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Re-conceiving ability in physical education: a social analysis

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Abstract

In this paper we explore how ‘ability’ is currently conceptualised in physical education and with what effects for different groups of young people. We interrogate approaches to theorizing ability in physical education that draw on sociological and phenomenological ‘foundations’ together with notions of ability as ‘physical’ and ‘cultural capital’ drawn from the work of Bourdieu. We also look to data we and others have collected across a number of empirical projects to ask: *where* do we find talk about what we might identify as ‘ability’ in the context of physical education and sport; *how* is it talked about? and in what ways might this further our thinking of the meaning of ‘ability’ in physical education and school based sport? Our findings suggest that physical ability is far from a neutral concept and that how it is understood has important consequences for young people in relation to gender, race and social class. We argue that ongoing discussions around what we mean by ability, how we use it, and in relation to whom, are crucial in physical education where organized sport, recreation and exercise remain privileged over other constituents of physical culture.

Re-conceiving ability in physical education: a social analysis

Jan Wright and Lisette Burrows

Physical education in its many manifestations has always been concerned with the body and its capacities. The form that this has taken, however, has been shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which physical education has been practised, and the ways it has been situated in relation to the broader context of the education of children and young people. Implicitly or explicitly, physical education has earned its place in schools through the work that it claims to do in producing particular kinds of citizens/subjects; citizens often differentiated on basis of gender, class, race and their intersections. For example, Kirk (1992) and Wright (1996) point to the ways, in Victorian England and colonial Australia, physical education and school sport were implicated in maintaining social class and gender differences through differentiated forms of physical training and school sport in the elite private girls and boys schools and the government elementary schools. In these physical education contexts, ‘ability’ has been imagined very differently for different groups of children: on one hand, the ability to perform in competitive organised sports and, in the other, the ability to move the body in unison to perform movements designed to exercise the body for the purposes of health and training in obedience to authority (Evans & Davies, 2004; Kirk, 1992; Wright, 1996).

This differentiation of ‘ability’ is a theme that persists in contemporary practices of physical education. In elite private schools, physical education and particularly school

sport, continues to be valued and resourced, because of the work it does in shaping particular abilities – abilities that are integrally linked to embodied and symbolic capital; that is, subjective and embodied changes created through the acquisition of skill and the challenges of physical activity pursued to a high level of performance. The abilities so developed, particularly in the context of boys’ elite schools, are recognised as having important exchange value in social life beyond school. The differentiation between physical activity for health and physical activity as symbolic capital persists in contemporary schools, and contributes to the profoundly different life outcomes for children in elite private schools compared to those in most government schools (Buckingham, 2000). We return to this theme below to argue our case through empirical work investigating the place and meaning of physical activity in young people’s lives (Wright, Macdonald & Groom, 2003; Wright, Macdonald & Kriflik, 2005).

In these introductory paragraphs, the term ‘ability’ has been used in scare quotes; its meaning is still negotiable. And we do not want to foreclose on any definition; what ‘ability’ means in physical education will depend on the discursive contexts in which it is used. While it would be valuable to conduct a genealogy of ‘ability’ in physical education to make visible the power/knowledge relations in which it has been constituted, it is not within the scope of this paper to do so. Rather we want to extend the discussion begun by John Evans (2004) in his paper “Making a difference: education and ability in physical education”, and taken up by others in this special issue, to trouble taken for granted notions of ability as simply a measurable and observable capacity. In following his direction, we are very aware that ‘ability’ is a loaded concept in educational contexts, it carries considerable baggage including the

rejection of its implications by some because of its ‘differentiating effects’, its historical role in sorting and selecting and the perceived effects of this on students’ lives.

The paper poses a number of questions: How is ability conceptualised currently in physical education; how is it given both meaning and value and how is this different and how does it work differently for different groups of young people/students? What are the implications for particular conceptualisations of ability in context of physical education? How can it contribute to a socially just form of physical education for children and young people?

