Can physical education be meaningful

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Can physical education be meaningful: the role of embodied subjectivity in enhancing self and social learning?

Abstract
This paper critically considers the pragmatic and phenomenological-informed conceptual possibilities for increasing meaningfulness in physical education via a greater emphasis on embodied subjectivity. The paper begins by considering why greater conceptual clarity is needed in this area and then focuses on why the centrality of lived-body experience in relation to educational planning can benefit from merging the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty with the reflective awareness component of Dewey’s pragmatism. Merleau-Ponty’s exploration of how the ‘body-subject’ provides a holistic way of conceiving relations between the body and the world. Likewise, Dewey’s writings on habit are reviewed as for Dewey habits are not mere repetitious events but socially shaped predispositions which enable feelings and judgements to be shown in response to settings. The paper then reviews curriculum and pedagogical related arguments which focus on the challenges of developing experience and language concurrently and in so doing reviews some concerning critical matters professionals require to address. The paper concludes by advancing measured claims that if applied concerns could be overtaken there is sufficient theory to practice coherence to argue that a progressive programme which focused on the self and the social could become a plausible basis for arguing that physical education is meaningful.

Keywords: embodiment, embodied subjectivity, physical education, learning

Introduction
There has been an increase in prominence recently for conceptually-inclined writings on physical education that focus on how embodied subjectivity can enhance students learning experiences (Standal & Engelsrud, 2013; Stolz, 2013, 2014). This attention is welcome, as is an enhanced focus on associated matters such as pedagogical engagement and linking students’ experiences with a degree of reflection and review (Beni, Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2017; O’Connor, 2019). Building on these instigations, the focus in this paper is on the need to invest further time in critically investigating key aspects of pragmatism and phenomenology in relation to educational theory, in order to ensure that these new lines of thinking in physical education are on secure conceptual ground. Sound educational theory requires in this instance elaboration and clarity on how subjective-led views of learning can also be shared and enhanced via an intersubjective perspective. Such a perspective could triumph over concerns about the overly narrow and
reductive forms of learning, teaching and assessment which currently exist in schools (Priestley & Philippou, 2018).

On this basis, discussion on key conceptual matters will focus particularly on the pragmatism-informed writings of John Dewey and the phenomenological-informed writings of Merleau-Ponty. Dewey was keen to critically consider how a post Heglian focus on intersubjectivity could dovetail coherently with a post Darwinian view of achieving certain ends-in-view (Bernstein, 2010). Thus, students could both engage with a rich diversity of personal experiences as well as achieving certain acknowledged outcomes; a situation and context which are frequently required nowadays in education and sport. In addition, Merleau-Ponty, as with Dewey, considered that people should not be bound by the dichotomies of reason/emotion and mind/body, and articulated a concept of the body-subject’s experience which is referenced through movement and language. Consequently, knowledge is founded upon integrated perceptual experiences, which reveal ever more of the world as we live and experience them (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968).

The paper proceeds by scoping out some of the reasons why conceptual clarity is needed in physical education. It then engages in greater detail with the main reasons reviewing the centrality of lived-body experience in relation to educational planning can benefit from merging the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty with the reflective awareness component of Dewey’s pragmatism. The paper then argues that a greater emphasis on pragmatic and phenomenological-informed curriculum planning and pedagogical strategies could contain rich possibilities for
achieving greater teacher autonomy and enhanced students’ ownership of their learning in physical education.

**Enhancing learning: the physical education context**

This paper concurs with Biesta’s (2009) broad view that the enhanced interest in measuring students outcomes in education should dovetail with an accompanying commitment to continually reviewing the purposes of education. In a physical education context, this involves exploring new areas of conceptual vibrancy in relation to embodied and subjective learning experiences and teasing out their respective demands in terms of curriculum construction, pedagogical practices and professional learning (Stolz, 2014; Standal, 2015). This paper advances broad principles that try to help matters and which also conspicuously avoid providing overly specific and potentially constraining advice on the construction and enactment of rich and productive learning environments. There is ample evidence of this self-inflicted own goal already in contemporary physical education e.g. in models-based practices, where the experiential inequalities some students’ might experience are a probable consequence of teachers blindly adhering to the mandatory and non-negotiable features of practice advised (Kirk, 2013). Take the case, for example, of a student who at least at some point and for some of the time wishes to be a captain or coach in sport education (Siedentop, 1994) but who is assigned a more minor remit for the entirety of the season. Surely professionals in physical education should baulk at such arrangements as well as being professionally bemused about how such a constraining model ever became so widely adopted in physical education. What therefore are surely required are more loosely framed guiding principles which are free from systemic design
flaws and which promote authentic learning outcomes, interesting subject matter and engaging teaching strategies.

