8

Contemporary Problems: Exploring the Power of Educational Approaches in Health, Wellbeing and Physical Education

This chapter explores the power of educational approaches in Health, Wellbeing and Physical Education (HW & PE) which relates to curriculum, teaching and learning; and School implementation (cf. Fig. 1.1). Three key historical and contextual themes emerge from the present national curriculum for England in PE: healthism; assumptions about sport; and an awareness of the social and cultural forces of influence. The first two themes relate to the behavioural philosophy which views the body as an object to be controlled. The third theme adopts a constructivist approach, placing a focus on "awareness". An awareness of social and cultural forces relates to holistic education and specifically the socio-cultural approach to PE. This chapter investigates contemporary problems with how PE is implemented, revealing the power of balance when choosing educational approaches in HW & PE.

It is suggested that Health Education is currently guided by obesity discourses (Quennerstedt, Burrows, & Maivorsdotter, 2010) and "offers a resurgence of individualistic and instrumental notions of health" (Alfrey & Brown, 2013, p. 160). For example, children in the early years of primary schools in England are being informed that they need to exercise or else they will get fat. Intentional or not, viewing the body as an object to

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be trained, places pressure on children, parents and school communities, often at the expense of enjoying movement. This chapter investigates why this is happening, beginning in the early years of British (English) primary schools, through exploring the educational and health approaches; in this instance, the "dominant performance-oriented curriculum with its accompanying behaviourist inclined pedagogical approach" (Thorburn, Jess, & Atencio, 2011, p. 393). This dominant behavioural approach reveals hidden messages (discourses) beneath the surface of the physical education (PE) national curriculum for England. It is argued that such discourses often exist in society without challenge and are having adverse effects on the "healthy active lives" the curriculum purports (Cale & Harris, 2019).

Hidden Messages

Some children in Reception class in south-east England state schools are bringing home a letter stating that they are overweight. This is because in England "Children are measured and weighed for their body mass index (BMI) in Reception class and in Year 6, under the government's National Child Measurement Programme" (Ford, 2018). In one example, a letter from Kent Community Health (NHS Foundation Trust) informed the parents that their child's measurements taken (as part of the National Child Measurement Programme) suggested they were overweight for their age, sex and height. Also, that overweight children often become overweight adults (Head of School Health and Immunisation Service for Kent and East Sussex, Letter to parents, November 16, 2016).

In another example, a Dorset schoolgirl, Daisy who is eleven years of age, "lost confidence", and "was miserable and angry" after receiving the same "fat letter". Her mother was not notified of the programme and unaware her daughter would be weighed at school. Daisy stated that after reading the letter she felt that "Because I was fat I didn't fit in with all of the other people that were playing cricket". Consequently, Daisy began skipping breakfast and it has taken weeks for her to return to playing cricket (Ford, 2018). Pressure on body image is also evident in advertisements for free summer school clubs in a primary school in Suffolk, listed under the West Suffolk weight management groups on the OneLife Suffolk website.

The advert reads "Fun packed clubs for those children aged 4-14 years who struggle with their weight", and in 2016/2017, "over 200 children and their families successfully completed our child weight management programme" (One Life Suffolk, 2017).

While in each scenario the messages given may be done with best intentions, the question of what messages are being received within young minds needs to be identified and addressed by educators. Cale and Harris (2019, p. 11) assert "a key area to focus on is how recommendations for physical activity and health are promoted, interpreted and accepted by teachers, health professionals and parents". For discourses and ideologies are not recorded in school curriculum documents, "but are traits taught and learnt through various mediums within society, often in what is termed the 'hidden curriculum'" (Lynch, 2017, p. 80). How does the child identified as "fat" for the free summer school club feel? What impact will this label have throughout their lives? Also, it raises the question of what messages are being received by parents? For example, as a result of the letter that came home from Kent Community Health, the Reception child's mother was left distraught and unnecessarily questioned her parenting skills (personal communication, June 20, 2017). Furthermore, Daisy's mother questioned why there is not a holistic view of the child's health; "you don't get a chance to say what you are doing at home or what your child is doing regarding exercise" (Ford, 2018).

The 2012 Olympic Games held in London had a large influence on the planning of the national curriculum for England in PE. Griggs (2015) identified this occurrence as "policy by the way" (Dery, 1998)—he further explained this connection as where "dominant discourses and rhetoric are favoured and permitted often without understanding the appropriateness or impact that may result" (Griggs, 2015, p. 38). This chapter provides new insights and a deeper understanding of "appropriateness" and "impact" by exploring relevant literature. Hence, it can be argued that presently the national curriculum in PE for England advocates a focus on the body as an object rather than the "whole" child. That is, the national curriculum for PE is heavily influenced by the behavioural, top-down governmental approach in education and health; being deliberate, systematic, planned attempts to change behaviour. This is supported by Leahy, O'Flynn, and Wright who refer to curriculum as a government

assemblage (2013). Hence, it desperately requires a balance of approaches and preferably a predominant inclusive, socio-cultural approach.