In an attempt to address some of these questions we looked to data we and others have collected across a number of projects to ask where do we find talk about what we might identify as ‘ability’ in context of physical education and sport; how is it talked about and how does that further our thinking of the meaning of ‘ability’ in physical education and school based sport. We read this talk about ability against some of the ways that ‘ability’ has been theorised in relation to the body, physical activity and physical education. Finally we would also want to keep in mind Foucault’s notion of the ‘body’ as located within relations of power and representation to remind us of how meanings associated with ability are always constituted socially in relations of power.

Defining ability

Ability as [a measurable] attribute: sorting and streaming

In the education literature on ability, it generally seems to be taken for granted that 'ability' is something that you are born with, but on which you can capitalise (Bird, 1994). It follows that some people are understood as having more ability than others. On the other hand, sitting side by side with this discourse is a discourse which privileges effort, that is some people can make up for their 'lack' of ability through hard work ('effortful diligence', Bird, 1994, p. 99). In some ways the kind of 'character' that this suggests may be preferred to that of those who throw away their 'ability' through 'lacking' effort.

Within the context of a sociology of education, the discussion of ability coheres around the practice of streaming and differential schooling and the consequences for children of the working class. From this point of view, the relationship between ability (as measured by school tests and tests of intelligence) and achievement is not transparent but constituted in unjust social relations which disadvantage those who do not have the cognitive abilities valued in academic contexts. The point at issue here is that, despite the intention to provide a common school experience, the 'dividing practices' of sorting and streaming produce different experiences of schooling which further differentiate groups on the basis of ability, where differences in ability are demonstrably associated with social class (Fitz, Davies & Evans, 2006).

Even in these studies, however, the 'language about ability is ostensibly transparent, purporting to represent an unproblematic truth about inherent capacities of persons' (Bird, 1994, p. 98). Despite acknowledging that ability is influenced by social location, it is still taken to be what students 'have' as indicated by measurements on IQ, maths and literacy tests. This literature raises few questions about the nature of

‘ability’ itself: ability for what? what forms of ability are valued and what not? how does the testing process itself shape what is regarded as ability? how is schooling structured to enhance particular abilities and not others? These are obviously not questions absent in some form or another in the sociology of education, the point here is that they rarely engage with the notion of ‘ability’ itself.

Ability as site of discussion in the sociology of education literature is more often than not equated with ‘cognitive ability’ (Bird, 1994). The discussions of physical ability are mostly found in exercise physiology and related areas. The language used in these contexts does little to challenge the naturalness of ability. Indeed theories of somatotyping, attribution of ability to racial and gender differences, the tools and practices of early talent identification, provide support for that naturalness of physical ability that is difficult to refute – the evidence is ‘visible’ and concurs with other assumptions about gender and racial stereotyping. Again within the sociology of sport such attributions have been challenged (Hokowhitu, 2003; St Louis, 2003), however, these arguments seem to have little purchase given the power of biological and scientific discourses which assert the naturalness of difference.

In physical education, ability has been taken up as an unproblematic attribute that can be measured and used to place children in groups based on similar abilities (ironically a web search indicates that this practice is often argued on the basis of equity). As is the case in education more widely, it is also taken to be a ‘competence’ that can be acted upon – this perspective particularly comes up in the socio-psychological literature in terms of ‘perceptions’ of competence and relationship of these to motivation to participate in learning skills which in turn foster participation in

physical activity. From this perspective teachers need to improve students competencies in order to impact on their ‘desire to participate’ in physical activity (e.g. Li, Lee & Solomon, 2006).

Ability as physical capital: Bourdieu

Bourdieu’s (1984; 1986) theorising of the body as the bearer of symbolic capital, provides the means to move beyond biological/physiological notions of ‘ability’ and to begin to understand both its socially constructed nature and its social value. Bourdieu helps us to explore the ways inequalities may be constructed through a physical education that takes no notice of the potential differentiating effects of different perspectives and practices associated with ‘ability’. The body in modern societies has become a source of ‘physical capital’ that has considerable exchange value beyond that associated with the ability to do physical work. Shilling (1993) describes how the body in modern societies as become the source of physical capital, ‘the possessor of power, status and symbolic forms’ (p. 127), which can be converted into other forms of capital: economic capital (e.g. professional sports and sponsorship); cultural capital (e.g. scholarships to schools, colleges and universities) and social capital (e.g. alumni networks, international connections through sports organizations).

