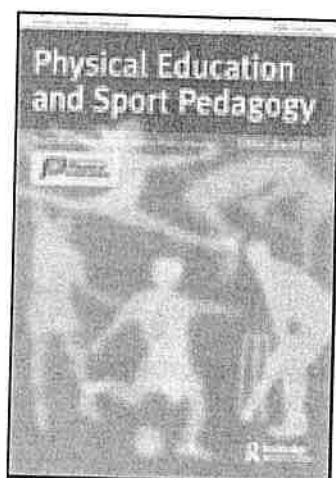


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The idea of physical education: a memetic perspective

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Background: Despite dire predictions of its demise, physical education continues to survive across most countries of the world. Moreover, the form of its survival is remarkably similar across cultures. Why has physical education survived as a cultural practice and why is its form so similar given the marked differences that exist between many cultures?

Purpose: This paper pursues this question through a consideration of physical education as a 'meme'. A meme, a term first coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The selfish gene*, is the cultural equivalent of a gene and is claimed to be the unit of cultural transmission. Memes are selected in a process not unlike biological selection. Some memes thrive and others die off or become unused. If we consider physical education to be a meme, then what is it about physical education that has been so successful in reproducing itself? Although far from uncontroversial, the study of memes, called memetics, might have the potential to be rather more than merely polemic or playful for understanding the future survival of physical education.

Research design: In particular this paper provides a memetic analysis of Kirk's claim that there has only been one major shift in the idea of the idea of physical education since its inception as a school subject; namely from physical education as gymnastics to physical education as sport techniques.

Conclusions: This paper concludes by suggesting that the next shift in idea of the idea of physical education might be oriented around obesity prevention rather than sport.

Keywords: physical education; memes; futures

Introduction

In various forms, physical education (PE) has been around for over 2000 years. In ancient Greece, for example, 'physical education was as important as, if not more so than, mental training' (McNeely and Wolverson 2009, 8). Taking an historical perspective on physical education, David Kirk (2010) argues that the idea of physical education

has remained more or less intact since around the middle of the last century, transcends the national borders of economically advanced countries and other nations that have some formal association with these countries [they were most likely colonies], and that has been highly resistant to change. (Kirk 2010, 1)

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Further, as the contributions in the edited book *International comparison of physical education* (Pühse and Gerber 2005) bear testimony, the nature or form of physical education is somewhat generalized across the globe. However, notwithstanding its long history and its (mostly) recognisable form worldwide, the future of physical education is far from certain. In the forward to Pühse and Gerber's (2005) book, Adol Ogi (then Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace) and Gudrun Doll-Teppe (then President of the International Council for Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE)) claimed there are serious concerns about the situation of physical education across the world.

In their account of a survey of physical education in 167 nations, Hardman and Marshall (2009) reported that while there is general national government commitment to physical education through legislation and policy, there is a lack of commitment to effective resourcing. They conclude, however, with a note of optimism citing the 2007 European Parliament's Resolution on the Role of Sport in Education and advocacy action by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as indicators that physical education is still on the political agenda, at least in Europe. While acknowledging such concerns, physical education continues to survive across most countries of the world. Moreover, although there are variations in what stands for physical education across national borders, the form of its survival is remarkably similar across cultures. Why has physical education survived as a cultural practice and why is its form so similar given the marked differences that exist between many cultures? And what of its future?

In considering why physical education is such a widespread educational phenomenon there are useful ideas and analyses in the literature on globalization, politics, colonialization and cultural transmission. For example, there is no doubt that physical education, as an institutional practice, has been exported around the world by colonial powers and there are some useful critiques of this process (e.g., Philip Doecke's [2005] account of the hegemonic effects of colonialism on physical education in Papua New Guinea). In his analysis of *Pedagogies of globalization* (2006), Joel Spring illustrates how ideas about pedagogy and school organization move and change in the global flow of ideas. Physical education is itself a product of the global flow of ideas. Physical education is an idea, and a set of cultural practices that embody the idea, that has been spread by colonialism and globalization. Accordingly, we can think of global physical education as a form of cultural transmission. Although there have been many analyses of the purposes and state of physical education across many countries (e.g., Annerstedt 2008; Hardman and Marshall 2005; Pühse and Gerber 2006; Bailey et al. 2009) none have considered physical education specifically as a cultural practice and its survival from the perspective of cultural transmission.