There is also concern about the professional absorption physical education has had with overly complicated pedagogical ideas on curriculum integration, as these over many years have rarely yielded rich learning dividends (Author & Author, 2017a). Uppermost amongst these concerns is the work of Peter Arnold, whose conceptual account of meaning and movement in physical education (Arnold, 1979) continues to produce underwhelming evidence of coherent progress (Brown, 2013). Thus, despite the prominence of Arnold’s influence and the ensuing ways in which his ideas have informed curriculum ambitions in Australia in particular, there remain concerns about the undue complexity of making coherent pedagogical sense of the ‘in’, ‘through’ and ‘about’ dimensions of movement. Arnold’s view of integration did not draw upon any cited Dewey references or notable Dewayan influences. There are references though to the four founding fathers of phenomenology; Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. More evident still were multiple references to Phenix’s (1964) ‘realms of meaning’ framework. This was considered to offer greater potential for a movement based subject where the subject emphasis would be on cognition and conceptual development and especially on aesthetic informed activities such as educational gymnastics and modern dance. As it happens, Dewey wrote quite extensively on ‘realms of meanings’ and highlighted that the ‘realm of meanings is wider than that of true-and-false meanings … Poetic meanings, moral meanings, a large part of the goods of life are matters or richness and freedom of meanings, rather than of truth’ Dewey (1925b/2009, pp. 410-411). However, in Scotland where Arnold was based when he produced his framework, it was not adopted when examination awards began for the first time in physical
education in the 1980’s. Rather, a greater emphasis on the development of perceptual-motor skills through games and sports through a range of pedagogical approaches was evident (Author & Author, 2011). It was in Australia however where the contribution of Arnold’s (1979) work is most evident in successive curriculum arrangements, and where the gulf between the vision and outcomes in practice has lasted for decades (Author & Author, 2017a).

On rather more secure ground, Casey and Quennerstedt (2020) have recently accessed three Dewey readings in order to review how contrasting elements of education could benefit physical education. Their emphasis is on highlighting how a shift away from a predominant focus on developing students’ skills to a broader and more open-ended transformative growth-infused focus is needed. Two of Dewey’s most widely known works: *Democracy in Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) are frequently accessed. A rather more extended review of Dewey’s publishing oeuvre (especially in relation to habit) may well have been merited. For over the course of a sixty year academic career Dewey’s writing output was copious. Fesmire (2015) calculates that Dewey’s legacy consists of around 8 million words, housed variously in over 600 articles and 32 books. That said there is in relation to Dewey and the theoretical context of cooperative learning taken forward, a more detailed and robust engagement with Dewey’s theorizing than has often been evident in other related writings.

To move beyond the above criticisms two broad principles are advanced, which it is argued should underpin programmes of physical education that are shaped and defined by embodied and subjective-led experiences. Firstly, learning ambitions should continually reinforce the self and social dimension of physical education; secondly programmes should reference and connect as
continuously as possible with the whole school ambitions and those of local communities. For
the first matter, I have elsewhere considered that the literature review of the nature and meaning
of physical education over the past 50 years completed by Beni, Fletcher and Ní Chróinín (2017)
helpfully signposts the need for a greater subject emphasis on social interaction and personally
relevant learning (Author, 2018a). Moreover, following Stolz’s (2014, 2015) writings on
phenomenology which draw extensively on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, 1964/1968),
physical education would be wise to critically explore the education of the phenomenal body and
what it means to come to know the world through embodied learning experiences. Merleau-
Ponty (1964/1968) explored in detail how the movement experiences of the body influences
people’s perception of the world and contends that lived-body experiences should not be
separated from cognitive learning, rather the ‘body-subject’ provides a holistic way of
conceiving relations between the body and the world, which avoids over privileging abstraction
and cognition (concepts and rules) and under-representing the centrality of the body in human
experience. Brown and Payne (2009) argued that Merleau-Ponty’s influence can contribute
towards a re-conception where there is a greater emphasis on spatial and temporal aspects of
movement within a social ecology of movement. This line of thinking is preferable to a
restrictive view of physical literacy which overly focuses on individual growth rather than self
and social growth (Standal, 2015; Whitehead, 2010).