For Bourdieu (1984), physical capital is not only an embodied capacity to use the body, but the appearance of the body, the body as evidence of particular work on the body. This latter notion of physical capital is embedded in forms of physical education that focus on the relationship between fitness and health, where the

appearance of body is assumed to be an indicator of not only good health but the work done on the body, and the dispositions to managing the self that this is taken to imply. 'Ability' here could arguably be equated with the appearance of the body as an indicator of 'fitness' – that is the 'endurance' capacity of the body/the capacity of the body to do physical work. The value of such ability in this context seem however less to do with what the body can do than with what the body looks like it can do.

Although writing about 'aging bodies', Dumas and Turner's (in press) comments on relationship between physical capital and power have relevance as we consider what happens when individuals do not have access to physical capital, through dis-ability, or through the failure of schooling to provide such resources.

The loss of physical capital (that is health, strength, bodily appearance) during the ageing process can also deny older adults power. First, it creates barriers to the accumulation of other forms of capital. Second, low physical capital is often directly translated into low esteem or is deemed to have poor social value.

Whether in the form of bodily dispositions or in deep-seeded internalised behaviours, such as posture, demeanour or speech, the ageing body is stigmatised.

The ways and extent to which individuals have access to the kinds of physical capital that have symbolic value in the contexts in which they live and society more widely is an important question for physical education/ors. We need to consider how and what forms of physical capital we promote, for whom, and with what effects for the formation of particular selves and social relations.

Ability as physical literacy

Drawing on work of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, Margaret Whitehead takes up the difficult tasks of conceptualising the notion of ‘physical literacy’. Her starting point, like Bourdieu, is that we learn, indeed become conscious, through our bodily interaction with the world.

Looking very broadly it could be suggested that the overarching characteristics of a physically literate individual are that the person moves with poise, economy and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging situations.

Furthermore the individual is perceptive in ‘reading’ all aspects of the physical environment, anticipating movement needs or possibilities and responding appropriately to these, with intelligence and imagination. (Whitehead, 2001, p. 129)

The choice of the term ‘literacy’ evokes comparisons with the highly developed and ongoing discussions of literacy in other contexts, particularly those around learning to read and write. On the one hand, Whitehead’s definition seems to provide an ideal to work towards. It also provides an alternative to the attributes that Connell associates with participation in sport and masculinity (see below). What it doesn’t have is any reference to the social and cultural contexts in which we learn and use movement; it does not acknowledge how particular repertoires of being, including movement are socially constructed in relation to gender, class, race and how particular forms of movement have relevance for particular social and cultural contexts.

In the literature on literacy as learning to read and write, there is a critique of simple functionality and an argument that readers and writers need to be *critically* literate, that is, able to recognise that language is socially constructed and that particular ways of speaking, writing and reading are valued differently (e.g. Luke, 2000; Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997). Like Whitehead, those writing from this perspective would argue that one of the roles of schooling is to help students respond to their environments, to become both critically and multi-literate; to be able to use a wide range of repertoires of reading and writing, to recognise and be able to respond to the requirements of their environments. However, they would also require that they recognise the work that language does in creating social values and beliefs. It seems relevant therefore to ask can the metaphor of physical literacy encompass a critical physical literacy?

Does it matter?

In attempting to think about whether it is worth being concerned about ‘ability’ in physical education, a quote from interviews with a young woman in the *Life Activity Project* has been instructive. The *Life Activity Project* (LAP) is a longitudinal project that asked (and continues to ask) Australian young people in secondary schools and beyond school, from a range of social, cultural and geographical locations about the place and meaning of physical activity in their lives (see Wright, *et al.* 2003). The young people were asked across range of interviews to talk about what they liked about PE, what they had learned in PE and what they would change about PE. If we think of ‘ability’ as in someway related to ‘skill’, the capacity to ‘perform’ or to

‘participate’, what stands out first is that the young people rarely talked about learning skills or new activities. While most liked physical education, like young people in other studies, what they said they liked was the respite from classroom-based work, the fun in playing games. No-one in the LAP talked about becoming a different kind of person, implicitly or explicitly – a more able person – through their participation in physical education or school sport.

