Moving Experiences: Reframing and Reclaiming Physical Education in New Zealand Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Physical education (PE) is often perceived as a learning area of lesser importance than others, for instance literacy and numeracy. Arguments for raising its status and gaining a greater share in the school day founder on uncertainty as to just what is educational about it, and on the view that really it is no more than skill acquisition and improving fitness with a few games thrown in. The majority of teachers tasked with teaching it in New Zealand primary schools may have had very little or no specialist preparation in PE theory and pedagogy. It is increasingly being left to outside providers to step into the breech. This paper outlines a way of reframing PE that widens its scope and potential for learning, makes PE teaching much more accessible to teachers who do not see themselves as experts in this area, and may enable teachers of all levels and expertise to explore and enrich the PE experience of their students. This approach is summarised as going *beyond skills and fitness*. It is unpacked and located in relation to existing pedagogical approaches before recounting how it was enacted with several cohorts of initial teacher education students in a New Zealand university. Readers may find useful the table of PE activities and how they can be invigorated within creative and diverse contexts. This is a practice paper, and is designed to appeal to the demand of busy teachers for examples of the theory in action. But it is also a call for teachers to reflect on those practices, and in particular the implications of large scale abdication of teaching to non-professionals.

Practice paper

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RECLAIMING: WHAT AND FROM WHOM?

Observing student teachers trying out an approach to PE, an experienced teacher approached the lecturer, put her hands on her hips and declared firmly, "Look, I've got a PE background and that's just not PE!" This episode caused a few moments of reflection for the lecturer and some questioning of the approach being trialled: was it just misguided, or was it confronting taken-for-granted thinking in PE? Her response indicated some issues that schools and teachers need to deal with concerning PE.

Firstly, just what is PE? The experienced teacher may have been operating from a model of fitness, skills, sports and games. Is this what PE is? There is a chronic uncertainty about just what physical education is (McGuigan, 2015; Tinning, Kirk & Evans, 1993) which neither the 1999 *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) nor the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) seems to have impacted. The socio-cultural frameworks of these curricula may have deepened the uncertainty (McGuigan, 2015). There is uncertainty too, about just what is *educational* about physical education (Tinning et al., 1993; Whitehead, 2013).

Secondly, who is best equipped to teach PE? Is it a curriculum area that can be effectively taught by teachers with little or no PE background, or should it be left to experts? A disturbingly large number of schools and teachers appear happy to leave PE teaching to the 'experts'. A New Zealand wide survey "… confirmed that [external providers] have a strong presence within New Zealand primary school physical education identifying 638 providers active within the 113 schools" (Gordon, Dyson, Cowan, McKenzie & Shulruf, 2016, p.104). This should be a matter of concern (McGuigan, 2015; Pope, 2013; Williams, Hay & Macdonald, 2011). Not only are there doubts raised by teachers of the educational effectiveness of these external providers, such as alignment with the New Zealand Curriculum, outdated pedagogical approaches, and a lack of assessment and evaluation (Gordon et al., 2016), but there are the more serious implications for the status of PE as a learning area which could be seen as not needing to be taught by educational professionals. It is not a great leap from de-professionalising PE to wondering what other curriculum areas might be handled by non-professionals, on the basis that the generalist primary teacher feels unprepared and there are a host of private providers willing to step into the

neo-liberal breach. There are serious professional and industrial issues at stake here.

A third issue concerns the status of PE in a crowded curriculum (Bennie & Still, 2012; Pope, 2013), perceived by many teachers to be a barrier to delivering quality PE lessons. The low educational status of PE makes cases for more attention and time difficult to defend (Tinning et al., 1993).

Sixteen of the teachers interviewed in the survey carried out by Gordon et al., (2016) referred to the negative impact the emphasis on numeracy and literacy and/or the introduction of national standards was having on the teaching of physical education.

