

# Seizing the Moment: improving curriculum and pedagogy prospects for physical education in Scotland

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**ABSTRACT** This article points out that recent government pronouncements clearly envisage an enhanced status for the provision of physical education in schools in Scotland. This being the case, it is essential that policy makers, researchers and teachers examine many of the contested aims and conflicting agendas now in existence so that outcomes can match investment.

## Introduction

In May 1999, Scotland elected its own Parliament for the first time in three centuries and the new devolved Scottish legislature now governs policy and expenditure on most domestic affairs, including health and education. Over 95% of schools remain in the public sector and are governed by 32 locally elected education authorities. Such a steady and continuous model of schooling is very much 'the Scottish way' (McCrone, 2003, p. 248) as it promotes a vision of schooling where every school aims for excellence. Within physical education (PE) specifically, the model appears desirable, as Penney & Evans (1999) have noted that in the more competitive climate of schooling in England, PE often has the unfortunate distinction of being both low in status and high in marketable merit.

Since devolution there has been a major review of educational provision in Scotland, and while no major structural changes are planned, there is an increased emphasis on subjects articulating their student-centred contribution to education. Accordingly, PE has been identified as a strong contributive part of the 'learning for life' strand within the 'National Priorities in Education' (Scottish Executive, 2004a), and as part of the 'Active Schools' Programme (Scottish Executive, 2003a). Overall, schools are considered pivotal for generating improvements and 'the only place where equity of access and opportunity to good quality PE can be achieved' (Scottish Executive, 2004b, p. 27).

The 'Review Group on Physical Education' (Scottish Executive, 2004b) was set up in response to a recommendation included in the document 'Let's Make Scotland More Active: a strategy for physical activity' (Scottish Executive, 2003b), which recognized the specialist nature of PE and the need for high-quality teaching, learning and curriculum frameworks as the basis for tackling problems with inactivity and lack of interest among students. Despite citing some examples of good practice overall, there was some disquiet about variable provision and the proportion of students who were disengaged from PE (Scottish Executive, 2004b), as well as the growing number of schools where there were reductions in curriculum time allocations (Littlefield et al, 2003).

Therefore, the announcement in June 2004 by the Scottish Minister for Education and Young People that PE required an exceptional level of support to address health and active lifestyles issues was welcomed (see Jess, 2004). Accordingly, within four years, schools will be expected to provide two hours of good quality PE for each student every week and a further 400 teachers will be provided to support curriculum delivery. In summary, a brighter future has been signposted as the Scottish Executive has made a commitment which is the 'biggest boost to PE for generations' (Jess, 2004, p. 6).

However, despite such laudable commitment, it is important that policy makers, researchers and teachers critically consider many of the contested aims and conflicting agendas which currently exist so that outcomes can match investment. Accordingly, the remainder of this article briefly considers three areas where new professional demands require analysis if policy aspirations are to be realised. This is necessary, for while policy headline statements have been about 'two hours of PE a week' and 'PE for all', the three implicit messages for secondary school teachers are about discussing and reviewing the precise aims of practical activities in the curriculum, deploying a greater range of teaching approaches to meet learning goals and to more closely articulate programmes in schools with the communities they serve. Furthermore, attention to such messages requires dovetailing related discussion with the overall emphasis of the new 'A Curriculum for Excellence' policy, which aims to place students at the centre of the curriculum, rather than subjects. Consequently, learning goals are now about preparing students to be 'successful learners', 'confident individuals', 'effective contributors' and 'responsible citizens' (Scottish Executive, 2004a).

### **Activity and Programme Modelling Issues**

The Review Group (Scottish Executive, 2004b, p. 29) is 'convinced that extending choice beyond the traditional games' is a critical issue when reviewing the curriculum, as providing 'more contemporary activities such as martial arts, yoga, dance, skateboarding and flag football could do much to increase participation in physical education'. Yet, increasing choice runs the risk of securing marginal learning gains if students experience mere activity sampling rather than a coherent set of learning experiences which articulate

with recent curriculum imperatives (Scottish Executive, 2004a), and which address lifelong learning priorities (Penney & Jess, 2004).

Clearly, 'the subject must be more than a list of activities' (Capel, 2000, p. 209) and consequently there are many complex issues to analyse, if PE is to contribute towards a transformative educational agenda which is geared towards highlighting how students' critical engagement with practically-based experiential learning could challenge much of the 'docility-utility' of current schooling (Kirk, 2004, p. 200). Evans (2004) has reasserted the need for physical educators to critically consider that which is distinctive about subject matter, and not to become deflected by wider, politically driven agendas, which are often based on the notion that PE can compensate for deficiencies in health and sport provision. Accordingly, Evans (2004) argues that discussions should try to dovetail with related studies of 'physical literacy' (Whitehead, 2001) and 'kinesthetic intelligence' (Arnold, 1979), in order to avoid the thinness of some curriculum accounts, which often highlight the immediate merits of fun and enjoyment (Green, 2000) to the detriment of offering a more coherent explanation of how developing intelligent, informed participation is possible. Overall, it might be merited for those advocates of increasing the choice of activities available to reflect on the longer-term pedagogy and professional ramifications of espousing such a strategy.