Perhaps the lack of talk about ability/learning/skill has as much to do with the discourses we employ around school physical education and the kinds of culture of activity that have become entrenched, as they have to do with learning in physical education. The example that does stand out is one in which a young woman, Angela explicitly talks about the ‘absence’ of learning, the consequences of not ‘being able’ in the areas that count in an Australian physical activity/education context. Migrating from Fiji with her parents in 1996, at the age of about 11 years, Angela found herself ill prepared (not ‘able’) for physical education in an Australian primary school.

Unfamiliar with the rules and with the games that were played in her senior primary classes, she avoided participating in physical education and physical activities then, and has continued to avoid participation in any form of organised physical activities through high school and beyond school. In addition, not being able to swim has shaped her experiences of some iconic Australian experiences of the beach and pool (that is, participation in the wider physical culture). These themes thread through her interviews from a fifteen years old in year 10 to a 21 year old with a fiancé.

In year 10 at about 13 or 14 years

I: So you're not interested in anything [in PE]?

A: No. Because I was never interested in it from the start. If I was interested in it at the beginning; like in primary school, then maybe I would be interested in it now. But since my primary school we had the choice, like to do sport or sit there and do class work, and I chose to sit there and do class work, I just *never knew how to play. Like they never explained the rules and I just didn't know how to play* so I couldn't be bothered to try anyway. When we arrived in Australia, my brother was younger, like he learnt quicker, but for me, I was past my years. Like *I was already supposed to know how to play.* (July 2000)

Reflecting back over her experiences of school PE in an interview conducted post her High School Certificate exam in year 12:

Like I think it was in Year Seven or Year Eight and we just got divided into teams and we were supposed to play netball and I had W8 on me or whatever and I had no idea what that does and I didn't even know that there are certain lines you can't cross and you can't do and in Australia I think you learn that in Year Four or something, I don't know. But up there [in Fiji] you don't learn those things unless you actually go out of your way and say "teach me". So when I came here everyone was knowing what they're doing and I had no idea, I'm just standing there, the fourth one, and I'm like, okay. So because of that I did less and less in the class because I didn't know what I was doing and everyone else did and I was like an outcast, sort of thing. So I just said, okay, instead of making myself look like an idiot I'll just shut up. (March 2002)

A comment from an interview in year 10 reflecting on her experience of physical activity outside the school points to ‘what is missing’ in terms of Angela’s ‘intelligent capacity to move’ :

I: I noticed your ten-pin style.

A: Yeah, I walk up, stop and push it down. I noticed how people run up and do this thing with their leg. I can't do that; I just look at people and say 'if I tried that I would just look like an idiot.' Haha. So I just try it at all. I would feel like an idiot because every one would be watching you don't want to look like an idiot.

I: Has your technique changed?

A: No. no.

I: What do you do after the ball leaves your hands?

A: I just stand there and wish. I always stand there. You know how people go back. I stand there and watch it and then come back and watch the mark.

(August 2000)

Angela in her interviews seems quite sanguine about her ‘lack’ of ability in physical activity; she consistently describes a general disinterest in physical activity and from her point of view, this is no great problem. However, she also describes her discomfort at the beach, both in terms of body shape and the gaze of others, but also because she cannot swim. If we inserted reading or mathematics for what Angela cannot now do, there would be considerable concern – her school experiences would be said to have failed her. If we use the metaphor of literacy for her physical ability, then in Whitehead’s terms there is a major aspect of her learning in the world that she

has had few opportunities to develop. As a young woman, her lack of recognised and socially valued physical capital may not be as much of an issue as if she were a young man – that is, it does not directly challenge her feminine subjectivity; however, if we accept that embodied capacity to engage in different forms of movement is a source of pleasure and integrally related to the development of ‘a sense of proper selfhood’ (Bennett, Emmison & Frow, 1999: 115), then Angela has been poorly served by her school physical education.