To sum up, confused or limited perceptions of what PE is and what is educational about it, allied to a downgrading of its status such that teachers don't need to teach it and other learning areas are seen as more important, harbour potential for significant educational malaise. Would an approach that makes PE teaching more accessible to generalist teachers raise its status or lower it? Would such an approach enable teachers to discharge their professional responsibilities more fully or dissipate them further? Would teachers with PE backgrounds embrace leadership roles within this approach, or reject it?

REFRAMING: GOING BEYOND SKILLS AND FITNESS

The intention of this practice paper is to present an inclusive and accessible model of PE that not only creates openings for generalist teachers to reconsider what PE actually is, and what is educational about it, but also restores the confidence to reclaim PE as a critical and essential learning area leading the way in the education of the whole child, integrated with, and contributing to, the other learning areas of the NZ Curriculum, and much too important to be left to external providers who are not educational professionals.

Let's start by considering afresh the thinking of Tinning, Kirk and Evans (1993) who sought to take teachers beyond the limitations of skills and fitness as the only way of thinking about PE. They wanted to provide a framework for thinking about:

> "... the educational potential of physical education and for countering the impoverished views of physical education that render it merely subservient and marginal to the competitive academic curriculum" (Tinning et al., 1993, p.56).

They referenced the work of Arnold (1979) in articulating a description of physical education as learning *in, through,* and *about* movement. This idea can be seen restated in the introduction to the Health and Physical Education learning area in the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.23). Critical to the Tinning re-conceptualisation is the notion of *reflective consciousness:* " ... our ability as human beings to understand ourselves in relation to other people and things in the world, and to use this understanding to generate new knowledge ..." (1993, p.57). They refuted the Cartesian dualism that conceives mind and body as separate and the latter subservient to the former. This dualism stems from Descartes famous assertion that, "I think, therefore I am". Where this assumption of mind-body separation occupies an unexamined space in teacher and educator thinking, the physical education programme may be limited in terms of what teachers will teach and children will learn. Teachers may aim no further than acquiring and developing physical skills and raising fitness levels.

A physical education programme will necessarily be based around physical activity, and lots of it. What makes it *educational* is that it has a point at all times, and this point enables learning beyond skills and fitness. Learning in movement focuses on actional movements and kinaesthesis; for instance, in learning freestyle swimming, the *about* dimension might include acquiring knowledge of game rules and purposes to place the activity in a context, and learning *through* movement may include social, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions (Tinning et al., 1993, pp.61-62).

THE LINK TO PHYSICAL LITERACY

Twenty years later, Whitehead (2013) makes a case for physical literacy as a unifying and powerful conceptualization of physical education. She wants to put this forward to see how it can play a part in "... articulating, with conviction and clarity, the significance and value of nurturing our embodied capability ..." (2013, p.37), and in removing the need to justify the inclusion of PE in the curriculum by reliance on extrinsic factors. As with Tinnings et al., (1993) this concept is built on a 'monist' (holistic) approach rather than a dualist position. Both Whitehead and Tinnings assert the importance of viewing the learner, the mover, as an irreducible whole. Physical literacy, therefore, is a disposition towards purposeful physical pursuits that are an integral part of lifestyle, based on relevant motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding (Whitehead, 2013, p.41). The subject area of physical education should be seen as important as any other because the "... learners' embodied dimension is as worthy of development as any other human dimension" (Capel & Whitehead, 2013, p.40).

This holistic approach is certainly being advocated in the NZC when the scope of the four underlying concepts (hauora, attitudes and values, the socio-ecological perspective, and health promotion) and the four strands (personal health and physical development, movement concepts and motor skills, relationships with other people, and healthy communities and environments) are considered (Ministry of Education, 2007).