Aaron Lynch (1996) provides an interesting and provocative insight into how ideas are propagated in his book *Thought contagion: How belief spreads through society*. According to Lynch, 'thought contagion warrants more attention as a force shaping society' (2). He talks of 'the epidemiology of ideas' (9) and the 'self-propagating idea' (2). A self-propagating idea is a thought contagion. It is also a meme. Although far from uncontroversial, the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes, known as *Memetics* (Heylighen and Chielens 2009), might have the potential to be rather more than a playful idea for understanding the future survival of physical education.

In this paper I consider why and how certain ideas regarding physical education are propagated and why we have certain conceptions of physical education that, at particular points in time, become dominant or wither and fade from use. To do this I begin with a brief

account of memes and memetics before offering a speculative analysis of physical education from a memetics perspective.

In this analysis I will focus on David Kirk's (2010) account of *Physical education futures* in which he provides a thoughtful analysis of physical education as an idea, and the various forms of physical education that have, over time, become dominant. Kirk is, however, rather circumspect about the future of physical education and argues that physical education is moving toward a major shift in its meaning. I will return to this issue of the future of physical education in the concluding section of this article.

The concept of the meme

A meme, a term first coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The selfish gene* (1976), is the cultural equivalent of a gene and is claimed to be the unit of cultural transmission. Memes are selected in a process not unlike biological selection. Some memes thrive and others die off or become unused. Two definitions are a useful beginning: According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *meme* is

A cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene.

Wikipedia offers the following definition:

A meme ... is a postulated unit of cultural ideas, symbols or practices, which can be transmitted from one mind to another through speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena. Supporters of the concept regard memes as cultural analogues to genes, in that they self-replicate and respond to selective pressures.

Dawkins (1976), in coining the term meme, was being provocative and polemic. He simply took the biological idea of a gene, 'anything of which copies are made, including 'active replicators' whose nature affects the chances of being copied again' (Blackmore 1999, 5), and proposed the idea of the meme as its cultural equivalent. Ideas that replicate are memes. As examples of meme replicators he suggested such things as tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. According to Dawkins (1976), memes are passed on by imitation and are subsequently stored in human brains (or books, computers etc.). We can think of common everyday cultural practices such as dieting, fashion, customs and ceremonies all being memes spread by one person copying another. Dawkins also suggested that scientific theories, for example, catch on and propagate themselves by 'jumping' from one person to another, from brain to brain. Can we not think of physical education similarly?

Dawkins, and subsequent meme-theorists such as Susan Blackmore who wrote *The meme machine* (1999), argue that memes evolve by natural selection in a manner analogous to that of biological evolution. This occurs through the processes of variation, mutation, competition and inheritance, all of which influence an individual meme's reproductive success. According to Heylighen and Chielens (2009), cultural traits are transmitted from person to person, similarly to genes or viruses. Cultural evolution, they argue, can therefore be understood through the same basic mechanisms of reproduction, spread, variation, and natural selection that underlie biological evolution. This implies a shift from genes as units of biological information to a new type of unit of cultural information: the *meme*.

Taking a memetic stance

Memes differ in their degree of 'fitness', i.e. adaptedness to the socio-cultural environment in which they propagate. 'Fitter' memes will be more successful in being communicated, 'infecting' more individuals and thus spreading over a larger population. This biological analogy allows us to apply Darwinian concepts and theories to model cultural evolution. In any given cultural context there are many competing memes. Some memes are more reinforcing for their 'hosts' (people) and they gain a competitive edge.