Gender and ability

In the interviews with the LAP cohort it was in discussions around the young people’s preferences for single sex or coeducation classes that ‘ability’ was most explicitly mentioned. It is no surprise then that it is in the sociological literature on gender, sport and physical activity that research and discussions about ‘ability’ are most developed. The debates cohere around two main issues: the extent to which embodied capacities are biologically determined differentially for men and women (Lowe, 1982; Dyer, 1986); and the consequences of differently embodied capacities for what it means to be feminine and masculine (Bell, 2004; Drummond, 2003; Garrett, 2004). Drawing on phenomenology Bob Connell’s and I.M. Young much quoted descriptions of the ways in which ability is differentially associated with masculinity and femininity point to the ways social expectations of ability in relation to gender produce particular kinds of relationship to the world. For those boys and men who engage in traditional male sports this is a relationship marked by the ability to act on the world with force and skill through the development of strong competent bodies.

What it means to be masculine is quite literally, to embody force, to embody competence (p. 27).

What is learned by constant informal practice, and taught by formal coaching, is for each sport a specific combination of sport and skill. Force, meaning the irresistible occupation of space; skill, meaning to operate on space or the objects in it (including other bodies) ... The combination of the two is power - meeting Weber's definition, the capacity to achieve ends even if opposed by others. (Connell, 1983, p.18)

And for girls and young women according to I.M. Young:

The relatively untrained man ... engages in sport generally with more free motion and open reach than does his female counterpart. Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common, first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather, in swinging and hitting, for example, the motion is concentrated on one body part; and second, that the women's motion tends not to reach, extend lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention. (Young 1980, p.143)

The quote from I.M. Young, should, of course, be treated as an observation on particular engagements with sport for some young women and not a generalisation to all young women. The point here is that the body is inscribed with social meanings

and that how bodies *are* impacts on the ways individuals interact with their world, how they use their bodies in space and their relationships with others. If we accept I.M. Young's propositions, then physical education has the potential to develop 'abilities' which allow women and men to engage with their world differently (and arguably more competently and with more confidence) than otherwise.

This is not to suggest that embodied capacity necessarily requires participation in the kinds of sports that Connell talking about – contact/semi-contact sport – but that following Whitehead, every child has the 'right' to experiences that develop a 'level' of competency that should not be differentiated by assumptions about gender. This requires a different physical education from that which we are familiar with - one not based on traditional team sport, for example, or the fundamental movement skills associated with these (see Wright 1998). On one hand, it should not be underscored by assumptions about the naturalness of gender (racial or other differences). At the same time, it needs to pay attention to how those institutional and cultural assumptions of difference i) have already made a difference in students' 'embodied capacities; and ii) shape their own teaching practices (Wright 2001).

Social class

There are few discussions around physical ability in relation to social class, yet if we follow Bourdieu, ability as a form of physical capital is profoundly classed, particularly in its value beyond the school. It is classed in terms of the unequal opportunities to develop ability both through differential physical and human

resources available; and the ways particular cultural and social capital are associated with particular abilities and capacities.

If ability can be equated with capital and it seems that it can, then how does it work within and between schools differentiated by social class? A nuanced understanding of the experiences of young people from different social classes within schools is difficult to determine, although research by Kirk, Carlson *et al.*, (1997) and Macdonald, Rodger *et al.* (2004) points to the highly differentiated experiences of children depending on parents' income, and the LAP project does provide some insight through case studies of young people from different social backgrounds (Wright *et al.*, 2003). More telling for the purposes of this discussion, however, were the comparisons of LAP interviews with teachers from the government and the systemic catholic school with those of the teachers from the elite private schools. None of the non-elite schools were located in particularly privileged areas and several could be characterised as drawing students from low socio-economic populations. It is in the elite schools that the importance of 'ability' as embodied capital was explicitly recognised and proclaimed as part of the school's purpose. In the 'working class' schools, physical education and sport, in contrast, was talked about as remedial, as conveying abilities that would provide their students with the capacity to function effectively as 'good' citizens and workers.