Subsequently, this chapter suggests that giving preference to a behavioural approach is having long- and short-term detrimental effects on many children's physical development and wellbeing and requires urgent change. In exploring discourses underlying the national curriculum for England in PE, two key historical and contextual themes/questions emerge:

'Healthism' as an ideology

Does sport really build character in the early years of primary schools?

"Healthism" as an Ideology

Throughout history, PE has had different guiding principles or purposes which are often driven by the government or needs of society. Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, and Farmer (2015, p. 429) refer to this as the philosophy of the discipline, "beliefs and values that underpin practice". As previously discussed, historically, PE has been influenced by two philosophies:

1. The body viewed as an object (*relating to behavioural model in education/efficiency [top down]/governmentality/medical model in health & behavioural model in health*).
2. The view of the whole person: body, mind, spirit and wellbeing (Lynch & Soukup, 2016) (*relating to process/humanistic perspective/constructivist approach/learning across dimensions/social model of health*).

From the perspective where the body is viewed as an object, PE has been responsible for schooling the body, a "controlled body, one which is appropriately skilled with the capacities to meet the standards of acceptable social behaviour of any particular society and to make a productive contribution within the economic system" (Kirk, 1993, p. 13). Tinning and McCuaig share that in many countries often this has related to physical training, for

the development of a certain type of citizen (2006). It is also "recognised that there is a crucial significance of the body and physical activity in relation to the exercise of power" within society (Tinning, Kirk, & Evans, 1993, p. 79).

According to Lynch and Soukup (2016), many discourses have influenced the "body as an object" philosophy. Healthism is defined as "a belief that health can be unproblematically achieved through individual effort and discipline directed mainly at regulating the size and shape of the body" (Crawford, 1980, p. 366). Hence, health problems are perceived as individual problems, failing to recognise the social and environmental influences—relating to the medical and behavioural models in health. Health discourses, from scenarios such as the ones described in the introduction of this chapter, and "healthism" as an ideology (accepted beliefs within society), are underpinned by the ever enduring crisis referred to as the "obesity epidemic".

> Young peoples engagement with healthism discourses may be facilitated by well-meaning but inadequately prepared teachers who themselves hold narrow, reductive views of health, fitness and physical activity. Such cases may result in schools falling well short of their potential to promote healthy, active lifestyles. (Cale & Harris, 2019, p. 13)

The obesity crisis has been growing over the last 60 years, produced by biomedical research experts it is re-contextualised within professional and academic PE literature (and social media) to justify the importance of the discipline. Subsequently, it has been argued over the years that it often creates fear in society which involves governments and media blaming parents and schools (Gard, 2006; Gard & Wright, 2001, 2005). According to Steinbeck research in primary PE has focused on physical inactivity and childhood obesity (2001). Gard and Wright (2001) warn that: unquestioning acceptance of obesity discourses in PE constructs anxieties about the body; creates a blame culture which takes away the pleasure of participating in physical activities, furthermore, marginalises physical activities that are not regarded to be "fat burning"; and negatively affects the way PE is researched and taught in higher education and schools. Hence, there

is "an urgent need to increase the breadth, depth and relevance of young people's learning about health in schools" (Cale & Harris, 2019, p. 13). Gard and Wright (2005, p. 13) propose that "the scientific foundations of 'obesity epidemic' thinking are far less certain than commonly assumed", this is supported by Biddle et al. (2004) who describe the evidence as less than compelling.

Promotion of health is "greatly valued by governments responsible for costs involved with the wellness of citizens, especially considering the influence of hypokinetic diseases and the strong correlation research evidences physical activity plays" (Lynch, 2013, p. 258). However, healthism forms a belief that causes guilt for those who do not fit the "exercise = fitness = health" triplex (Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989). Hence, physical appearance plays a leading role in healthism, underpinned by judgements being made about ideal appearances and how people conform to society's expectations. "Like a script, bodies tell us a story about the person they embody, they convey sets of ideas and values" (Kirk, 1993, p. 7).

Healthism is associated with people's morals and with feelings of guilt. "The television program 'The Biggest Loser' is a prime example of healthism, where the body is associated with morally disciplined behaviour and people experience guilt if they are seen as undisciplined" (Lynch, 2017, p. 81). Such messages are passed onto children through what is referred to as the hidden curriculum, as in the scenarios given at the beginning of this chapter of the children in Reception and Year 6 class. It is debated that this is often unintentional and in many instances the teacher has become so accustomed to the messages that they may be unaware of their existence (Lynch, 2017).