According to Marsden (1998) while memetics is not a fully blown theory, 'the memetic stance is more a way of looking at the world, a set of guiding principles, a useful heuristic' (73). For Marsden, 'The memetic stance involves describing, explaining and understanding social behaviour from this meme's-eye perspective' (74). Blackmore (1999) gives us a meme's-eye perspective when she writes that 'memes are not just objects; they can be representations of emotion, memory, and can spread around indiscriminately without regard to whether they are provoking, harmful, or neutral' (145). Moreover, 'the meme cares not what effects it has, but only whether it is successful in doing what memes do, which is to copy and spread' (145).

Although Blackmore and other meme-theorists talk about memes 'not caring', it needs to be understood that this anthropomorphic language is used in a metaphorical sense. Memes are considered to behave *as if they were* agentic. In the same way that genes do not actually choose, in any conscious thoughtful sense, memes simply are replicated or they are not. No underlying purpose can really be ascribed to a meme's propagation and we need to bear this in mind when taking a memetic stance to an analysis of physical education (or any other meme).

It is important to register that memetics, with its Neo-Darwinian legacy, is probably a 'good fit' for a theory of cultural transmission that itself is anchored in a neoliberal worldview. Not surprisingly, given its Neo-Darwinian roots and its socio-biological sympathies, there are some persuasive critiques of the memes and memetics. For example, anthropologist Maurice Bloch in his *Essays on cultural transmission* (2005) claims that memes do not provide any new possibilities for understanding cultural transmission than already exist in anthropology. For Bloch '[m]emes are a wonderful device for the student who wants to learn about human beings in *general*' (87). However, '[i]n reality, culture simply does not normally divide up into naturally discernable bits' (92). Another useful critique of memetics is provided by bio-scientist and historian theologian Alistair McGrath in his book *Dawkin's God: Genes, memes and the meaning of life* (2005). We can also recognize that the methods used by Michel Foucault's in his corpus of work on how certain ideas become dominant in certain societies at certain times (see for example his three volumes of *The history of sexuality* or his *Discipline & punish*) would provide a powerful analytic tool to address the question of how particular forms of physical education came to be at particular points in time, without ever having to bother with the concept of memes.

However, notwithstanding the serious discussions regarding the concept of the meme and its analytic power, and the cautions regarding its Neo-Darwinian roots and socio-biological sympathies, I still consider there to be sufficient heuristic value in taking a memetic stance or a meme's-eye perspective to the idea of physical education.

Taking a memetic stance to physical education

Taking a *memetic stance* to physical education we can return to the questions I introduced earlier – Why has physical education survived as a cultural practice over so many years and why is its form so similar given the marked differences that exist between many cultures? If

memes involve a 'natural selection' of ideas, then what is it about physical education that satisfies this selection? What is the environment into which it fits? But considering physical education to be an idea is not as straightforward as it might seem.

Physical education is best thought of collection of memes rather than a single meme. Accordingly physical education is a *memeplex* or meme complex which is 'a collection of mutually supporting memes, which tend to replicate each other' (Heylighen and Chielens 2009). Some of the ideas (memes) that constitute the memeplex of physical education might include: Systematic bodily exercises; sport as games play; sport as techniques; health-based exercise; physical education as catharsis; physical education as an academic subject; obesity and exercise; body as machine, and many more. Each of these memes might also be thought of as consisting of other memes; for example health-based exercise might 'contain' ideas or memes such as dose-rate-response, heart rate threshold level, aerobic fitness etc. As such, it is difficult to isolate the smallest unit of cultural transmission.

The overall attractiveness (and hence survival value) of physical education is contingent on an interactive mix of these memes. As one meme (or memeplex) becomes more attractive there is the possibility of a shift in what physical education becomes. In taking a memetic stance to physical education it is necessary to consider physical education in the first instance *as an idea*. The practices that constitute physical education are an instantiation of particular ideas at a particular point in time.

Kirk's idea of the idea of physical education (id^2)

One generative perspective of physical education as an idea is that provided by David Kirk in his recent book *Physical education futures* (2010). In this book, Kirk conceives of the idea of the idea of physical education, which he refers to as the id^2 . This strange play on words was inspired by his reading of Sheldon Rothblatt's (1997) *The modern university and its discontents*, in which Rothblatt coined the phrase *the idea of the idea* of a university, meaning that the university is, in the first instance, an idea.

