

Is physical education relevant?

Interpersonal skills, values and hybridity

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Discussion surrounding the relevance of the document *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) has focused on a range of areas. While some writers claim it has the potential to be emancipatory and the inclusion of interpersonal skills and values is important and meaningful, others have levelled criticisms that the document is trying to do too much (Tinning, 2000) and has a middle class agenda (Ross, 2004). This article reports part of the findings of a small study which explored how some Maori and Pasifika students viewed their experiences of physical education in one major urban New Zealand high school. The experiences of these students are related to Besley's (2002) notion of hybridity. Her argument suggests that young people actively negotiate and make critical decisions about what they think is relevant to them. The students believed physical education has provided them with opportunities to develop and practice care for others and to learn and apply interpersonal skills as well as to gain confidence and apply their skills in situations outside the school setting. The study argues the need for curriculum to connect with the wider lives of students and any degree of connection can only occur if students are given a voice in the curriculum implementation process.

Introduction

In today's climate of what seems like endless curriculum change and an increasingly dynamic and ever changing world, the efficacy of schools is often called into question. Doubt is expressed by young people, by the media and by communities about whether current curriculum in today's schools is relevant for young people in a (post)modern world. Like reservations are also expressed by some postmodern theorists. Giroux (1996) questions the relevance of schooling for many young people and notes that working class students, and those from minority groups, often find today's schools unwilling to meet their needs and interests or to recognize their skills; instead serving them a learning diet tailored for white middle class students, one which seeks to reinforce and reproduce dominant culture (Giroux, 1996).

In addition, schools in both New Zealand and Australia, are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, their numbers comprising students from a wide range of diverse backgrounds with differing languages and cultural values. According to national achievement statistics in New Zealand, students from ethnic backgrounds other than European, especially students who identify as being from Maori and Pasifika (Pacific Islands) backgrounds, are under-achieving in national qualifications compared with students

from Pakeha (European) backgrounds (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2004). The level of under-achievement adds strength to the concern expressed by many writers that school curricular are not relevant for all students, and often marginalise indigenous students and those from ethnic minorities (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Smith, 1999). Aronowitz and Giroux (1993), however, argue that considering only the perspectives of the oppressive forms of cultural reproduction in education is too simplistic because this only acknowledges the oppressive nature of society (structure), without giving voice to how students receive these influences (agency). Besley (2002) suggests that students actively construct their learning through a process of hybridization. Besley's (2002) argument suggests that young people actively negotiate and make critical decisions about what they think is relevant to them.

The curriculum in physical education in New Zealand: Is it relevant?

Physical education within schools has been accused of serving, in practice, the same marginalisation discussed above, by reinforcing hegemonic structures which disadvantage minority groups (Burrows, 2004; Fernandez-Balboa, 1993; Kirk, McKay & George, 1986).

Six years ago in New Zealand, a curriculum document was introduced which the writers claimed had emancipatory potential (Culpan, 1996/1997; Tasker, 1996/1997). *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum*¹ (HPENZC) (Ministry of Education, 1999) has some similarities to Australian health and physical education curricular and comparisons can be read about elsewhere (Penney & Harris, 2004; Tinning, 2000). Although this document encompasses objectives relating to both health and physical education, our focus here is primarily on how these are realised through physical education. Discussion surrounding the relevance of HPENZC has focused on a range of areas including claims that it is emancipatory, that the inclusion of interpersonal skills and values is important and meaningful as well as criticisms that the document is trying to do too much (Tinning, 2000) and has a middle class agenda (Ross, 2004). These will be discussed later in this paper.

Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) has an explicit focus on both values and interpersonal skills. This document has a structure which consists of the weaving together of four underlying concepts with the achievement objectives, key areas of learning and eight curriculum levels. The underlying concepts are entitled Hauora², Attitudes and Values, Socio-ecological Perspective and Health Promotion. 'Attitudes and Values', lists a set of values intended for explicit inclusion into programmes. These values include "respect for the rights of other people ...care and concern for other people... and social justice" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.34). The curriculum focusses on the development of interpersonal skills through one of the four general aims which states that "students will develop understandings, skills, and attitudes that enhance interactions and relationships with other people" (p.7). The inclusion of values within curriculum in general has been discussed widely. Some claim that curriculum statements include inherent values whether they are explicitly stated or not (Jewett & Bain, 1983) while others question the teaching of values and focus on the potential for different interpretations to have oppressive effects on those from different cultures (Carr, 2000).