Secondly, in relation to physical education programmes referencing and connecting as
continuously as possible with the ambitions of schools and local communities, there is merit in
pedagogical terms of avoiding approaches which are either overly Cartesian or overly solipsistic.
Moran (2016) considers that Merleau-Ponty was capable of developing a more integrated
ontology as he was alert to recognising a middle ground between the subjectivity of the ‘I’ and the objectivity of thinking of humans as objects in the world. Therefore, what is needed is a form of communicative constitution that emphasises the extent to which ‘We’ are intertwined and interwoven with each other as part of our intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). On this basis, the second person phenomenological standpoint becomes relevant to a social ontological perspective e.g. reviewing students’ and teachers’ obligations in classes and what conditions might benefit the development of a shared sense of practice and empathy. In brief, how can a first person ‘I’ response become closely aligned with group ‘We’ responses, and how can this alignment be nurtured in viable intersubjective ways which highlight the capacity for both personal privacy and shared identification in human experiences. Actualizing these forms of plurality requires building consensus around shared practices and observations and thereafter using speech, judgement and action to confirm the authenticity of experience.

Thus, at the foundation of experiences and reflections there is a being which immediately recognizes itself as it has both knowledge ‘of itself and of all things … through direct contact with that existence’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 371). On this basis, we need to become perceptually aware of the psychologically rich behaviour other students are displaying, especially with regard to the part empathy can play in appreciating how things are for others i.e. in a sense of being able to feel as others do (Smith, 2016). In further considering how the above phenomenology-informed principles of embodied subjectivity could benefit the internal goods of physical education practice and the external (whole school) goods of practice, MacIntyre’s (1981/2007) holistic vision of practice is helpful in highlighting how students can become increasingly adept at cultivating stable values and displaying practical wisdom. For as the goods
internal to practice have transferable gains, so it is that engaging in practice can lead students to the achievement of individual and common goods. Moreover, students can share a concept of experience and practice which is nurtured through performance and cultivated further by factors such as a shared sense of fair play, recognizing rights and responsibilities, accepting decisions and getting winning and losing in perspective (Author & Author, 2017b).

**John Dewey: making sense from experience**

For the sake of context, it is worth mentioning that there is no particular evidence that even though the academic careers of Dewey and Merleau-Ponty partially overlapped, that the continental writings of Merleau-Ponty were ever widely read by Dewey and vice versa. Since then however, reflecting Fesmire’s (2015, p. 238) view that Dewey’s many writings play ‘a vital role in cross-cultural and emerging cultural dialogue’, there is evidence of specific associations and comparative analysis between Dewey and Merleau-Ponty’s work which can be productively drawn upon. For example, both Kestenbaum (1977) and Margolis (1998) have sought to draw more extensive connections between Dewey’s work and Continental philosophy. These are important contributions as one criticism of leading phenomenologists is that some of the operative concepts in phenomenology are not elaborated upon in ways which provide methodological insights or aid reflection (Vagle, 2014). Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1962) emphasis on pre-reflective experiences can for example make it difficult to dovetail with attempts to emphasise meaning-making and reflective thinking. In this light, reviewing the centrality of lived-body experience in terms of educational planning can it is argued benefit from merging the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty with the reflective awareness component of Dewey’s pragmatism (Dewey, 1925a/1981). For Dewey, a central tenet of his philosophy was that the
subject and object, the self and the world, the mind and the body are not separate structures but single structures which are in tune with each other through cyclical and intentional meaning-making transactions (Dewey, 1938). These views reflect the influence of Hegel on Dewey and the need to fuse a concern for individuality with a similar level of concern for social and shared engagement in life (Ryan, 1995). In relation to enhancing meaningful bodily awareness (as part of being a confident and autonomous person capable of informed decision-making) such a perspective would be capable of acknowledging the distinguishing differences between ‘the body’s vulnerabilities and resiliencies, its obstacles and successes, its frailties and wonder …’ (Caldwell, 2012, p. 10).

