for physical education

Thus physical education has a unique contribution to make to the education of pupils. This unique contribution should be central to physical education teachers' work. If physical education teachers lose sight of that which is unique to the subject and the justification for physical education is made only in terms of what it contributes to general educational and cross-curricular aims, the justification for physical education as a subject in the curriculum is weakened. Other subjects may be equally or better placed to serve the purposes identified. This issue is discussed further in [Chapter 1](#) of this book. However, while recognising the unique contribution of physical education to physical development and physical competence, different priorities for physical education can be identified.

Priorities for physical education influenced by the personal values of teachers

Physical education teachers have their own priorities for the subject; these are based on their own personal values. It is important that teachers are clear about their personal values and reflect on the impact these may have on their priorities for the subject. Personal values are a result of a number of factors, e.g. personality, previous experience and background. For example, many physical education teachers come into the profession because they have had good experiences, and been successful, in physical education and sport (e.g. Evans and Williams 1989, Mawer 1995). However, personal values can also be developed as a result of increased knowledge and understanding, training and support, and reasoned reflection. Readers are invited to reflect on why they have chosen to become physical education teachers, what their personal values are, and therefore what their priorities for physical education are.

Priorities for physical education influence the curriculum content selected and the teaching methods adopted. Two examples of the link between priorities and curriculum content and teaching methods are given below.

Teachers who value the competitive experiences which sport may provide may prioritise the importance of the sports experience for all pupils. One model of teaching that has some support is the *sport education* model (see, for example, Siedentop 1994). The aim of this model was articulated by Siedentop *et al.* as 'to help students become skilled participants and good sports persons [and] ... to teach them to be players in the fullest sense of that term' (Siedentop *et al.* 1986: 186–7). The sport education model was designed to promote a positive sport experience to pupils through stimulating an authentic sport experience, incorporating as many aspects of the sport as possible in the programme, for instance:

- 1 Sport takes place in seasons. A unit of work on one sport is called a season. The season/unit is often

longer than six weeks or half a term. At the beginning of the season/unit more time is spent on practice, but later in the season/unit, more emphasis is placed on competitions.

- 2 Players are members of teams and remain in a team for a season/unit (pupils are placed in teams that practice and play matches together throughout the season/unit).
- 3 Seasons/units are defined by formal competitions. A formal competition extends through the season/unit on the particular sport.
- 4 There is a culminating event to each season/unit. The season/unit concludes with an organised event such as a championship.
- 5 There is extensive record keeping. Records are kept for teams during the season/unit, e.g. matches won, patterns of play, etc.
- 6 There is a festive atmosphere in which the season/unit, particularly the culminating event, takes place.

Pupils are therefore players, but also have the opportunity to become coaches, referees, managers, organisers, statisticians, publicity officers. The teacher begins by coaching all the teams but later in the season/unit pupils can become coaches of their own teams.

Proponents of sport education identify reasons for basing a curriculum on this model, e.g. the positive experiences of pupils in units of work; greater knowledge and understanding developed by pupils due to the length of time they participate in one sport and the ability to undertake different roles in the team.

A second example is teachers who value the benefits of physical education for health; such teachers may prioritise the health benefits of participation in physical activity. There is no single model for effective delivery of a *health based physical education curriculum*; debate about the best curriculum and teaching methods is focused around a number of factors, including the emphasis on health versus fitness and a permeation model of delivery versus discrete units of work devoted to a health focus (see [Chapter 11](#) for further discussion about different modes of delivering a health related physical education curriculum). Almond and Harris suggested that ‘how teachers deliver HRE [health related exercise] is an empirical and procedural issue which is open to evidence-based practice. In the absence of documented evidence, a range of possible organisational models should be explored in order to substantiate gains of practice’ (Almond and Harris 1997: 27, parentheses added). Thus, without evidence-based practice, it is possible that the approach adopted to delivering a health based curriculum is based on personal values and priorities. For example, if the priority is fitness of pupils, the emphasis in the curriculum may be on fitness testing. If the priority is to encourage all pupils to adopt a healthy lifestyle, the emphasis in the curriculum may be on enjoyment of participation in physical activities and/or the development of a knowledge base/theory associated with health and HRE. This may be reflected in providing pupils with a wide range of experiences in physical education to motivate them to participate and to enable them to choose those activities in which they want to participate during extra-curricular, out of school or post-school time. If such an approach is adopted, it is important to reflect on the balance between the range of activities taught and the time necessary for pupils to develop knowledge, skill and understanding necessary as the basis for developing competence for later participation; between breadth and depth of activities. (Further consideration is given to breadth and balance in the curriculum in [Chapter 7](#).) In this approach, a health focus can be taught as an independent unit of work or it can permeate other activities in the curriculum. Also, the approach may be extended beyond HRE into the rest of the school encouraging the development of a health promoting school.