It can be stated that healthism is encouraged in the English national curriculum, in particular where the "purpose of study" states; "It [PE] should provide opportunities for pupils to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness" (Department for Education, 2013, p. 1). As the scenarios discussed in the introduction of this paper illustrate, a consequence of this PE curriculum has witnessed children in Reception and Year 6 fearing obesity, being labelled as overweight, and head teachers permitting advocacy of "fat" clubs in their schools. Subsequently, teachers and school leaders are required to be educated in

the existence of ideologies and informed of practical ways that they can be sensitively addressed.

In relation to the obesity crisis, Gard warns of teachers' responses such as the undesirable examples identified earlier, which indicate a lack of professional thought and may even be unethical. Such practices are unlikely to have any "detectable effect on population obesity or levels of health" (2006, p. 79). The current PE national curriculum for England has been described as a "dominant performance-oriented curriculum with its accompanying behaviourist inclined pedagogical approach" (Thorburn et al., 2011, p. 393). A previous national curriculum draft purported a holistic approach and was suitably titled "Understanding Physical Development, Health and Wellbeing", however, was discarded in 2010 with the change of government.

Does Sport Build Character in the Early Years of Primary Schools?

As mentioned earlier, the present national curriculum for England for physical education was influenced by the 2012 Olympic Games held in London. At the close of the Olympics, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, published the following statement; "any new national Physical Education curriculum which would follow the Games will now 'require every primary school child to take part in competitive team sport like football, netball and hockey'" (Griggs, 2015, p. 38). Griggs refers to this curriculum as having a hegemonic position of sport (2015) with "increased focus on competition and in particular competitive teams now permeates [ing] down into Key Stage 1" (2015, p. 40).

These details suggest the latest curriculum may promote discourses and ideologies such as sporting, sexism and elitism and therefore need to be identified and addressed by educators. Furthermore, if there is limited education in teacher preparation it is very likely that such ideologies are influencing children now even earlier in life. Unfortunately, this is of major concern as Griggs suggests that PE in English primary schools is being delivered ineffectively (2012), thus increasing opportunities for cultivation.

When unpacking the national curriculum for England in PE—Key Stage 1, the purpose of study suggests that the citizen being developed is ideally an Olympic champion: one who is "inspired" to "succeed and excel in competitive sport and other physically demanding activities" (Department for Education, 2013, p. 1). The problem with this ideal is that for most boys and girls it is not realistic and therefore becomes exclusive. Kohn clarifies, "competition is structured to produce a single champion and many more losers" (1992, p. 109). As the scenarios shared in the introduction of this chapter illustrate, unfortunately for many children failure is being reinforced before they may have even begun the Key Stage 1 school curriculum.

This national curriculum statement is an example of a sporting discourse, "developed beliefs about physical education and sport that are not always necessarily true" (Lynch, 2017, p. 82). Furthermore, the national curriculum "purpose of study" also states, "Opportunities to compete in sport and other activities build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect" (Department of Education, 2013, p. 1). Such statements need to be questioned by educators, rather than accepted.

Is it realistic to expect all children in schools, given the present problems identified with the preparation of teachers and infrastructure for PE delivery (UNESCO, 2014), to excel in competitive sport? Does playing sport build character for every child? Are fairness and respect outcomes of playing sport for all children? Where do the ideologies of sexism, elitism and individualism sit within this rhetoric and how are they addressed?

As the national curriculum for England in PE "Purpose of study" accentuates, sports sits within the PE curriculum. However, there is often a misconception that PE is only sport. This becomes confusing for educators in the early years when children's motor control is not developmentally ready to combine a number of motor skills with game rules and strategies. Using the analogy of learning to read, throwing a child into a complex game is like introducing early years' children to phonics using a novel—it is not developmentally appropriate.

Curriculum statements about sport and PE, such as the ones located in the English curriculum's purpose of study for PE, are assumptions. While they may be outcomes experienced at times by some children through sport, for many they contradict experiences, exacerbated by limited teacher

education. Simply put, they are not based on research evidence. According to Hickey common assumptions about sport include:

- By being involved in sport, people naturally develop positive attitudes about healthy lifestyle;
- Friendship, teamwork, sharing and cooperation are incontestable manifestations of involvement;
- If you are prepared to work hard and make the necessary sacrifices, you can achieve what you want;
- That boys and girls receive equal opportunity and recognition (1995, p. 5).