Kirk (2009, 2010) argues that we can also think of physical education along the same lines, that is, there is some idea (thought, concept) of physical education. By taking a memetic stance to physical education and thinking of the idea of the idea as not a single meme, but rather as a memeplex, this opens up the possibility of bringing some new perspectives to our understanding of the history and future of physical education.

When we think of physical education we usually think of the particular form or type of physical education (physical education as sport techniques, physical education as health, physical education as gymnastics) as physical education *itself*. If, however, we think of physical education as a common noun we come to see physical education more as something that embodies certain characteristics, much like one might think of the characteristics that signify a house as a category or class of human dwelling.

For Kirk the idea of the idea of physical education, presents the possibility that, although disparate and changing in its context-specific versions, we can agree 'on the existence of some characteristics that mark this field of knowledge [PE] off from others' (Kirk, 2009, 138). What then are these characteristics? At this point we might flag some questions that seem to follow from Kirk's claim, for example, are these characteristics different from purposes? For example, is physical activity/movement an essential characteristic of physical education?

Richard Bailey and colleagues (2009) provide a recent comprehensive review of the educational benefits claimed for physical education and school sport. They argue that behind, or embedded within, physical education policy in the UK (similar elsewhere I

contend) is the belief that physical education 'has significant and distinctive contributions to make to children, to schools, and to wider society' (2). This belief is oriented around an idea of the idea of physical education.

According to some commentators, such as American Catherine Hinberg (2005), there is currently a considerable consensus about what quality physical education means and that we mostly agree on what physical education should look like. Michael Gard (2006) however, argues that understanding itself (its essence or its essential characteristics) is physical education's greatest challenge. If we follow Gard's argument, articulating what might be 'existence of [the] characteristics that mark this field of knowledge [PE] off from others' (Kirk, 2009, 138) remains a challenge.

Paradigm change and institutional 'fitness'

In taking a memetic stance to physical education we are led to consider the compatibility of particular ideas to the requirements of particular social institutions. According to de Jong (1999) concepts or ideas that survive in an institutional context are those that are the most compatible or 'fittest'. Ideas that best fit the institutional agenda will win. In this context, 'Institutions are rules which enable actors to cope with uncertainty when making decisions' and in the process they act as a filter of concepts. Memes, for de Jong, are mainly replicated because of their ability to make individual actors understand and solve problems. When the memes prove no longer useful in dealing with particular problems there might be slight modifications, equivalent to slight mutations, or rarely, there might be a complete replacement of the conceptual framework (set of ideas) by another set of ideas. This later event we would recognize as a paradigm shift.

In his influential book *The structure of scientific revolutions* Thomas Kuhn (1962) revealed, among other things, that paradigm shifts in scientific thinking are rare phenomena. But what of paradigm shifts in social or cultural thinking? Paradigms also exist in the social world. We can think of democracy and communism as paradigms. Paradigms, then, can be thought of as memplexes, 'a collection of mutually supporting memes, which tend to replicate each other' (Heylighen and Chielens 2009) and when they no longer provide a fit for a particular context (environment) they will be partially modified or changed completely. The memplex that constituted the paradigm of communism clearly ran into difficulties in the 1990s in terms of its 'institutional fitness'.

Given that paradigm shifts are rare, but slight mutations in ideas more common, this, in part, might explain why Kirk (2010) considers that there has only been one paradigm shift or change in the idea of the idea of physical education since the 1800s. In what follows I provide a brief analysis of two competing ideas of physical education that are represented by physical education *as gymnastics* and physical education *as sport-techniques*.

In Kirk's analysis 'in the one hundred or so years from the 1880s to the 1990s there was only one shift in the idea of the idea of physical education, from gymnastics to sport/sports-related skills' (2009, 141). Moreover, this shift 'signifies a profound movement of beliefs and values around embodiment, around the uses and utility of organized physical activities, particularly their educational value, around deep matters of being in the world' (141). Arguments between advocates of Swedish Gymnastics versus Educational Gymnastics or Motor Skills versus TGfU are merely 'contesting one idea of physical education against another' (Kirk 2010, 19) within a larger or more universal conception of physical education as gymnastics or as sport.