Thus, it is important that physical education teachers reflect on their personal values and how these

influence their priorities for physical education. In turn, these priorities can have a significant effect on the physical education curriculum offered. However, physical education teachers are also operating in a societal context. Thus there may be different priorities for physical education in different contexts. The next part of the chapter looks at how priorities for physical education have changed over the last century and how they may change in the twenty-first century.

Changing priorities for physical education over time

The Forster Education Bill of 1870 allowed for physical education to be included in the elementary school curriculum. Following the Forster Bill, the School Board for London adopted a military training approach which Her Majesty's Inspector for the City of London believed would lead to health and physical development as well as to good habits of obeying orders and aptitude for military service (Morrell 1871, cited in McIntosh 1976: 21). Objections to military drill, especially for girls, led, in 1876, to 'non-secular' physical education for girls. This marked the introduction of a form of physical education other than military drill and the beginning of separate curricula for boys and girls. Following this decision, Swedish gymnastics was introduced for girls in all schools in London in 1878. In 1890 swimming was introduced into schools.

A New Code was developed in 1904 in which the purpose of elementary school physical education was identified as forming and strengthening character and providing opportunities for the development of the body. This was achieved by training children in appropriate physical exercises, encouraging them in organised games and instructing them in some of the simpler laws of health. Schools also had a responsibility to develop the instinct for fair play and loyalty to one another as the basis for a wider sense of honour in later life (McIntosh 1976: 30). This Code led to games being added to the elementary school curriculum in 1906, with the objective of providing 'for moral and social education' (ibid.: 29–30).

A report from the Chief Medical Officer of the Board of Education in 1932 stated that

the ultimate criterion of the success of any scheme or system of physical training is the carriage, mobility and equilibrium of the human body. If there is one test of the strength, tone and balance of the body it is posture, for this depends on the co-ordination of the muscles acting on the skeleton. Good posture indicated health and soundness; bad posture the reverse.

(cited in McIntosh 1976: 32)

This led to an emphasis on good posture in the 1933 physical training syllabus. During the Second World War 'movement' replaced posture as the means by which the curriculum was judged; changing the shape and focus of physical education after the war. The 'movement' approach was influenced by a number of factors, including: modern dance of Laban; orthopaedic and remedial exercises; and obstacle training in the army. Different aspects of physical activity were identified in the curriculum, e.g. games, gymnastics, dance, and swimming. Girls' and boys' departments became further separated, with girls focusing more on movement education than boys.

Changes in the physical education curriculum over the last century were influenced by and linked to the changing context of society over time, such as the importance of military drill in physical education at the end of the nineteenth century was due mainly to the number of recruits who were rejected for military service in the Boer war as they were unfit for duty (see, for example, McIntosh 1976: 27).

This brief look at the history of physical education shows that as society has changed over time, so priorities for physical education have also changed. Likewise, priorities for the current curriculum

framework in which physical education teachers are working are not static; they are determined by the particular context in which it is operating. This is the result of a complex interaction of factors, including social, technological, economic and political factors. In England, the influence of the market economy on education, the importance of sport as part of the political agenda, and the concern for the health of the nation have been particular influences on the physical education curriculum in recent years. Other more general recent changes which influence education and physical education, have included:

- *Social*: an increase in the number of one-parent families; greater convergence of roles between men and women in families; an increased number of working women.
- *Technological*: increased use of and sophistication in information technology; growing influence of electronic communication and the Internet.
- *Economic*: the demise of major manufacturing industries; increased unemployment, particularly among young men under the age of twenty-five; the likelihood of redundancy or changes of job during a career; within education, emphasis on value for money; the introduction of the Euro.
- *Political*: greater emphasis on market forces within education which results in increased competition and, hence, marketing in education; greater emphasis on standards.

There are numerous other changes in each of these areas and readers might like to reflect on these.