According to Culpan (1996/1997), a principle writer for the curriculum, HPENZC includes learning opportunities for students to engage in interpersonal and social skills relevant to their lives and communities in order to enable them to develop positive relationships. Tasker (1996/1997), also a principal writer, claimed that this curriculum has the potential to address issues of equity and, if implemented in schools, can be empowering for all students regardless of background.

It [the curriculum] is designed to remove barriers to total or holistic wellbeing through the empowerment of individuals and communities (p.190).

In addition, the writers state that an attempt was made in designing the document to incorporate all seven curriculum value orientations identified by Jewitt and Bain (1983), namely, 'disciplinary mastery', 'social reconstruction' 'self actualisation', 'learning process' and 'ecological validity' (Culpan, 1996/1997, p.2'7).

The writers of HPENZC, along with others (Culpan,

1996/1997; Gillespie, 2003; Tasker, 1996/1997), argue that learning about relationships, along with the explicit inclusion of values within programmes, will allow students to develop complex interpersonal skills and reflective practice concerning relationships, which they can use in everyday situations in their lives. It is argued, by the above authors, that this makes the document relevant and meaningful to the lives of students. Not all writers are, however, in agreement concerning the potential of the document. Ross (2004) has doubts about the curriculum statement and asserts that HPENZC incorporates a "constrained middle class social improvement agenda" (p.23). He claims that the curriculum only incorporates one viewpoint so, rather than being emancipatory, it limits the inclusion of diverse perspectives and encourages compliance. Concomitantly, Tinning (2000), who has made a comparison between curriculum in New Zealand and Australia, while supportive of the aims of the New Zealand curriculum, cautions teachers against trying to do too much and losing sight of the main goals of physical education, namely, the development of physical skills. Tinning (2000) asserts that current curriculum in New Zealand and Australia, including HPENZC, are driven by pressures to solve social problems out of the control of teachers and schools. He, furthermore, argues that what he refers to as 'first order objectives' (physical skills) should take priority in physical education classes over 'second order objectives' (social and interpersonal skills).

Of note in this literature is the paucity of research which has sought student views on the curriculum in New Zealand and their subsequent experiences in physical education (Pope & Grant, 1996). The perspectives of any students, especially those from indigenous and minority cultures, is almost entirely absent in discussions concerning the relevance of physical education curriculum in New Zealand. This article will focus on senior students' experiences of physical education in one New Zealand secondary school. It will begin by detailing the methodology used and will then report part of the findings of a small study which explored how some Maori and Pasifika students viewed their experiences of physical education. The experiences of these students will be related to Besley's (2002) notion of hybridity.

Methodology

The seven participants involved in this study were all students that one of the authors had taught for year 12 physical education. The students experienced a programme that we felt aligned with the philosophies of the curriculum. The foci of learning opportunities included outdoor education, leadership, sports education, scientific principles and interpersonal skills. Because of the first author's position as Pakeha (European) and as both teacher and researcher, and because of beliefs concerning the subjective nature of knowledge and an internal idealist perspective of reality, a qualitative approach was used. This enabled retrieval of in-depth information about the students' experiences, ideas and interpretations. Bishop and Glynn (1999) identify that a qualitative approach "creates opportunities for the voice of the research participant to be heard" (p. 104). In-depth interviews were used in order to actively involve students in a way that their "insights,

feelings and cooperation are essential parts of a discussion process that reveals subjective meanings" (Neuman, 1997, p. 371).

This study aimed to gain insight into the experiences of some Maori and Pasifika students in one New Zealand secondary school. We do not wish to suggest that the students in this study are representative of all Maori and Pasifika students but that their views and experiences may help to inform the debate and contribute to understandings about the relevance of curriculum documents to students from diverse backgrounds. Sarantakos (1993) asserts that, in qualitative research, transparency is important and researchers should state "openly the course and elements of the research process and let others judge its quality" (p.21). To this end, a self reflective approach has been used as much as possible concerning the underlying motives, beliefs and actions of the researcher in relation to the participants involved. The research process has been marked by reflexivity because, as Bishop and Glynn (1999) argue, "simply listening and recording stories of other peoples' experiences is not acceptable" (p.102) and reinforces researcher hegemony. The use of reflexivity can result in more open discussion between the researcher and participants so that "shared and negotiated meanings" can be formed (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p.103). The interviews and data, therefore, involved a process of interaction between the researcher and the participants where emerging themes from initial data analysis were discussed informally with participants to check that intended meanings were honoured.