This multifaceted perspective encapsulates the complex relationships between embodiment and education and the challenge of integrating the two as meaningful experiences in contemporary physical education. Such interest in meanings is therefore not a stilted linguistic or knowledge-related concern but rather a wider focus centering on the conception of habit (Dewey, 1922/2012). Habits for Dewey are not considered as mere repetitious events but rather as socially shaped predispositions which enable feeling and judgement to be shown in response to settings (Author, 2018). This more wide-ranging notion of habit was predicated on considering that means-ends thinking enabled different (rather than fixed-ends) outcomes to be achieved. This position highlights the subtle connections Dewey perceived between knowledge and action and of how interactions between the two was primarily a matter of ‘functions and habits, of active adjustments and readjustments, of coordination and activities, rather than states of consciousness’ (Dewey, 1909/1978, p. 5). Kesterman (1977) believes that the concept of habit provided Dewey with the resources for recording and reflecting on the outcome of experiences;
for exploring the omnipresent role of habit in experience and for reviewing the capacity of habit to intensify experience. Thus, while experiences are contextually bound, habits have an active sense-giving qualitative dimension which is emblematic of Dewey’s pragmatism and his sense of phenomenology (Kesterman, 1977).

As such, actions and movements which are fundamental to being physically educated are not the result of purely mental decisions but are based on sensitive and thoughtful responses to the environment. In addition, Dewey considered that social interaction was pivotal to integrating the cognitive and emotional dimensions of behavioural responses as habits comprise environmental features that merge inseparable mental and physical means and which promote corporeal reflection (Dewey, 1922/2012). Therefore, for Dewey habits provide the resources for recording and reflecting on the outcome of experiences. This perspective is reflective of Dewey’s emerging view that philosophy needed to move from the absolute idealism of Hegel that Dewey initially admired to a more practical problem solving philosophy which recognized continuity in experiences (Dewey, 1896/1980). Such a context recognizes the learning benefits from a degree of conflict or newness e.g. in educational circumstances, challenges and tasks require some form of self and social deliberation and review. And, for Dewey in ethical terms the pursuit of the social good was inherently worthwhile as the benefit of all learners was met by the shared desire for inclusive and multiplying ends (Westbrook, 1991). Accordingly, for Dewey developing the capacities of the self as part of the pursuit of a wider moral life required a focus on self-unification rather than self-realization, where the pursuit of growth was key to realizing normative ends. On the basis, the ‘good society was, like the good self, a diverse yet harmonious, growing yet unified whole, a fully participatory democracy in which the powers and capacities of
the individuals that comprised it … permitted the full and free expression of individuality’
(Westbrook, 1991, p. 164). Such a view of positive responsibility can lead to learning contexts
where students recognize the integrity of their shared communities without undue restrictions
being placed on their individuality (Dewey & Tufts, 1909/1985).

Making physical education meaningful
In terms of building on the theoretical views of Merleau-Ponty and Dewey in helping make
physical education more meaningful, the position taken forward in this paper is predicated on the
view that more pragmatic and phenomenological-informed curriculum planning and pedagogical
strategies could contain rich possibilities for achieving greater teacher autonomy and enhanced
students’ ownership of their learning. The context for these gains are reviewed in mainstream
school contexts, familiar to educational arrangements across the Anglophone world, where
almost all students complete week-by-week programmes of physical education throughout their
compulsory schooling years (i.e. most typically between 5 and 16 years). Thus, what follows is a
scoping out of a progressive learning context covering a minimum of eleven years and totaling in
many cases nearly 1000 hours of what for most students is essentially ‘one’ continuous physical
education programme. This enterprise is consistent with aspirations, goals and outcomes which
support students’ attempts to ensure that by the end of their schooling they should be positively
disposed towards lifelong physical activity. In making such progress, the paper considers that
embodied subjectivity is capable of providing the foundational cornerstone for sustaining child
and adolescent engagement in physical education. Thereafter, the paper reviews the broad
pedagogical principles capable of furthering students’ opportunities to progressively review and
reflect on their self and shared experiences.
Mapping out this position begins by considering the views of an insightful sceptic. This is necessary for as many have noted in physical education, the subject area suffers from an excess of theorizing, not all of it robust and astute (McNamee & Bailey, 2010). In this light, it is worth dwelling on the contribution of Barrow (2008) who unpacked in conceptual detail the possible value of educating the body as part of schooling (if not necessarily education). In Barrow’s (2008) view, while there should be a concern with physical fitness and bodily health and their possible connections with contributing to a broader view of wellbeing, this is altogether different to arguing that the education of the body offers an alternate route to conceptual understanding. The problem Barrow (2008, p. 278) perceives is that movement forms are not effective forms of communication i.e. ‘in respect of propositional knowledge or truths and insights encapsulated in our verbal language’. This criticism makes sense relative to arguing on the grounds that teachers can judge inferentially that the performance of practical skills alone conveys intelligent thinking without the need to use language to verify understanding. I am persuaded by this particular criticism of Barrow (2008) and recognise that some part of students 1000 hours of ‘one’ physical education programme needs to contain opportunities for reflection and review which are captured or profiled in some way by using language e.g. completion of journal.

