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The 'Visions and Voices' of Physical Education Teachers (Part 1)

Mike Jess, Paul McMillan, Nicola Carse and Karen Munro

University of Edinburgh

Introduction

This series of articles explores the role that teachers' visions for physical education can play in their professional development as teachers and, more generally, in the development of physical education as a subject area. This first article investigates how the complex nature of the current physical education landscape compels teachers to articulate, develop and enact their personal visions for physical education. Through an exploration of the importance of boundaries in the vision-making process, the article highlights how physical education teachers will increasingly become the 'voice' of physical education in the future. Further articles in the series will track the developing visions of physical education teachers as they develop from student teachers through their teaching careers in schools and beyond.

Physical Education Today: Complex, valued and connected

Physical education is becoming more complex as it moves from its traditional position on the margins of education. With research consistently reporting a broad range of holistic benefits from regular physical activity, the perceived value and status of physical activity and physical education has increased and both are now more prominent features across the education, health and sport policy arenas. The mind-body dualism that has long dominated educational thinking and squeezed physical education to the fringes of the curriculum is on its way out. With knowledge and learning increasingly being viewed as emergent, integrated and situated, we are seeing a significant shift in the way that curriculum and teaching are being approached. As a result, physical education initiatives are becoming more educational in nature as they focus on a holistic mix of physical, cognitive, social and emotional learning. Physical literacy, socio-ecological approaches, meaningful physical education, lifelong learning and models-based practices are all now part of this holistic physical education curriculum. The long dominant 'one-size-fits-all' multi-activity curriculum approach is increasingly being replaced by a form of physical education that involves decision-making processes focussed on the most appropriate learning experiences for different students. In addition, as governments increasingly regulate education through a neo-liberal lens, physical education is becoming part of an open market in which outsourcing is commonplace. Stakeholders from education, health, well-being, sport, the outdoors and leisure all now compete for space within this crowded subject area. Politicians, policy makers, national organisations, local authority managers, school leaders, health professionals, sport coaches, voluntary groups, parents/carers, the media and the public are all now taking more active interest in physical education. Physical education is becoming more complex, more valued, more connected with educational thinking and is attracting a wider range of interested parties.

The Voice of Physical Education Teachers

As the reputation and educational credentials of physical education grow, the future for the subject area appears to be more heartening. However, with more stakeholders participating in physical education developments, many voices are now making a legitimate contribution to the debates about physical education. Physical education teachers, individually and collectively, now find themselves positioned in an increasingly crowded arena in which their voices may not be heard. While teaching in classrooms will remain at the core of their work, there is a growing need for physical education teachers to actively engage in these debates about the future direction of the subject area. Physical education teachers have the potential to make a significant contribution to these debates by ensuring that future developments align with contemporary educational thinking and practice. However, to do this, physical education teachers will need to bring individual and collective clarity to these discussions. As we now discuss, developing and sharing their visions for physical education will be key to their voices being heard across these important debates.

The Visions of Physical Education Teachers

As the world of education becomes more complex, physical education teachers can no longer be viewed as ‘technicians’ who deliver physical programmes focussed on movement technique. Nor should they be expected to simply implement a curriculum from ‘on high’. Physical education teachers are contemporary professionals who are increasingly becoming involved in a career-long vision-making process that compels them to take a stance for a preferred future for physical education. Hammerness (2001) captures the multi-layered nature of teachers’ vision-making when she proposes that vision,

“.....consists of images of what teachers hope could be or might be in their classrooms, their schools, their community and, in some cases, even society...vision can provide a sense of ‘reach’ that inspires and motivates them, and invites them to reflect upon their work” (2001, pp. 3-4).

This multi-layered, or nested, definition aligns with the contemporary views of education that focus on more holistic, connected, collaborative and situated forms of learning. It acknowledges that while the teachers’ work is rooted in classrooms, they also have a key advocacy role to play across and beyond the school. At the immediate level, teachers’ visions can help them recognise the complex nature of student learning and also of their own professional learning. Visions can help teachers envisage the learning they wish to achieve with their students and classes, create a frame of reference to negotiate policy guidance and also help them reflect on their experiences to inform their professional development. Beyond the classroom, teachers’ visions can help them add their voice to debates about physical education and, more generally, education, sport and health. In their schools, teachers’ visions are critical to the ongoing dialogue with colleagues in their own departments and with external physical activity practitioners who contribute to the student experience. These neighbourly discussions are key to the ongoing development of a collective educational vision for physical education and can help teachers build the confidence to share their vision with teachers from

other subject areas, senior leadership and also with professionals, academics and lay-people beyond the school. This advocacy role becomes particularly important for the many physical education teachers whose career pathways extend beyond the teaching of physical education. Critically, without the clarity of these individual and collective visions, the voice of physical education teachers may not be heard in the congested arena in which physical education now finds itself.