Sport in both the boys and the girls' elite schools was a mandatory part of the schools extracurricular activities, important in producing the well-rounded graduate who is capable of taking a leading role in civic life. At both schools, professional coaches were employed. Although neither the word 'capital' nor 'ability' was explicitly used,

it is clear that experience of participating in sport was structured to produce physically able young people. For the students at both schools their engagement in physical culture was primarily associated with the school, that is, they played in school teams, they participated in school sponsored activities during school, after school and on the weekends. For the girls the activities were much more varied, including dance and martial arts; for the boys, activities tended to team sports and rowing, with a hierarchy of social value attributed to different sports and boys who played them in the school.

From teachers at the elite girls' school on school sport and PE:

The school sport set up, um, I think it has a lot of benefits in the fact that as well as providing physical activity or recreation, the normal things associated with structured sport, it's also very important for social interaction, um, it teaches girls a level of commitment. They sign a contract to say they want to play sport; it puts the responsibility back on them so that they're hopefully becoming more efficient decision makers as well. It teaches them the benefits of relying on other people, of making that long term commitment and gives them the ability to compete in an enjoyable atmosphere where the emphasis is on being competitive but it's not on [winning at all] costs and attitude as well. So I think they can take a little bit more values and benefits out of it once they actually leave the school environment. (Terry, PDHPE teacher)

They (the school executive) realise that it's an important part of learning and it just gives students another way of thinking and a new angle of thinking and I think people understand that playing sport isn't just about remembering things,

it's about thinking on the spot. It's about understanding patterns and predicting what's going to happen, anticipation and all those sorts of things come into PE and I think at this school especially with their transforming learning that it's one of the things that they're trying to actually integrate into the academia side.

(William PDHPE teacher)

The teachers in the government and the systemic catholic school talked about physical education and school sport in relation to developing the 'abilities' of their students rather differently. For the teachers at the private schools, sport and physical education was about developing those embodied capacities which will translate into the kinds of capital that enable students to achieve their school's vision of them as young women who have professional and academic careers, in a competitive social environment. It is also about excellence and achieving potential. Ability is to be maximised.

For the teachers in the government and catholic schools, physical education and sport 'ability' was taken to be a given, unevenly distributed amongst students, which simply complicates teaching. Those with ability were assumed to be already participating outside of school; and the teachers' mission was to provide those without a high degree of inherent ability with the opportunities to develop sufficient skills to experience pleasure in movement now, which would motivate them to continue to participate beyond school. In this process, physical education should also be about making a contribution to making better citizens, citizens in the case of their students who have the personal attributes of productive members of society.

For example, the a female teacher from the Victorian rural schools in the LAP study, in describing the process of skill development, points not to the value of becoming more 'able' or developing skill, but to the contribution such a process makes to the developing particular social and interpersonal attributes.

Well even learning the skill. They have to start from the beginning of learning a new skill. They go through different progressions. So that is something in itself. Might be sport and with a new sport you have to start from scratch and *just* learn the basics which once again is hard for a lot of students to grasp because they just want to get down and play the game. They don't care about skill development. But with the *skill development in sport it's going to help them in everything. Learning to do something from scratch you have to do that a lot of times throughout your life so that comes up to that as well.*

And from the male teacher at a NSW catholic school, what is important is passing on his own love of physical activity so that students will want to continue to participate in physical activity throughout their lives for both health and pleasure:

... So yeah, the big thing is yeah regular physical activity, um, try and teach them some new skills that they can use for the rest of their lives, so they can have the opportunity or have the ability really to go up and join sports classes if they want to or have a go at doing recreational sport.

...

Q Do you think you can teach them to enjoy it?

A Well I think you can teach it, if they have developed some skills and they achieve some kind of success they're going to enjoy it, in most cases, I think that's, you don't really teach them to enjoy it, but your aim is opportunity, have a go, um develop some sort of, show them success in some small way and then they'll think 'yeah I can do this'.

From a teacher in a government school on the urban fringes of a large city

I'll say (to the students) "You've just got to keep trying and never give up, because if you learn that, you can take that from your sport and you can use it in life." And I think that's the whole, a lot of the kids here aren't the best in academic but if they take the idea of, you know, keep trying, keep trying, keep trying and don't give up, in their life, maybe in games they've learnt or teams they've played at this school or coaches they've had at this school, they've tried to get that into their head, then it's something they can take from sport to their life. They may never play sport again, but they may, as long as they take the idea of trying their best, because that's what I say to the kids. (PDHPE teacher).