Acknowledgement of this key issue is also prevalent in the examination award context which some students opt to select in addition to their 1000 hours physical education programmes. In such contexts, in Scotland, Author (2008) found that a performance led approach to learning and teaching (for students of 16-18 years) could in some instances lead to the integration of high levels of practical activity with high levels of propositional knowledge learning and assessment.
success (as measured through the completion of extended written answers in an examination setting). However, this was far from a given and required among other matters considerable teacher expertise in constructing learning environments and students being interested in their learning, and reflective when it came to reviewing their own assessment progress. More recently in Australia, Whittle et al (2017) found that content difficulty continues to challenge students when faced with drawing on their experiential learning and practical experiences to complete written assessment tasks. If this was not problematic enough, Author (2010) reviewed how the weighting afforded to practical performance relative to the analytical understanding lessened as the age and stage of examination progressed i.e. the higher the level of award, the less prominence and weighting was afforded to practical performance relative to analytical understanding. Scanlon, MacPhail and Calderon (2019) note the same problem in the current Irish context when reviewing the new Leaving Certificate in Physical Education. One policy stakeholder was delighted when a 50/50 theory (analytical) to practice split was agreed and they ‘breathed a sigh of relief that we got it (practical) that high’ (Scanlon, MacPhail & Calderon, 2019, p.82). Without getting further diverted from the main purposes of this paper, it is evident that in outcome terms performance (practice) and analysis (theory) need to be integrated as one and not separated, even if this lowers overall pass rates. For only this measure contains the twin advantages of being more certain that those students who pass the overall award were ‘physically educated’ at the age and stage requirements being examined, and furthermore that those students completing awards and passing them were being appropriately presented for awards which they could realistically achieve.
Returning to the 1000 hour types of programmes for which the vast majority of students participate in, McNamee (2005, p. 9) robustly states that ‘anyone attempting to argue for the educational value of physical education on the grounds that the playing of games conferred a wide-ranging cognitive perspective on the world would be barking up the wrong tree’. While not entirely sympathetic to this sentiment, as with Barrow (2008) the pithiness of the statements do prompt a review, not least in terms of considering how effective forms of communication can emerge from experiential learning. Dewey (1925b/2009) argued that for language communication to develop, latent qualities and habits can be identified and discriminated between in order to foster intimacy, interaction and personal growth. Thus, experiential-based methodologies should be geared towards more than reaching objective fixed ends and focus as well on interconnected actions related to the how, what and why of tasks. Progress on this basis can help overtake one of the major criticisms of Dewey’s pragmatism i.e. that it is overly subjective. Furthermore, through common understandings and shared social situations a community of action can be defined and sustained. Therefore, for Dewey (1911/1978, p. 19) what is required through practical responses is that common sense statements hang together and ‘provide a consistent report or narrative.’

As noted, earlier Kestenbaum’s (1977) view was that experiences which are contextually bound have an active sense-giving qualitative dimension, suggests a fluid approach to learning where students continually integrate past and present experiences and where students understanding of the world is constantly developing and adjusting. Consequently, Dewey aimed to engage and progressively interest students in educational experiences beginning from their foundation of past experiences and perceptions. Thus, by utilising the principles of continuity and interaction,
Dewey (1938) planned to preserve learning as a process, while still aiming to achieve predetermined outcomes (Author, 2017a). Following these principles can justify using experiential learning approaches where full engagement and the observations of facts can lead students to reach nuanced, sensitive and open-minded judgements.