The school

Blue Sky College³ is a multi-cultural, decile 1 (low socioeconomic) school in South Auckland, New Zealand. The school's philosophy incorporates a focus on care and self-belief, high expectations of achievement and the recognition and valuing of culture. The school's ethnic composition is Samoan 40%, Maori 21%, Cook Island 20%, Tongan 10%, Niuean 3%, Indian 2%, Asian 2% and other ethnicities 2%. The participants involved in the study were from Maori, Samoan, Niuean, Cook Island, Tahitian and Tongan backgrounds.

Research method

This qualitative study involved in-depth field interviews (Neuman, 1997) conducted in August and September of 2004. From the students who returned to school (from the previous years class), nine volunteered to be involved in the research project and seven were purposely selected to attempt to represent the range of cultural backgrounds in the school population. A focus group interview was initially conducted to introduce students to the topic and allow general discussion and was followed up by five individual interviews and one pair interview.

Culturally appropriate practices were maintained at all times during the data collection process. Bishop and Glynn (1999) acknowledge that research can be a disempowering process for participants, particularly young people, because the researcher often holds a position of power and their ideas, therefore, become more dominant. Avoiding this was especially important in this study because of the power inherent in the (already established) teacher-student

relationship. This was addressed by conducting the initial interview with the whole group to allow students to be introduced to the topic in a relaxed way, where they were not put 'on the spot' to answer questions (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In addition, the interview protocol was treated as a guide only and, where possible, an attempt was made to let student responses and ideas drive the conversation. The interviews were semi-structured and treated as conversations where the students participated and were able to ask questions of the researcher. The focus of the research was centred around the perspectives of the students, so it was made as clear as possible to the participants that their experiences and ideas relating to the curriculum were highly valued and the most important element in this research process.

Data analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was used. Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997) describe this process as "a sorting through the fabric of the whole for our understanding of the threads or patterns that run throughout and lifting them out - as a seamstress lifts threads with a needle - to make a general statement about them" (p. 206). Ely et al (1997) also remind us that when a thematic approach is used it needs to be made clear that the themes are a result of the interpretation of the researcher rather than discoveries inherent in the data. A process of 'crystallization' (Richardson, 1994, cited in Ely et al., 1997) was used, whereby the data was viewed in as many ways as possible and related to existing and emerging themes and ideas until some clarity was gained about the direction of the study. Because there are multiple realities, any data may be interpreted in many different ways. Besley's (2002) notion of hybridity was employed as an analytical tool to explain how students engaged with their learning in an active and dynamic way, rather than as passive recipients of curriculum. All interpretations that emerged from the data were addressed in discussions between the researchers and research participants.

Findings: Results and discussion

Many themes emerged from the analysis of data in this study. The experiences expressed by the students were related to Besley's (2002) notion of hybridity, which suggests young people exist with a myriad of influences acting upon their lives and, as a result, are subject to many different messages and sets of values. As a result of this analysis it was concluded that the young people interviewed were active in their engagement, acceptance and rejection of the diverse influences they encountered and were, therefore, dynamic and critical agents in their own lives. Using this concept of hybridity, a metaphor of 'weaving' was adopted in order to both organise the influences into "strands" representative of the different aspects that students 'wove' into their lives and to suggest that the process of weaving was, largely, controlled by the students themselves. The influences they encountered (and, therefore, the strands they wove) included a wide range of values, attitudes and experiences that they gained from home, school, cultural values, peers and church. This article will discuss only the strands relating to school and, more specifically, the discussions regarding interpersonal skills

and the value of care.

The key themes relating specifically to learning in physical education were those of interpersonal skills, care and conflict. The students had studied leadership and experienced working with younger students in both outdoor education and sport education contexts, as part of physical education classes. They talked about gaining interpersonal skills and about how their learning in physical education enabled them to develop confidence in interacting with others, as well as empathy and care. Consistent with the notion of hybridity (Besley, 2002), it became apparent during the data analyses that these students interacted with learning about values and interpersonal skills in a variety of ways. At times the students described the positive experiences resulting from applying communication and interpersonal skills, while at other times they identified the problems encountered while using these skills outside of the school setting. In the following section three themes which emerged from the data will be discussed. The first theme 'interpersonal skills' will deal with discussions concerning confidence and the application of communication skills outside of the school setting. The second theme 'care' will canvass how the students made links between their experiences in physical education and developing care and empathy for others. The third theme 'conflict' will discuss the cultural issues the students encountered while applying these skills.

Interpersonal skills

The students in this study acknowledged the importance of the work they did on leadership in physical education settings in relation to developing interpersonal skills. This is consistent with both the aims (concerning relationships), and one of the underlying concepts (attitudes and values) of HPENZC, as discussed above. The students identified that these skills were useful to them in their lives currently and suggested that they would continue to be in the future. They saw these experiences as positive and enjoyable for themselves and the younger students with whom they engaged. They acknowledged that their experiences in physical education classes gave them the confidence to believe in themselves, to have a voice and the ability to talk with others.