Priorities for physical education in the twenty-first century

It is clear that change is going to continue; we are living in a world where it has been said that the only constant is change. Three areas which are likely to have an impact on physical education in the twenty-first century are considered briefly below in order to stimulate reflection on the influence of external factors on physical education in the future.

The information revolution is almost certain to continue. Information technology and its various applications, including electronic communications, look set to play a more important role in society in general. Consideration therefore needs to be given to the role of information and communications technology in helping to develop a physically educated population.

Sport is highly likely to remain important and the influence of sport and sporting bodies on physical education is likely to continue. Gifted pupils are likely to be under more pressure to move into the adult world of sport at an early age. Physical education teachers will need to balance the immediate needs of gifted pupils to excel in specific activities alongside the longer term need for such pupils to become physically educated. Physical education teachers will also need to continue to balance the needs of gifted pupils with the individual needs of other pupils, remaining abreast of developments concerning the rights of the individual and the commitment to equality of opportunity. However, continuing concern about the health of the nation and the financial implications of poor health among the population, along with continuing pressure on the National Health Service to increase efficiency, is likely to lead to greater focus on HRE in physical education. Thus, the differing pressures of sport and health need to be considered in developing a physically educated population. ([Chapters 8](#) and [11](#) provide further discussion about these influences.)

Safety considerations have always been of paramount importance for physical education teachers. However, litigation appears likely to increase in the twenty-first century and the impact of any increase will require physical education teachers to balance carefully requirements for safety with the need for pupils to be able to have a full range of experiences which will enable them to become

physically educated. The breadth and depth of the physical education programme could be adversely affected if the threat of litigation results in physical education teachers offering a limited range of activities considered least likely to result in any injury.

As society changes in the future, priorities for physical education are likely to change. What should be the priorities of physical education in the twenty-first century?

The effect of changing priorities on the physical education curriculum

Despite considerable change in society in recent years and changes in priorities for physical education, the physical education curriculum has remained much the same over many years. It remains dominated by major team games such as cricket, football, netball, hockey and rugby. Other activities such as athletics, dance, gymnastics, rounders, swimming and tennis are included in the curricula at certain times or in certain schools (evidence of this dominance is given in [Chapter 7](#)).

Teachers need to question why the physical education curriculum has not changed much. Why is it dominated by competitive team games? Is it because of tradition, because games have long been dominant in the physical education curriculum? Is it due to the value which many physical education teachers place on competitive sports and physical activities? Is it because physical education teachers tend to teach those activities in which they have knowledge and/or expertise? Is it because of political influences, e.g. to produce the next generation of international athletes? What other factors are influential?

Activities should not be included in the curriculum because they have traditionally been included. Activities should be selected for inclusion in the curriculum to serve a particular purpose, that is, to enable the aims of the physical education curriculum to be met. Physical education teachers therefore need to question whether a curriculum dominated by team games is appropriate for physical education in the twenty-first century. Does a curriculum which is dominated by competitive games meet the needs of pupils in the twenty-first century? Does the curriculum take account of the wider range of opportunities for participation in physical activities by young people? Is there a conflict or compatibility between the activities offered in school and those popular in the community? Are the fairly traditional activities included in the curriculum in many schools the most appropriate to enable priorities identified for physical education for the twenty-first century to be met? How can the needs of youngsters in the twenty-first century best be catered for within the physical education curriculum? How should the priorities for physical education in the twenty-first century be translated into the physical education curriculum? What should the curriculum look like? What factors need to be taken into account in determining the physical education curriculum in the twenty-first century?

The influence of physical education teachers on changing priorities for, and curriculum of, physical education in the twenty-first century

While it is likely that change will be needed to the physical education curriculum to ensure that the subject continues to meet the needs of youngsters in the twenty-first century, change should not be made for its own sake, to follow the latest trends or to respond to the latest pressures from various interest groups. Talbot considered the impact of various interest groups on physical education, concluding that ‘one common feature between all of these interest groups had been their apparent purpose – to appropriate both the ideology and content of what children should learn, as physical education, in school curriculum time’ (Talbot 1998: 104). She also suggested that ‘seeing these lobbies essentially as interest groups also raises awareness of the influence of key drivers, leaders,

stakeholders and gatekeepers, each with their own agendas and reasons for seeking to influence the theory and/or practice of physical education' (ibid.: 105).