MOVEMENT FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Ross (2008) adds a further layer to non-utilitarian views of physical education when he argues elegantly and poetically for movement to be seen as an intrinsically motivated and justified activity. He casts doubt upon the traditional justifications of PE, such as health benefits, cognitive function, or fostering particular ways of playing conventional games. The benefits are indirect, intangible, and transitory. The joy of turning a cartwheel or climbing a hill can only be experienced, not learned as theory, nor stored for later use (Ross, 2008, p.64). If nothing else, accepting this view would encourage regular physical activity, but not for the usual extrinsic reasons such as increases in fitness or growth in skill.

Physical education should be seen as a form of "serious play" that provides opportunities for learners to engage with and make sense of the world and their relationship to it. Real physical education would have

> "... youngsters ... play for excitement, run fast for breathless pleasure; jump for joy; climb for thrills and views; throw, catch, and skip for the glow of accomplishment, and swing from bars, roll down slopes, and frolic in water to sense the sensual satisfaction of being alive"(Ross, 2008, p.65).

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Tinning, Whitehead and Ross invite the generalist teacher to go further in their PE teaching. Within these frameworks, the possibility exists for teachers to think about, plan and teach PE in a free-wheeling, unrestricted way, to be more permissive and adventurous in implementing the curriculum, perhaps in a way that ERO (August 2012) is now calling for. But as Risto Telama has noted:

> "The gap between what we say we want to do and what we are doing in practice has been and still is the main problem in physical education, as it is in many branches of education" (Mosston, 2002, p.ix).

Much has been written about the theory-practice divide and what to do about it. Sewell (2012) suggests that the effective pedagogy of 'Teaching as Inquiry' (Aitken & Sinnema, 2014; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Dilks, 1993; Ministry of Education, 2007) can bridge this gap. Teaching as Inquiry (TAI) enabled the student teachers referred to in the opening paragraph to investigate their growing craft knowledge in teaching *beyond skills and fitness*. Part of this TAI was to design or reinterpret physical activities and games and then imagine and practise ways of teaching them such that the *educational* dimensions could emerge.

Presented in Table 1 are some of these activities that were trialled by the student teachers and also in the gym at university. The territory that lies beyond skills and fitness is labelled as the context in this table. The idea of 'context' is developed here as going beyond its normal meaning of background. Context includes an alignment (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008) of educational aims, language and expression, and activities and resources. To be effective there also needs to be an alignment of questions, organisation, and management (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008). For instance, if the context was self-management or taking responsibility for learning, it would be an aligned opening for learners to establish their own goals for the session. Context could be lost if a lesson aimed at participation inadvertently excluded learners, for example, through excessive waiting time or skill level required, or through something as simple as the use of the first person singular by the teacher.

Context is not presented here as an additional layer of planning. It is intended to connect with and give expression to the four strands of the NZC. For instance, the contexts of *co-operation* or *fair-play* could align with the Relationships with Other People strand. The key concepts (KC) can also provide contexts for lessons in such a way that the KCs become vitally expressed in the lesson and in the learning that occurs. The KC of 'thinking' should find itself at the forefront of every physical education lesson as participants explore what sort of thinking actional movement engenders. Managing self, relating to others, and participating and contributing likewise should be resident in this learning area.

Hauora/PE is well-stocked with opportunities to integrate with other learning areas. Drama, dance and music are close neighbours, there are obvious links to science and social sciences, and, with imagination, mathematics and literacy can both contribute to and be contributed to in a *beyond skills and fitness* model. Context as used in the examples below provide a source of learning intentions that teachers may wish to draw on.

The ITE students practised establishing the context from the outset, usually with one or two open ended questions. In the *Dead Wetas* activity (see the table

below) asking, "What species are threatened with extinction in NZ? Why?" introduces the context of sustainability as a space within which learning could occur. The context can be sustained by pauses during the activity to debrief and reflect, and by an aligned conclusion (Webster, Connolly & Schempp, 2009).

The table offers a range of contexts that could be explored in the activity and invites the invention of more. Those in **bold** have been trialled in class or in schools by the lecturer and/or the students. They are presented in isolation here for clarity given that this is a practice paper. This is in no way intended to suggest that they should occur in isolation from an integrated programme or larger units of study in Hauroa/PE.