Lisa⁴, an 18 year old student from a Cook Island and Samoan background, commented that:

Yep I actually use them [leadership skills] at church now 'cause I have to do promotions for like social games that we hold... 'cause I never used to talk but, I think it was when we had the 4th formers, and I had to talk to the students and I get up the front and now I'm more confident than I was before.

Mihi, a 17 year old Maori student, agreed:

Yeah for that leadership stuff... I used to be like shy and quiet, I used to just stick to myself and now nearly everyone in this school knows me.

Fualaau, an 18 year old Samoan and Niuean student, saw the long term benefits of developing leadership skills. She stated that she wanted to be a teacher and identified that she had learnt meaningful communication skills in physical education classes that she would use in the future in her chosen career:

I think the way I communicate I use - like in PE - I've learnt

ways to communicate like with different age groups; I think I'll use that for the rest of My life. Like in the long run, like with teaching, you probably have different age ranges and you'll know what they will feel like in this situation and what a younger age group will feel like in that situation and just being able to communicate in different ways will benefit me in the long run.

Lisa, Mihi and Fualaau all stated that interpersonal skills including gaining confidence and being able to communicate effectively were highly valued and useful to them in different aspects of their lives. This adds to the debate, raised by Tinning (2000), concerning the balance in programmes between learning physical skills and social skills. The students in this study suggest that physical education classes provide opportunities for them to develop interpersonal skills which assisted them in maintaining meaningful relationships. It was clear that they valued this type of learning and identified that they would use it in the future.

Care

Noddings (1995) argues strongly that values can be taught in schools through prioritising cultures of care in which students and teachers engage in learning about human relationships. Noddings (1995) asserts that schools should reject ideologies of control that monitor and seek to reform students' behaviour and instead recommends moves towards curricular centred around discourses of care. As well as communication skills, the students in this study discussed how experiences in physical education helped them to develop and practice care, empathy, and affiliation with others.

Fualaau commented that her leadership experiences had allowed her to empathise with younger students and to understand "where they were coming from", their feelings and fears:

[During] the feedback [from the younger students]... I got to hear what they really thought about me and the activity we did and - just listening to them - and I could see it in them, but they were too afraid to talk. And then I told them what I thought of them and then they understood where I was coming from. With the second group I understood where they were coming from when they didn't want to do activities ...yeah, so it was a good experience.

Tyah, an 18 year old Cook Island and Tahitian student, discussed her memories of year 12 camp when she got hypothermia and had to be looked after by the students in the class and the teachers. She commented that she learnt a lot about others in the class who she didn't get on with:

Yep, I didn't like that camp ...cause I got hypothermia (laughs). Nah it was like pretty cool, like getting support from people I don't really mingle with and just getting that encouragement and you know, especially from the girls that we don't usually hang out with and we always have like arguments and everything. Just getting a t-shirt with... supporting encouragements from everybody, I reckon that was quite cool, that was probably the main highlight for me. And finding out that everyone was like crying, like um I mean those girls - that made me think that they like had feelings you know or that deep down like they had respect for me.

Adrian, a 17 year old Cook Island student, thought that caring and respect were important parts of PE:

Um yep... just when we're playing games you know that you can't really put them [others in the class] down, 'cause if you do, then they'll probably feel all stink and you'll feel guilty if you did make them feel stink and they started crying or something.

Sione, a 19 year old Tongan student, viewed outdoor education camps as the most important setting in physical education where people showed respect for each other and students could and would actively care, he uses the example of carrying another student's bag on a tramp:

Camp was cool because we had respect for everyone... I reckon everyone looked out for each other. We were like a family on the tramp. We were just thinking of each other as brothers and sisters yeah. Like on one of our camps, one of the girls had a sore tummy so we - like the guys - just grabbed her bags and carried it majority of the way. Yeah and ...it's like just treating the girls or the guys like they were your own family, like sisters and brothers yeah. Like if they had a need, I dunno give them a hand, if they need it.

Care is clearly an important aspect of their learning in physical education for these students. Their comments reflect that they valued cultures of care and the situations where care was shown were remembered and viewed as a meaningful part of their learning. Ross (2004) states that the curriculum statement represents ideologies of control, not emancipation, by specifying a focus on social change. The students in this study, however, have shown that rather than being victims of controlling curriculum policies, they have negotiated, adapted and interacted with their learning in ways which are meaningful to them. Regardless of stated curriculum outcomes, these students have responded to, valued, and created apparent cultures of care through their experiences.