In reviewing the broad pedagogical principles which could provide students with opportunities for reviewing and reflecting on their self and shared experiences, key to success are teachers being able to mediate environments which can foster a shared embodied learning focus. This matters more than the activity contexts which are chosen or for how long they are pursued (Standal, 2015). Therefore, reflecting MacIntyre’s (1981/2007) views on the internal and external goods of practice, teachers need to facilitate discussion and help students to critically engage with their experiences, recognize available choices and discern viable ways forward. This enables students to make a greater sense of their world, with their qualms and instincts informing the establishment of more rounded conceptual understandings which are both accurate (objective) plus relevant to their lives (i.e. having a subjective benefit). In this way, in this micro community of practice, extended opportunities are available for students to exercise reflection and deliberation and to share instances of listening and leading as they make increasing sense of their inner world and the world around them. As such, practice experiences can become part of students’ wider social conversations with the goods of practice shared both internally (within class groups) and externally (within the wider life of the school). This spirit of openness and opportunity also pervades O’Connor’s (2019) thinking on trying to capture something of the thrill, the zip, zest and sheer magic of bodily activity and the capacity there may be to draw vivid recollections and reflections from such significant movement experiences through recast physical
education programmes. O’Connor (2019) highlights that some adeptness at not inviting students to rush to judgement and to recognize the merits of revisiting, recasting and reemphasizing diverse points of detail requires greater consideration in the context of individual and group, self and social planning and practice.

The key task therefore is considering how dialogic exchanges can capture the vital importance of body-subjective experiences that can have transferable learning gains at a self and social (whole school and community) level. The contribution of Zimmerman & Morgan (2011) is helpful in this respect as the authors have scoped out encouraging possibilities which emphasise through detailed reference to Merleau-Ponty the expressive potential of movement and play. The authors input is especially significant in relation to O’Connor’s (2019) point on the benefits of engaging with contrasting points of detail as underpinning Zimmerman & Morgan’s (2011) work is a belief that body-subjective led movement and play experiences can create open and authentic dialogic conflicts that need to be explored rather than suppressed or avoided. Thus, by considering our embodied subjectivity body as a context for holistic developmental activity, students can learn through movement to understand and appreciate the wider human condition as well as enhancing their personal capacities. In this context, the body can become a mediator of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) in an environment ‘which leads to a kind of teaching spontaneity (that) allows the refutation of subjectivism and the supremacy of representation’ (Zimmerman & Morgan, 2011, p. 54). This inbetween positioning is a desirable one educationally both for enhancing students’ self-expression and for building a shared sense of class empathy in relation to the tasks at hand and in relation to coping with the demands of school life and the wider world. Thus, by viewing the world as an inter-corporeal community and
by confronting both a self and shared perspective on learning situations, we can discover things about ourselves and others that we did already know.

In terms of capturing the qualities and characteristics of movement experiences through language, Andersson & Garrison (2016) further advise that a body perspective which utilizes Dewey’s distinction of significant meanings is needed. This would comprise abstract linguistic meanings and imminent meanings underpinned by intuitive qualities, feelings, selective attention and habits. However, as the authors acknowledge the intention to further explore how inclusive accounts of bodily experiences can more fully engage with the transaction between the subject matter (activity experiences) and the learning environment is often difficult to bridge through language. Hughson and Inglis’s (2002) elaboration on how the relationship between experience (body-subject), the nature of activities and associated subject knowledge (e.g. of skills, fitness and improvement strategies) are part of a totality, where change in one area effects changes in other areas, is in some respects a helpful conceptual step forward. However, as Author (2008) and Whittle et al (2017) noted earlier, it is acknowledged that the pedagogical complexities associated with cultivating an embodied subjectivity perspective on enhancing self and social learning is subject to expertise issues which necessarily require ongoing professional support and encouragement.

Furthermore, there is also the concern over whether movement experiences can also be formally assessed as well as progressively recorded. Vagle (2014) notes, how students’ accounts of their experiences are often modest and overly descriptive relative to engaging with subject matter in richer and more detailed ways. This is especially so when trying to gain a transition from
description to interpretation and when language is designed to avoid an undue focus on pre-
determined conclusions. As Author and Author (2017b) found when reviewing school-based
attempts to profile students’ wider achievement, the advantages of documenting reflective-based
progress and goals were frequently overtaken by the rushed and confused ways in which schools
completed the process. Thus, in order to overtake concerns about the shallowness of students
reporting and poor working practices, it would be wise for teachers to consider when, where and
how reflections and recording of experiences might best take place e.g. during activity, directly
following activity, after a gap of some determinate amount of time. Progress on this basis might
assist consideration of how diverse experiences and identifiable occasions can become the focus
of reflection and provide the basis for more extended and nuanced reflections and interpretations.