### **Teaching Approaches**

The centrality of comprehensive secondary schools in designing policy solutions means that a crucial question for teachers is how will the additional time associated with recent curriculum reviews be used (Scottish Executive, 2004b). This is important, because at face value, simply to repeat for a longer time that which exists at present might create as many problems as it solves. It may well be that different students have different needs. For example, some students might welcome a relatively frequent change of activity focus to sustain their interest, while other students would relish programmes which are based on greater perseverance and challenge.

Furthermore, there is a need to review the extent to which teachers can adapt from directly instructional to more participatory pedagogy practices. This is because current policy attempts to make progress towards achieving more physically literate citizens could founder without changes in teaching practices (Carr, 1991). It is, therefore, disappointing to note that recent initiatives aimed, in part, at developing these types of personal qualities, such as 'Sport Education' (Siedentop & Kinchin, 2003), 'Teaching Games for Understanding' (Kirk & MacPhail, 2002) and Hellison's model of personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 1995) have yet to influence Scottish practice to any great extent. Thus, the time appears right for a degree of pedagogical in-school experimentation, and for the profession to move beyond the restrictiveness associated with the syndrome of 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' (Curtner-Smith et al, 1999, p. 75).

### **Extended Professional Demands**

During the 1980s many teachers were involved in a protracted and often acrimonious pay and conditions dispute, which in many cases led to a reduction in teachers' support for voluntarily leading extended school day activities. Since then little improvement has occurred, with teachers' new contractual obligations becoming defined in ever more precise terms (Scottish Executive, 2001). In a belated response to increasing concerns about students' lack of participation in sporting activities, the School Sport Coordinator Programme (SSCP) began (Sport Scotland, 2003). This national programme typically involved PE teachers being released from their teaching duties to coordinate school-wide attempts to improve levels of active sports-based participation. However, findings indicate that while two-thirds of PE teachers were prepared to volunteer time, only one-third of other teachers were prepared to volunteer (Sport Scotland, 2003). Overall, such evidence tends to reinforce some of the knowledge hierarchies and subject status anxieties many PE teachers possess (Fernandez-Bilboa, 1997). Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that many PE teachers in England as well as Scotland did not consider that completing an SSCP remit was useful for career progression (Flintoff, 2003).

More encouragingly, the contribution of the SSCP towards improving school ethos was widely recognized by school leaders, and while this could have pitfalls in itself, the less competitive culture of comprehensive schooling in Scotland might yet mean that programmes like the SSCP can contribute to the achievement of wider school aims. This might, if it can be recognized, represent a dynamic for professional change which suits a broader school-community agenda, and which enables an extended view of the educational contribution made by PE teachers to occur. However, this is most likely to happen if teachers can attempt with more urgency and sharper political instincts to work across school and community boundaries rather than seek to maintain them unnecessarily.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, PE is as close to centre stage as it gets; a new set of health initiatives, increasing participation and sport in the community priorities dominate Scottish Executive thinking. Given the problems PE appears to be having worldwide (Hardman & Marshall, 2000) this is good news for the profession. Future goals are clearly signposted: to ensure that all students have access to quality PE experiences throughout every stage of their school life and that they have the opportunity to develop the foundation for healthy and active lives. To achieve such goals, teachers are challenged to change and to view the contribution PE can make with the widest possible lens. If planned investment leads to the profession showing genuine enterprise in introducing an exciting new curriculum, where courses achieve a multitude of aims based on a clearly articulated view of learning and where participation increases are sustained, then the benefits will justify the cost. If successful, an emerging model of

professionalism which satisfies the intrinsic beliefs of teachers and the aspirations of school communities alike can emerge.

In attempting to find curriculum security, based on merit rather than convenience, PE must break away from the past 'dependency culture', take professional responsibility and critically consider the best way forward. Without a political presence, influence and higher levels of funding can just as easily be taken away as provided. Over the years PE teachers have been determinedly apolitical, so it is little wonder that their views are often ignored. Accordingly, it is suggested that in the light of diminishing levels of local authority advisory support available to teachers (Brewer, 2003), closer partnership arrangements between teachers and research-based academics should occur. Such partnerships could help ensure that evidence-based findings inform a mix of off-site training and in-school experimentation designed to improve the core learning experience of students in PE (Thorburn, 2006).

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