Vision-Making and Boundaries

While vision-making may be the key to unlocking the ‘voices’ of physical education teachers, it is important to recognise that vision-making is a complex process that does not take place in a vacuum. Vision-making develops over many years as teachers negotiate the multiple boundaries they meet on a daily basis. Boundaries define the limits of the spaces in which teachers think and practice and have a strong influence on the nature of the vision-making process in which they engage, both consciously and subconsciously. Table 1 presents 6 key features that highlight how boundaries can influence a teacher’s vision for physical education.

Table 1: Key Features of Boundaries

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Boundaries are everywhere.2. Boundaries are found within the teacher, the multi-layered environment in which the teacher functions and also in the different tasks the teacher attempts over time.3. Boundaries can be physical but also cognitive, social and emotional.4. Boundaries can either be positive features that enable progress or they can be more negative and hinder development.5. Boundaries are ambiguous. The same teacher may react to similar boundaries in different ways at different times. Different teachers will react to the same boundaries in different ways.6. Boundaries can positively or negatively change teachers’ views about, practices in, and visions for physical education.

The following example highlights how the vision of one *hypothetical* physical education teacher, Lesley, has been influenced by the different environmental, personal and task-related boundaries she has met and negotiated over a number of years as a student teacher and as a teacher.

Lesley's Vision-Making Journey

Lesley has been teaching physical education for 8 years and her vision-making journey has been divided into 3 phases: initial teacher education/training; early career; towards mid-career. For each phase, we present a summary of the key environmental, personal, and task-related boundaries Lesley has met during the phase and briefly comment on how these boundaries have influenced her evolving vision for physical education. In terms of macro level environmental boundaries, the same political party have been in government in Lesley's country throughout the 3 phases. During this period, from a policy perspective, physical activity and physical education have received more attention than previously and more stakeholders are now involved in physical education developments nationally and locally.

Phase 1: Initial Teacher Education/Training

Environmental Boundaries: Lesley attended a former polytechnic that became a university in the 1990s. The university has a strong reputation for teaching and is less focussed on research. Accordingly, university staff set out to develop relationships with students and put in positive mechanisms to support students as they progress through their studies.

Personal Boundaries: At university, Lesley was a quiet and conscientious student who usually lacked confidence in new situations. However, she enjoyed participating in a number of different sports for enjoyment and social reasons. As a younger person, Lesley's family had been particularly supportive of her participation in many forms of physical activity.

Task-Related Boundaries: Vision-making was an important feature during the final year of Lesley's programme. All students were tasked with writing a final year essay and producing a poster presentation about their vision for physical education. These tasks, particularly the essay, were clearly bound by the academic expectations of the university.

Initial Vision: Lesley's physical education vision was informed by the way she negotiated the enabling boundaries from her early physical activity experiences with her family, the supportive university culture, some of the reading from her courses and also the positive social relationships she developed from her many physical activity experiences. At this time, Lesley's vision focused on the development of a foundation for lifelong participation in physical activity for all, inclusive pedagogy and holistic models-based practices.

Phase 2: Early Career (Years 1-2)

Environmental Boundaries: For 2 years, Lesley taught in a small rural high school, spending one day per week in 2 feeder primary schools. The physical education department was small (4 staff) and all her physical education colleagues had been teaching in the school for at least 20 years. The physical education curriculum followed a multi-activity approach and there were few, if any, examples of more holistic or contemporary activities. Throughout these 2 years, Lesley was observed and evaluated on her teaching by senior colleagues on a regular basis and she was never asked to discuss her vision for physical education. The school was academically strong but physical education was not viewed particularly important by the senior leadership or the parent/carer community.

Personal Boundaries: During this early career period, Lesley was anxious to ‘fit in’ with the small closely-knit department and lacked the confidence to make contributions to departmental or cross school discussions. She became particularly conscious of the school’s focus on ‘best practice’. Lesley enjoyed working in the feeder primary schools, largely because there was less pressure to ‘fit in’. During this time, Lesley explored a number of more contemporary activities e.g. sport education.