In making good on these purposes, improving and modifying current reflective journal
approaches may well be needed if the focus on self and shared empathetic experiences is to
contribute sufficiently to a set of more sharply focused curriculum intentions. Taking forward
this self-unified (rather than self-realisation) focus may well be aided by a sharper focus on
questions and circumstances that naturally arise through happenings and encounters experienced
in lessons. In this way, students can come to reflect on visible and bounded, sense-laden
experiences that are capable of yielding shared understandings of basic truths from which each
student can reflect on and analyse their particular experiences (Author & Author, 2020). This
holistic intention is predicated on the view that educational matters of self and shared importance
can be sustained and represented by ‘the desire to exist in a particularly concrete, embodied,
perceptual and human kind of way’ (Rocha, 2015, p. 15).ii
Conclusion

This paper has critically reviewed claims over the extent to which physical education through an enhanced focus on embodied subjectivity and self and social learning could plausibly claim to be a meaningful contributor to educational learning. It has pursued these ambitions through considering the pragmatic and phenomenological-informed conceptual possibilities of leading thinkers, Dewey and Merleau-Ponty in particular. The paper has advanced measured claims that the Deweyan notion of habit could underpin attempts to better support reflections on more concentrated physical education experiences. In applied terms, to make good on these intentions would require more nuanced and illuminating curriculum arrangements and suitably excellent pedagogical facilitation supported by informed professional development to be in place. If this occurs, there is the potential for a greater focus on experience-based learning to provide students with a mix of movement and play experiences that trigger instances from which each student can reflect on and analyse their involvement in learning. Such reflections afford opportunities for students to develop both personally and in terms of their wider class and whole school contribution. On this basis, there is sufficient theory to practice coherence to argue that a progressive programme of physical education which focused on the self and the social, on personally relevant learning and social interaction, could become a plausible basis for arguing that in educational terms, physical education is capable of being meaningful.

References


Author (2008)

Author (2010)
Author & Author (2011)

Author & Author (2017a)

Author & Author (2017b)

Author (2018)

Author & Author (2020)

Author (in press)


\(^1\) MacIntyre (1981/2007) holistic vision was that it is from inside practices that students and teachers can recognise and appreciate how the goods of practice are informed by personal narrative, our social and moral life and through developing good habits. The term ‘communities of practice’ does not feature in MacIntyre’s (1981/2007) work however such notions are inherent in MacIntyre’s concept of a practice. As such, through practice students should become increasingly adept at cultivating stable values that display practical wisdom. This would be apparent, for example, by student focusing on achieving excellences of character. On this basis, the goods internal to practice have transferable gains, as engaging in practice can lead students towards an achievement of common and individual goods. MacIntyre’s views on practice have enjoyed something of a pre-eminence among philosophers of education based on the identification of key features of practice and there ‘invitation to a certain kind of self-involving and self-transformative co-operative engagement ... (combined with) ... deep-seated intuitions about the nature and value of teaching, properly conceived, particularly in opposition to technicist and instrumentalist conceptions of the activity’ (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 347). See also Author & Author (2017a).

\(^2\) Author (in press) in the broad area of Health and Physical Education provides activity specific examples of how enhanced engagement with embodied experiences can help overtake concerns over restrictive pedagogical ‘what works’ approaches unduly influencing school teaching. Author (in press) argues for the need for restatements of pedagogical risk taking and for teachers to find spaces and opportunities for committing to more engaging and enlivening teaching approaches.

\(^3\) Scotland is one country which would benefit from more nuanced and illuminating curriculum arrangements (Author & Author, 2011). For while the overall capacity building aspirations of the curriculum are laudable the explanation of the experiences and outcomes students require too experience and achieve lacks pedagogical insight and credible explanation and justification. Indeed, the approach adopted is merely to restate the exact same statements for both experiences and outcomes, see also Education Scotland (2009).