These assumptions are ideals, which can be argued are enhanced through quality PE implementation, as the "purpose of study" refers to a high-quality PE curriculum. Moreso, what is vital is quality implementation from quality teachers (Lynch, 2005, 2016, 2017; Lynch & Soukup, 2017). However, as previously mentioned, it is argued that PE as a subject can be vulnerable (Tinning, Macdonald, Wright, & Hickey, 2001). Quality PE is contentious within the context of England as it is well documented that most teachers are underprepared for teaching PE (Griggs, 2012, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Lynch & Soukup, 2017). Literature shares "England appears to have not experienced growth in the first of the five UNESCO pillars for quality PE, 'Teacher education, supply and development'" (Lynch & Soukup, 2017, p. 8). Furthermore, it is the only subject often taught by sports coaches; not requiring teaching qualifications, nor the presence of qualified teachers (Blair & Capel, 2011; Carney & Howells, 2008; Smith, 2013).

This gives impetus to Kohn's arguments against assumptions made by the national curriculum for PE. Conversely, "competing drags us down, devastates us psychologically, poisons our relationships and interferes with our performance" (Kohn, 1992, p. 114). Kohn positions the advocacy for sport and competition within the "body viewed as an object" philosophy for PE, associated with schooling the body for a certain type of citizen:

> Sport does not simply build character, in other words; it builds exactly the kind of character that is most useful for the social system. From the

> perspective of our social (and economic) system – which is to say, from the perspective of those who benefit from and direct it – it is useful to have people regard each other as rivals. (1992, p. 85)

He asserts that competition is not enjoyable for all children, referring to competitive sports as a failure factory which not only eliminates the "bad ones" but also turns off many of the "good ones" (1992). This argument is of particular interest as the 2015 Wales school survey involving 110,000 Welsh school children across almost 1000 schools found that "Making sport and physical activity enjoyable and fun is critical to boosting participation by children and young people" (Sport Wales, 2015).

Perhaps Kohn's argument against competition resonates with children in England, as it is affirmed in literature that PE in the UK fails to engage children in school and is unsuccessful in inspiring physical activities outside of school (Griggs & Ward, 2012; James & Brophy, 2019; Sandford & Rich, 2006). An England-wide survey from the Department of Culture Media and Sport (2016) titled "Taking Part" researched child participation in sport for 5–10-year-olds. Findings for 2015/2016 (1096 participants) revealed that in July 2016 "there has been no significant change in the proportion of children participating in sport in any age group (5-15, 5-10 or 11-15) compared to 2008/09 or 2014/15". This indicates that the new PE national curriculum for England and the government's one billion pounds funding for Sport England to invest in grass-roots sports has made no improvement (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2017). Based on these latest findings, it may be suggested a new holistic approach to PE is necessary and timely. It is recommended that unwelcomed ideologies are addressed in the early years of schools using a holistic, socio-cultural approach—which has been raised on numerous occasions throughout the book and is explored in detail in Chapter 9.

Reviewing literature reveals PE has had different purposes over the years, all driven by needs of the government or society. At present, the British national curriculum for PE was derived from a need for Olympic champions and young competitors. This is of particular significance because a deeper analysis reveals that it may be defeating its own aim of "healthy active lives" in both the short and long terms. Educative questions are raised about possible hidden messages that are experienced by four-year-old chil-

dren in their first year at primary school, messages adversely affecting the development of the "whole" child.

This chapter offers balance to perspectives portrayed through the national curriculum in England for PE. In doing so, it suggests that educators are made aware of existing social and cultural influences that influence PE and sport. Discourses and ideologies need to be identified; the position or contextual needs for the discourse should be shared, as should the undesirable aspects. Children are passive consumers of discourses and ideologies; an awareness of their choices needs to be brought to their attention from the early years of school. The socio-cultural approach requires teachers to be educated about such forces and strategies for how best to manage these.

In short, the national curriculum for England in PE can and needs to be better, in design and implementation. This is supported by Cale and Harris (2019, p. 13):

> In PE, in particular, learning should challenge the narrow focus, misunderstandings and misconceptions that many young people hold [and teachers] concerning health, fitness and physical activity. Meeting this goal is likely to require us to develop alternative approaches, both in initial teacher education and in professional development related to PE-for-health pedagogies.

Children in Reception class should be moving for enjoyment, because it comes naturally to them, and this should be exploited by teachers as a medium to enhance their learning across all areas. They shouldn't be exercising out of fear that they will get fat, nor should they be experiencing guilt for not meeting adult "health" expectations. It is wrong for children to be categorised as overweight and school leaders should not be allowing this within their schools. Hence, it is recommended that the global shift to a constructivist, holistic social-cultural approach be adopted for the national curriculum for England in PE, one which has a focus on the whole person philosophy: body, mind, spirit and wellbeing.

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