Kirk (2010) argues for a consideration of four relational issues that need to be considered to gain an understanding 'of the dominant form of physical education at any given time' (19).

These include the relationship between physical education and physical culture; the transfer of learning beyond school; how excellence is defined and how it in-turn defines 'ability'; and the ways in which physical education is active in cultural transmission and renewal. My interest in this paper is with the relation between physical education, physical culture and cultural transmission. Basically, as corporeal discourse and physical culture change over time then so does the possible attractiveness of a particular memplex that is physical education.

PE as gymnastics

Jan Broekhoff (1972) in his *Physical education and the reification of the human body* makes a strong case for the shift in corporeal discourse and physical culture in late nineteenth century Europe. Broekhoff makes links between ways of thinking about the body and the forms of physical education that dominated European culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular the Ling system of Swedish Gymnastics. Riordan and Krüger (2003) in explaining why physical education was gymnastics in the late nineteenth century suggest that

The various schools of physical exercises [gymnastics] – associated with Jahn in Germany, Nachtegall in Denmark, Ling in Sweden, Lesgaft in Russia – developed as pedagogical, political and military instruments for building national identity. And that involved everybody: man and woman, squire and peasant, factory owner and worker. To learn to put one's body at the service of the nation emanated from a policy of acculturation of the common people in the same way as learning one's national language. (1)

In other words, gymnastics was a good institutional fit with a particular conception of national building. It had an explicitly instrumental rather than an educative purpose. Swedish gymnastics was an idea or a meme that was attractive and readily replicatable because it was sympathetic with body ideas of the physical culture of the time. As Kirk (2010) reminds us that the 'primary purpose of corporeal regulation through schooling was the creation of a population of productive but compliant workers and citizens' (20). The pedagogy of Swedish Gymnastics in which the teacher made all the decisions was also a good institutional 'fit' within the educational culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But time moves on and so does the educational and physical culture and inevitably there were challenges to this form of gymnastics.

Educational Gymnastics, sometimes called Movement Education, was a pedagogical form of the child-centered educational philosophy that became popular in the 1950s. Inspired by Rousseau's famous *Émile* (1911) it was a response (reaction) to the more severe forms of teacher-directed pedagogy such as Swedish Gymnastics or the skill-focused German Gymnastics. Kirk (1998) provides a wonderful account of the heartfelt passionate professional rivalries that existed between the advocates of Swedish Gymnastics and Educational Gymnastics. Indeed, many of the advocates for both Swedish Gymnastics and Educational were rather zealous in their devotion to their idea, and both forms of gymnastics spread rapidly.

Perhaps for some advocates the shift from Swedish to Educational gymnastics was nothing less than a paradigm shift. However, in Kirk's (2010) analysis this shift was rather more like a mutation of the idea of the idea of physical education as gymnastics. The real paradigm shift came when sport-based forms of physical education came to displace gymnastics in the mid-twentieth century. The question for this memetic analysis is what were the particular institutional and physical culture contexts to which the new memplex was attractive. In other words what was the institutional fitness of sport-based physical education?

PE as sport-techniques

According to Kirk (2010) the multi-activity, sport-based forms of physical education have been dominant in schools since the mid twentieth century and they have been highly resistant to change. In his book *Defining physical education*, Kirk (1992) claimed that 'a sport-based form of physical education was perfectly aligned to a number of broader terms in British society and beyond' (103). Indeed 'A form of physical education based in sport was in time with the times of the mid twentieth century' (Kirk 2010, 103). Further, Kirk (2010) argues that it is the sport-techniques of games and sports that are given prominence 'over the performance of the games and sports themselves' (42). For Kirk, '[s]port-techniques are specific movements that are designed to be effective in achieving a clearly identified goal' (42). By contrast a *skill* is 'an amalgam of technique and cognition in context'. Moreover, '[t]he id² rests then on the assumption that the teaching and learning of sport techniques (most often called 'skills') are of such central importance that these activities define the purpose of physical education (45).