Conflict

The students acknowledged that, although they valued their learning experiences in physical education with regard to interpersonal skills, challenges arose for them, especially in relation to communication. Learning communication skills enabled them to gain confidence to speak openly and to question others' ideas and opinions, but this caused conflict for some students in relation to family and cultural values. Tiatia (1998) suggests that students from Pasifika backgrounds show respect to their elders by not questioning them.

Sione reflected about how this affected him:

Respect... it's just basically for our parents and our elders it's like an automatic thing, like a rule no matter what...you' ve just got to have that respect 'cause they're older than you... [with] my parents I'm like quiet around them like if they're gonna give me a lecture or something I usually just sit there and just take it... yet if I get a growling from a teacher and I know ...that it wasn't quite my fault then I'd speak.

Tyah explained that learning in PE has helped her to be stronger about making her own decisions: "I come with my own decision in life now, I do what I think is right for me now, if my family disagrees on something then... I don't really care I go with what I want to go with". Later in her interview, however, Tyah reflected that disagreeing with her

parents could cause problems:

They'll [my parents] be angry cause they'll think that they're like a failure... cause like if I don't believe in what they believe in then they'll think that like I'm like no one or that they've failed.

Fualaa explained that learning communication skills has helped her to talk to her parents at home:

Urn... voicing out my opinions like being able to talk in class I've been able to take that back home in my home environment and talk back to my parents like... in a good way, like saying what I thought was wrong and right.

But she also explained that, in her family, she still wasn't really allowed to question things:

Yep way different [to school]. if you're like talking then you're not allowed to, they think we're just too young, even though we're 18 and getting older... they think that's still too young... so it's really hard to talk to them so we just don't talk at all... When we go home we don't bring, we don't take our things we do at school we don't take it home we do our own stuff, we don't talk with our parents about school.

The teaching of skills related to communication and relationships has been valued by these students but has also highlighted issues relating to cultural difference. Tiatia (1998) suggests that students from Pasifika backgrounds may live between two or more cultures and therefore face complex interpersonal challenges that are not always experienced by those from other cultures. Other scholars argue that young people live with a complex range of influences and the complexity of their lives need to be acknowledged (Bexley, 2002; Giroux, 1996). Greater consideration of cultural issues needs to be included into physical education programmes for these students to ensure that learning related to communication addresses the complexity of their lives and interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) incorporates explicitly stated values including "care for other people" and a focus on the teaching of interpersonal skills. Despite the changing nature of schools and increased diversity, the writers of *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) (Culpan, 1996/1997; Tasker, 1996/1997) and others (Gillespie, 2003) claim that it can provide meaningful learning opportunities for students from all backgrounds. Claims by the writers that the curriculum has the potential to be emancipatory have been disputed by some who question the agenda of the document (Ross, 2004) and others who fear physical education is trying to do too much by incorporating a range of objectives unrelated to physical skills (Tinning, 2000). This debate has, however, failed to recognise the perspectives of students regarding their learning in physical education, especially students from diverse backgrounds.

The Blue Sky students involved in this study have identified that physical education has provided them with opportunities to develop and practice care for others and to learn and apply interpersonal skills as well as to gain confidence and apply their skills in situations outside the school setting. This is significant in challenging concerns that some critical theorists have about the relevance of

school-based learning in the lives of young people, compared with other influences (Giroux, 1994), and may suggest that learning related to physical education has meaning in the lives of the students in this school. The students also noted, however, that in developing interpersonal skills and then in applying them to cultural and family contexts, conflicts often arose for them. This may suggest that the application of skills and cultural issues were not incorporated effectively into the programmes these students were involved in. This study highlights the need to investigate the experiences that students derive from stated curricular and, perhaps more importantly, why investigation of such derivations must occur in a variety of cultural settings. The complexity of students' lives, cultural contexts, and the diverse spaces they negotiate, therefore, need to be considered in the development of programmes related to learning in physical education. So, while physical education has enabled students to develop meaningful skills, they are still charged with integrating such skills into their wider lives. Learning in physical education could, therefore, be viewed as providing strands which students choose to weave into their own lives in dynamic, active and diverse ways.

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Footnotes

- For further information see HPENZC (MOE, 1999) and relevant discussions and explanations of the curriculum in Culpan (1996/1997, 2000), Tasker (1996/1997) and Tinning (2000).
- ² This concept is explained in the curriculum as "a Maori philosophy of health" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 31)
- ³ The school name has been changed.
- ⁴ Students' names have been changed.

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