Physical education teachers must not sway with the wind. It is dangerous to be reactive; to continually respond to different trends or interest groups. Curriculum change is difficult, particularly when many people have a vested interest in the curriculum. Physical education teachers can have an important influence on change and changing priorities for physical education in the twenty-first century only if they are clear about what they are trying to achieve, i.e. the aims of and priorities for physical education. They need to recognise the values on which their priorities are based. Physical education teachers then need to plan change in order to meet the identified priorities for physical education.

In order to plan change physical education teachers need to consider the external environment. Therefore, they must remain abreast of current and anticipated external changes, including changes in society which impact on education in general and physical education in particular, and more specifically in the context in which they are working, as well as of developing government educational policy which will help to shape policy and practice within the school and department. They should reflect on changes, trends and pressures and their potential impact on physical education in general and on practice in schools.

Physical education teachers should then try to influence the external factors which impact on what is prioritised at a specific time for physical education. Otherwise, priorities for physical education will be determined by others. For example, priorities to produce future champions to achieve more medals in international competitions may take precedence over the need to physically educate all pupils. Physical education teachers must articulate priorities and determine the direction of the subject in the twenty-first century rather than let others determine priorities and the curriculum for them.

Conclusion

In this chapter consideration has been given to re-reflecting on what physical education is and what lies at its core. It touched on the influence of personal values shaping the priorities of individual teachers. Two examples of how priorities are translated into the curriculum were given. The chapter looked at how priorities for physical education change over time. It provided a brief historical background and identified some recent influence on physical education. It highlighted some likely influences on physical education in the twenty-first century, encouraging readers to reflect on priorities for, and curriculum content of, physical education in the twenty-first century. The discussion of priorities was placed within the context of the unique contribution that physical education makes to the curriculum. The unique contribution will remain to produce a physically educated population, even though priorities are likely to change.

It is important that physical education professionals articulate priorities for physical education to other teachers, the headteacher, governors and others. By being involved in identifying priorities physical education teachers can help to ensure that the subject makes as full a contribution as possible to the education of all pupils and that it remains relevant to the needs of pupils in the twenty-first century. Also, and perhaps most importantly, if physical educationists do not identify priorities, the physical education curriculum is likely to be based on the values and priorities of various interest groups which have an input into shaping the physical education curriculum.

Reflection on changes in society identified in this chapter and other changes which readers consider to be influential, as well as reflection on issues in [Chapters 1 to 12](#) of this book and other issues which arise in day-to-day teaching and beyond, may result in identification of the need for

change (beyond change to the teaching of any one activity as a result of ongoing lesson evaluation). In the next chapter consideration is given to making change. The chapter recognises that making change is not easy, but provides some structure to help teachers make complex changes, such as those requiring larger scale change, e.g. in the department and/or school more widely.

Questions for reflection

- 1 How can you articulate to parents, other teachers, the headteacher or governors what is unique about physical education, and hence the importance of its contribution to the education of all pupils, in order to justify more time for physical education in the school curriculum?
- 2 What do you identify as social, technological, economic and political changes most likely to impact on education in general and physical education in particular now in the early years of the twenty-first century, and what is their impact likely to be?
- 3 What are the most important priorities which you identify for physical education? Why? Are they appropriate for all pupils?
- 4 What should be the priorities for physical education in the twenty-first century?
- 5 How do these priorities influence your selection of curriculum content and teaching methods?
- 6 Are any changes needed in your curriculum and/or teaching methods to enable these priorities to be promoted? If so, what; if not, why?
- 7 How can you contribute to making sure that the voice of physical education is influential in debates about priorities for the subject in the twenty-first century?

Further reading

Almond, L. (ed.) (1997) *Physical Education in Schools*, London: Kogan Page, particularly Chapter 1, 'Generating a new vision for physical education', and Chapter 2, 'The context of physical education'.

As this chapter is based on reflection on priorities for physical education, the implications for the physical education curriculum and teaching methods, and changes in priorities for physical education over time and in the twenty-first century, it is important that physical education teachers remain abreast of what is happening in society, in education and in physical education. To this end, it is therefore recommended that readers refer regularly to a variety of publications which will enable them to remain abreast of what is happening, for example:

- national newspapers
- the *Times Educational Supplement*
- the *British Journal of Teaching Physical Education* (formerly the *British Journal of Physical Education*) (a quarterly publication sent to all members of the Physical Education Association of the United Kingdom (PEAUK))
- The *Bulletin of Physical Education* (the journal of the British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education (BAALPE))
- other professional and academic journals.

For further information about joining PEAUK, please contact:

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