There might be those who would challenge Kirk's claim to the dominance of sport-techniques, but this is not the place for such a discussion. Others can take up such arguments elsewhere. My purpose here is merely to demonstrate the heuristic potential of a memetic analysis of physical education.

What then was the institutional fit for which the idea of the idea of physical education as sport-techniques was well suited? This conception of physical education is to be found at macro, meso and micro levels of cultural practice. Firstly at macro policy level many governments continue to expect great things of school physical education (e.g., see Bailey et al. 2009 for a UK example). Secondly, at the meso institutional level school physical education as sport-techniques was (and is) operationalized within curriculum documents as a molecularized (Rovegno 1995), multi-activity (Siedentop 1994) form that was directly compatible with, and accommodating of, timetable restrictions and the subject-centered nature of schooling. At the micro level the memes of sport-techniques fit very well with the particular sport-based discursive histories of most physical education teachers (e.g., see Dowling-Naess 1996) and with the particular forms of physical education teacher education (PETE) and physical education pedagogy across most Western countries. In this sense there is an embodied receptivity to these memes.

So the memes that have come to dominate the memplex of physical education are those related to sport. Differences in approach between fundamental motor skills (FMS), teaching games for understanding (TGfU), Game Sense, and Sport Education are, in this analysis, all variations (mutations) on the particular conception of physical education as sport-technique. The sport-oriented memes in the physical education memplex have had widespread attractiveness in both policy and practice. And this idea, as I suggested in the introduction, is remarkably similar across cultures throughout the world. However, like the earth's crust near Iceland, all is not stable. It never is, and in Kirk's (2009) opinion 'we are due for another seismic shift in the idea of the idea of physical education parallel to the shift from gymnastics to sport/sport-related skills' (139).

Physical education futures?

Kirk (2010) talks of three possible futures for physical education. These include: *more of the same* which would be continued replication of the idea of physical education as it now is conceptualised, including mutations such as Sport Education and TGfU; *radical reform* in which we see a paradigm shift in the idea of the idea of physical education; and *extinction* in which it ceases to exist within the context of schooling. In regard to the possibility of extinction Kirk (2010) refers to the classic story recounted in *The Saber-tooth curriculum* (Peddiwell 1939) in

which Palaeolithic teachers continued to teach stone-age skills no longer relevant to their contemporary Palaeolithic culture. According to Kirk, in the contemporary context the move to a more academicized version of physical education may have gained status for physical education as a school subject but, like the saber-tooth curriculum, it has become more decontextualized, technical, and ultimately superficial and less meaningful. Certainly others, myself included (see Tinning 2008), have raised concerns of this nature before. But physical education is still there and certainly the academic versions are proving increasingly popular.

However, the idea of physical education as an examinable academic subject is but one meme in the memplex of physical education. Other memes will also contribute to the survival of physical education. Thinking back to some of the other memes that I suggested make up the memplex of physical education (including systematic bodily exercises; sport as games play; sport as techniques; health-based exercise; physical education as catharsis; physical education as an academic subject; obesity and exercise; body as machine) it is conceivable that just as the memes of the gymnastics became less attractive, sport might also suffer this fate and another memes (or set of memes) from the memplex might become more attractive thus precipitating another paradigm shift.

Those who want to imagine a different conception of physical education (e.g., Ross 2001) must consider how attractive to the contemporary institutional and popular physical culture contexts are the memes they favour. Whatever the idea of the idea of physical education becomes it will be one that is 'fit' for the contemporary environment. In Kirk's (2010) view, when the ideas making school physical education and physical culture become incompatible then physical education is in serious trouble. In this regard, Kirk claims that

Despite its close alignment to contemporary physical culture in terms of its field of knowledge of sport, exercises and active leisure, the institutional manifestation of the id² of physical education-as-sport-techniques can be described as culturally obsolete, archaic and largely irrelevant to current societal needs and interests. (104)

