

Words and Things: A Response to Will Kay

Richard Bailey

Will Kay's recent article for the *Bulletin* is typically thought-provoking and insightful (2005). He recounts a hauntingly familiar tale of the politicising of physical education by influential individuals and groups who are not open to discussion and, heaven-forbid, criticism. He is not alone. Many of us have found ourselves dumb-struck whilst listening to a civil servant, recently transferred from the Department of Fish or Coal, confidently telling a room full of experienced professionals what is wrong with physical education. And we have all sat on our hands whilst our subject is blamed for everything from the lack of Olympic Medals to the obesity epidemic.

I do not doubt that Will's concerns are very real. I am not sure, however, that he has got the diagnosis quite right. If I understand his argument correctly, Will is arguing that the root of our current difficulties is a failure by 'the rulers' to properly distinguish between 'physical education' and 'sport'. Or, is it that they are deliberately conflating the

two terms with some sinister intent? This is, of course, a familiar complaint, although one largely restricted to the UK and Anglophone educational systems. Internationally, people are rarely so exercised, and it is perfectly possible to have a meaningful conversation with people who talk about sport, sport education, physical and health education, sport pedagogy or physical activity education, and be pretty sure that we are talking about basically the same thing. Indeed, the recent international study of the place of physical education and sport in schools, for the IOC, found an almost universal consensus regarding the outcomes and benefits of that school subject concerned with structured, supervised physical activities at school (Bailey and Dismore, 2005). We did not find, though, any agreement about what to call that subject!

Does it matter? Not really. Surely, what matters most is the quality of children's experience and learning, that it is available in a form that is accessible and authentic to all children, irrespective of their ability, gender or social class, and that they come away with some insight into the learning, challenge and sheer pleasure that these types of activities can offer us all. That the bit of the timetable responsible for these aims is called physical education, sport, or sweat studies seems rather irrelevant in comparison.

I suggest that words are not nearly as important as Will Kay assumes, and that we should shift our gaze from the map to the territory, from the words used to describe things, to the things, themselves.

Will's main points stand irrespective of whether we accept his distinction between physical education and sport. That there is a move to separate teacher training from institutes of higher education is, perhaps, alarming. But this is because such a decision shows a wilful refusal by central government to acknowledge the data from its own agencies, like HMI, that to do so is likely to be disastrous. It has little to do with language games. Likewise, he is quite right to point out the limitations of any strategy designed to 'squeeze out' talented young sportspeople, and expose them to intense competition from an early age. But, again, the fault lies not with a conflation of sport and PE, but with ineffective and inequitable practice. We know that such practices exclude large numbers

of pupils (many of whom will have the 'talent' so eagerly sought); we do not know that they work.

Underlying many discussions of definitions, distinctions and delineations associated with physical education is a more fundamental concern – status. Indeed, Will acknowledges as much towards the end of his paper, when he talks of the consequences for both physical education and the professionalism of physical education teachers of accepting a broad definition of 'PE and sport'. He worries that to do so would open the door to all sorts of non-educational contexts, like 'holiday play schemes and summer camps' (p. 21). But why can't holiday play-schemes and summer camp be capable of physically educating children? Of course, it would be nonsense to claim that all such schemes develop appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding, but that does not lead to the conclusion that none do. Indeed, it seems as problematic to exclude all such activities as non-educational as it is to include all PE lessons, simply because they are taught at school by someone with a teaching qualification.

If I take my niece and nephew to the Natural History Museum and, being a bit of a science geek, I tell them about the wonders of evolution, can I not be said to be educating in some way? Although I have no teaching qualification in science, surely education is taking place if they understand more about evolution than they did before. If I understand Will's argument, he would seem to be led to conclude that science education had not taken place.

Either physical education is concerned with some sort of learning, or it is associated with professional identity. If the former, there is no inherent reason why all sorts of people cannot contribute to children's physical education, whether they be teachers, sports coaches, or parents. If the latter, I would suggest that this is a conception of the subject too impoverished as to warrant serious defence.

If 'sport' is used, as it is in common language, as a generic label for organised physical activities, what do we lose by letting it into our secret garden, and benefiting from its massive popular appeal ... and status?

The key point has to be the quality of the learning experiences offered to young people. If we are able to negotiate a stronger political position by tolerating the language of sport, that seems a price worth paying.

References

- Bailey, R.P. and Dismore, H. (2005) *Sport in Education: the role of physical education and sport in schools. Final Report*. Berlin: International Council for Sports Science and Physical Education.
- Kay, W. (2005) 'A Rose is a Rose by any other Name', but physical education and sport are not the same. *Bulletin of Physical Education* 41(1), pp. 15-22.

Richard Bailey is Professor of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University College, and Director of the Centre for Physical Education Research.

The Growth of Sports Leadership

Ron Tulley

Graduating as a young PE teacher from that fine PE College, Jordanhill, in 1982 was indeed a very proud moment. Being allowed to enter a profession where I would have the opportunity to involve young people in becoming healthy, confident and happy citizens was indeed a great challenge and responsibility.

Of the many things taught to us at Jordanhill one thing stood out in my mind. Young people can be enticed into a healthy responsible lifestyle through their involvement in sport. That would generally be as a competitor/performer who may well be participating at a high to excellence level, or as a participative player who really just wanted to play sport at a recreational level. As a PE teacher I had a contribution to make in helping all the pupils that entered my gymnasium to find their ambitions in a sporting sense.

Twenty-three years later, it is quite obvious that the training I received back in the 1970s had failed to recognise that there was a third and very large area of sports participation that had been ignored, or we certainly were not taught about it. What provision can we make for those who want to get involved in sport because they want to lead others, maybe as