Table 1
Possible Contexts and PE Activities.

Possible contexts	**Activity**	**Description**	**Notes**
Focus Impacting others **Timing** Leadership **Spontaneity** **Unity** Fun	Ha!	Stand knees slightly bent, upper arms parallel to floor and lower arm vertical. Anybody can call Ha! loudly, clap hands and jump to land on 2 feet. Everybody calls Ha!, claps, and jumps to face that person. Repeat randomly.	**Warm up** If two or more call simultaneously, turn and face the nearest. Debrief with reference to getting in tune with others.
Taha Tinana **Following instructions** **Thinking quickly** Reaction times **Mind-body unity**	1,2,3	Leader calls 1=walk, 2=jog, 3= sprint, number repeated = reverse direction.	**Warm up** Can be played as an elimination game, but better to keep it inclusive.
Teamwork **Non-verbal communication** **Peripheral vision** **Thinking** **Strategies**	Hand soccer	Played on indoor court with volleyball or spongeball and small goals. Number two teams 1 to 4 (i.e. each team will comprise 4 mini-teams) Game must be played in silence. Ball may only be played with flat of hand. When "1" is called only number mini-teams play. When "2" is called "1s" leave the court immediately and "2s" continue etc. Goal is scored if ball is hit through goal. Penalise talking and fouls (e.g. deliberate kicking with foot).	**Game** Give teams planning time at several intervals, especially when **Strategy** is the context. Debrief is critical. Emphasise safety through use of peripheral vision. Teams randomly assigned or mixed ability. Rapid changes of players minimises focus on ability.
Focus Engagement Probability	Paper scissors rock relay	Use lines of netball court teams begin at either end. One player of each team starts on whistle running on designated lines until they meet. Then play paper scissors rock. Loser goes to back of own line winner keeps going, but next member from losing team starts immediately to intercept. Players reaching opposing line score point.	**Warm up** Non stop game Issue is waiting time Use small teams
Quick thinking Rapid response Positive attitudes **Strategy**	Chair tag (also known as Indian tag)	One team seated on chairs or forms alternating. 2 or 3 gaps in chairs for runners to run through. Limit size of playing court. Taggers can only operate on side of court they are facing. Runners can run to either side. Tagger tags team mates facing other way when runner runs to other side. When runner is tagged next team member starts.	**Game** Time the running teams. Team that lasts the longest wins.

Creativity Group work **Participating and contributing**	Move it	In groups of 4 respond creatively to movement challenges. I min practise, then demonstrate. Move like an animal. Cross this space to a rhythm. Create a machine. Demonstrate silly walks. Build a statue in a park to a hero. Demonstrate a force of nature. Make the initial letters of your group names etc.	**Warm up or warm down** Use music.
Co-operation, Teamwork Attunement	Blanket ball	Keep the ball from dropping through the holes for as long as possible.	Blanket /sheet with 5 ball sized holes.
Taha Whanau (adults protecting the child?) Movement skills Teamwork	Catch the Tail/ Mind the baby	Teams of 4. 3 join up (hold onto waist of person in front) and protect the last student. Front person tries to tag the rear.	**Warm up** Context established with recount of times when older person/sibling protected you.
Taha Whanau Taha Hinengaro Fun Strategy **Conservation**	Dead Wetas	Divide class in to birds and wetas. If tagged by bird, weta lies on back waving arms and legs in air. Can be revived if carried by 4 wetas (1 on each limb) to mat. Wetas cannot be tagged if carrying another weta.	**Warm up** Ratio of 1 to 5 birds to wetas. Begin at a walk as a warm up. A game equally suited to deeper learning is *Trawlers* where children simulate and modify trawling techniques to investigate the effect on fish populations.