I will speculate that maybe the next idea of the idea of physical education will centre on the memplex that I am calling the 'obesity epidemic'. As I have argued previously (Tinning 2009), the obesity issue (call it a crisis or an epidemic) presents a dilemma for those of us in physical education. It presents a difficult choice between two equally problematic alternatives: Should we promote the amelioration of obesity as a primary purpose for physical education or should we ignore this instrumental goal and instead focus on educational purposes? Some argue that by ignoring this current social issue as an opportunity we might be losing the best chance we have to legitimize our subject in an educational environment that is increasingly challenging the place of physical education in the curriculum. However, in spite of any attempt to 'pick the winner', the memes will 'work it out' and those with the 'best fit' to the educational, institutional and physical culture context will win.

Some time ago, Arnold (1985) argued that the educational legitimacy of a curriculum's subject matter is contingent on its activities having worth in and of themselves, rather than being justified for other extrinsic or instrumental reasons. But this is not how memes work. Their attractiveness is related to their fitness for a particular environment niche. Unfortunately, in the current neo-liberal context it is not sufficient to argue for educational legitimacy that is disconnected from the development of human capital (see Manne 2010). Governments of many persuasions are increasingly seeing physical education in instrumental terms. The staggering success of contemporary neo-liberal inspired concepts of education which foreground and value accountability memes set the institutional context for the attractiveness (and hence survival) of particular forms of physical education. To ignore the current

institutional context would be to spell disaster for physical education. A return to an instrumental form of physical education such as Swedish Gymnastics however, would hardly be a good institutional fit in terms of the popular movement culture that would position such systematic exercises as anachronistic.

The UK provides a good example of the neo-liberal institutional context into which physical education memes must fit. There the government is persuaded that physical education can deliver on instrumental outcomes related to sports talent identification, decreasing the incidents of obesity in children and adults, and creating a more courteous and better-behaved citizenry (Bailey et al. 2009). Delivering, and then demonstrating such outcomes, will be a tough ask for our British colleagues. Now it needs to be said that instrumental purposes are not necessarily bad, but as Michel Foucault has suggested, they are, like everything else, dangerous. Kirk (2006) signals a danger when he suggests that it will be increasingly difficult to resist calls for physical education to be held accountable for child health because the obese child is symbolic of cultural degeneration.

In this vein Sallis et al. (1997) suggest that '[a]lthough it is not possible for school physical education to provide all the recommended daily physical activity, physical education should be judged in part on how it contributes to national health objectives' (1331). In my view this is a potentially dangerous perspective. It is dangerous not because it might not be worthwhile aspiration, it is dangerous because demonstrating such a contribution is exceedingly difficult. Trying to demonstrate that we have achieved this goal will make us vulnerable. Ignoring this issue will also make us vulnerable – hence the dilemma.

Certainly the 'obesity/exercise' memplex is increasingly 'fit' for the environment created by health fears and government concerns over the increased incidence of obesity and overweight in the population. Moreover, the 'obesity/exercise' memplex is being proselytized by many within the broader field of kinesiology and in the popular media as well. Given that '[t]hought contagions spread fastest via proselytic transmission' (Lynch 1996, 5) it is no surprise that the 'obesity and exercise' memplex is becoming so pervasive as an orienting perspective for many in our field.

In my view the future of physical education will not to be found in trying to evoke the old memes such as philosophical arguments for the intrinsic value of physical activity as an educational activity. While many (myself included) might lament this situation and still value and actively propagate those memes, as the context of physical culture changes, a memetic stance would indicate that memes that make up the obesity/exercise memplex will be a better 'fit' with this new institutional context. Should this result in a paradigm shift in the idea of physical education we will have to wait to see.

In concluding, let me emphasize that I am *not* advocating this shift in the idea of the idea of physical education. I am merely providing a memetics perspective to physical education. Maybe this analysis is totally off the mark. History will be the judge. My hope is that this memetic analysis can make some contribution to our discussion regarding what school physical education has been, is now, and may become in the future.

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