Task-Related Boundaries; The main task for Lesley was to demonstrate her ability to plan and teach effectively and to meet the ‘best practice’ expectations of senior colleagues.

Early Career Vision: Lesley’s physical education vision shifted during this period as she negotiated the narrow boundaries within the department and school. Her lack of confidence and desire to ‘fit in’ meant that the key features of her university vision were put on the ‘back burner’. Her vision shifted to focus on teaching the physical skills within key activities and to use a more top-down or transmissive teaching approach.

Phase 3: Moving Towards Mid- Career (Years 2-8)

Environmental Boundaries: Lesley has now worked in an inner-city school for the last 6 years. The physical education department is large (10 staff) and particularly proactive in supporting new educational developments, including peer teaching, student engagement and models-based practice. Departmental meetings include discussions about educational issues and the head of department, who is studying for a masters’ degree, shares readings for these discussions. The school leadership team seeks to involve all staff in cross-school activities and Lesley is a member of a school project focussed on practitioner inquiry. She has been encouraged to represent the physical education department at a number of local community planning events.

Personal Boundaries: While she found the first year at the school daunting, Lesley slowly began to enjoy peer teaching with different colleagues and the more engaging approaches to teaching. From the second year onwards, the enabling culture across the school and within the department helped Lesley feel more confident and she began to make regular contributions on a range of issues, particularly inclusion.

Task-Related Boundaries: While demonstrating her ability to teach effectively remains the central task for Lesley, the culture within the school has widened the scope of the tasks in which she engages across and beyond the school. Sharing ideas and collaborating with colleagues across the school and local community are now key tasks for Lesley.

Moving Towards Mid-Career Vision: Lesley’s physical education vision has been rekindled by the enabling boundaries within the department and across the school. With her growing confidence, the inclusive and holistic aspirations from her earlier university vision have returned, although she is less clear about lifelong aspirations which appear a bit too ‘woolly’ and ‘out there’. However, her vision for physical education now includes consideration of the transition issues that exist between primary school and high school and from high school to post school life.

While Lesley’s vision-making journey may be a hypothetical example, it highlights how different environmental, personal and task-related boundaries across the 3 different phases of her career have acted to open and close Lesley’s thinking about, practice in, and vision for

physical education. The example highlights the holistic nature of the boundaries and demonstrates how, over time, Lesley reacted to similar boundaries in different ways e.g. as her confidence grew during phase 3. The key message from the example, however, is that during phase 3 Lesley's vision for physical education extended beyond the classroom so that her voice was being heard within the department, across the school and within the local community.

Vision-Making: Some Questions to Get You Started

Building on Lesley's vision-making example, the following questions may be a useful starting point for student teachers or teachers at any point in their careers. These questions are only a starting point and many other questions can be added as the vision-making process progresses.

My Vision

What are the 5 most important things you believe that physical education should set out to achieve?

Personal Boundary questions

How important is it for physical education teachers to develop a vision for physical education? Explain your answer.

How important is it for physical education teachers to share their vision for physical education? Explain your answer.

What are your 'big picture' beliefs about education and how do these relate to physical education?

Environmental Boundary Questions

In my current work environment, what are the boundaries that help me develop and share my vision for physical education?

In my current work environment, what are the boundaries that hinder my efforts to develop and share my vision for physical education?

How should I negotiate the national guidance in physical education?

Task-related Boundary Questions

Is my vision for physical education coherent and concise? Explain your answer.

Who should I begin to share my vision for physical education with? Why? How should I share my vision?

What next?

The Visions and Voices of Physical Education Teachers

At the University of Edinburgh, 'Visions and Voices' is a longitudinal project that sets out to track how physical education teachers develop and share their visions for physical education. In the first phase of the project, final year student teachers presented and shared their evolving visions with University staff and fellow students. Findings from this initial phase have recently been published in the Curriculum Journal (Jess, McMillan, Carse and Munro, 2020) and will

be discussed in the next article of this series. The next phase of the project is underway and focuses on two key elements. First, vision-making is now a key feature across all years of the initial teacher education programmes and seeks to develop a culture of ‘visions and voices’ for future teachers. In addition, we are tracking how the vision-making process is progressing for the first cohort of student teachers as they commence their school careers. Further articles will discuss the issues that emerge as the student teachers and teachers continue to develop their individual and shared visions for physical education.

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