The place to begin in planning a learning experience is with the first column, where the teacher selects or invents possible contexts for learning. We hypothesised that creating and maintaining a context is what triggers the deep learning in participants. This relates to Nuthall's (2007) assertion that kids learn what they do. When they are co-operating in PE, they are learning co-operation. The way the lesson opens is therefore critical. If you can open with a question, students immediately begin co-constructing the context, and therefore the learning. For instance, an opening question for Blanket Ball might be, "Whereabouts in life is co-operation important?"

The ITE students created a wide range of contexts, and gathered evidence for the differences they made to learning through the process of Teaching as Inquiry. Some of the contexts investigated were:

> Student voice, intrinsic motivation, problem-solving approaches, mind-body connection, teacher participation and modelling, sport education models, whakawhanaungatanga (supporting and caring for a knowledge-producing community), gender issues, building positive relationships through physical education, creating caring communities (the ethic of care), attitudes and values.

Andrew's (pseudonym) group looked for ways to create a context that would build positive relationships through physical activity. What they did was not complex: asking open-ended questions, scaffolding specific group protocols, designing inclusive activities, and ensuring time for a student debrief of the learning. They were surprised and delighted at the results:

> "... the classroom teacher, stated that she has observed improved behaviour both within the classroom and in the playground, as students displayed a willingness to work with students they previously would have avoided. They are also giving more astute answers to our questioning in debriefs regarding how games can be improved and goals achieved through working as a community, which is observable in video 1 from Sept 3rd. I was initially suspicious that the students had simply come to understand our inquiry, and were feeding us the answers they knew we were looking for, but [the class teacher] was adamant that this wasn't the case, and that the students' answers were genuine".

Jo (pseudonym) shows how imagination can transform a game like line tag (she called it *Escape the Game*)

> Backstory:
> "It happened before any of us even had a chance … Our movement was now restricted to the lines beneath our feet, as orbs of evil rained from above us…

The digital world had sucked us in.
We knew the only way out would be to defeat the orbs of evil.
We had to get them through the petal portals in order to escape this nightmare …
In order to escape … the game".

The context is not explicit here but the participants will all appreciate the difference that the powerful world of the *imagination* makes to activity. Jo models how students may invent new contexts that breathe new life into well-known activities.

"LOOK, I'VE GOT A PE BACKGROUND AND THAT'S JUST NOT PE'

The purpose of this practice paper was to outline relevant thinking by selected PE theorists and give examples of how their ideas might be put into practice. The data that is presented here in the way of a table of activities and the reflections and descriptions of the ITE students is limited and there is little pretence of a research methodology being brought to bear on it. It is expected that if this approach resonates then teachers will want to try it out for themselves and, in the best traditions of TAI, evaluate its effectiveness for themselves also.

In this paper, the intention was to show some specific examples of how familiar PE games and activities can be re-imagined with new-found relevance. Teachers marginalised by their perceived lack of content knowledge and skill may find a new confidence to give full expression to the Hauora/PE learning area. Perhaps students demotivated by the mindless focus on high levels of physical skill and fitness will find new joy and meaning in PE along the lines suggested by Ross above.

It is hoped that teachers and schools will want to re-evaluate their ready acceptance of outside providers in PE and reclaim the learning area. This may now be more likely because they can see themselves as better placed to physically *educate*. The larger threat to professionalism in primary education should also be considered.

You may find that not everyone in the profession and in the community welcomes this demystification, hence the response from the experienced teacher quoted in the opening paragraph. Such responses are valuable though. They provide the opportunity to examine our own practice and our beliefs about it.

This paper has advanced an ideal of physical education that is *educational* if the movements involved trigger or result from a *reflective consciousness* that is activated and modified, or, in Whitehead's terms, it involves the development of the learners' embodied dimensions. The potential impact is on the whole learner in ways that are unique to this learning area. In time, those teachers who already practice from a similar model or who choose to experiment with the approach outlined here will answer for themselves the question of whether this is PE or not.

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