Clearly what these teachers are describing as outcomes of physical education are in some way 'embodied capacities' to productively participate in society. What we would argue is that they are not physical capital or physical literacies, nor 'intelligent capacities for movement', yet these are what these teachers and many others (refs – Tinning etc) describe as the work that PE should do. In the last school, the quote suggests that physical education is taken to make a contribution to make up for deficiencies in students' characters and lives – what Evans (2004) refers to in relation

to ‘perfection codes’ – that is students require correction and treatment through participation in physical education.

Race, ethnicity and culture

Understanding the diverse ethnic and cultural heritage of young people in schools has been recognised as a crucial starting point for construction of more socially just school-based curricula in recent times (Education Review Office, 2003; Fleras & Spoonley, 2002; Whitinui, 2005). The growth of postcolonial scholarship in countries where indigenous interests have historically been marginalised has not, however yielded a comparable interest in how ability in physical education has and continues to be configured in a postcolonial era. There remains a dearth of scholarship directly addressing the ways race and ethnicity are implicated in questions around what abilities are valued, where and to what end?

In most European and Eurocentric countries – that is, those whose histories are shaped by colonization by European countries – sport and physical activity and for the purposes of this paper ‘ability’ need to be considered as an artifact of both colonization and contemporary migrations. Historically the notion of physical ‘ability’ has always been used to differentiate between different races and ethnicities (Hokowhitu, 2004; St Louis 2003) and generally, the physical ability of ‘black bodies’ (including Maori, Pasifica, Australian Aboriginal and Afro-American bodies) has been opposed to an assumed intellectuality of people of European cultures (Hokowhitu, 2004). Sociologists and historians (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002; MacLean, 1999; Phillips, 1987) have, in the context of competitive sport, pointed to

the ways black athletes, across a range of sporting codes are regularly allocated positions envisaged as requiring brawn not brain. This representation of black peoples as ‘physical people’ and a concomitant assumption that they are therefore *not* intellectual has, and continues to inform, notions of who gets regarded as having what ‘ability’ and why in schools.

Hokowhitu (2001, 2003, 2004), drawing on interviews with pakeke (esteemed physical educators) and extensive policy and curriculum analysis, has mapped the ways Maori children have historically and contemporaneously been regarded as achievers in the physical realm yet limited in their academic potential. His genealogical work disentangles the racist assumptions (e.g. that Maori are ‘natural athletes’ and ‘born warriors’) that continue to inform understandings of Maori ‘ability’ and clearly shows how channeling Maori boys, in particular, into sport has been and continues to be such a widespread practice. A proliferation of sports ‘academies’ populated largely by Maori and Polynesian boys, the promotion of professional rugby as a lifestyle choice for Maori and Pacific Islanders, and the deliberate targeting of Maori and Pacific Island young people (with sporting prowess) for recruitment into elite schools, are just a few examples of the ways young people are being encouraged to use the ‘physical capital’ they are presumed to have ‘inherited’ by virtue of race. Ironically, it would seem that physical ‘ability’ in the context of sport would seem to be one of the mediums through which Maori (and other indigenous) children have been able to ‘achieve’ within the context of monocultural schools and societies. In other words, a narrowly conceived notion of ‘physical ability’ as sporting prowess seems to advantage rather than ‘discriminate’ against some young indigenous people.

As discussed above, however, the equation of black = physically competent works within an opposition of the intellectual to the physical. As Bishop and Glynn (1999) and Hokowhitu (2004) point out, when young people come to regard competitive sport as the only way for them to achieve, their other needs (which may include academic needs, access to intellectual resources that may facilitate promising career pathways and so on) are inevitably sidelined. Palmer's (2000) study of young Maori women's physical education in schools supports these contentions. Teachers in her study readily ascribed to the 'Maori as natural athlete' notion and many felt that school curricula and pedagogy should be shaped by this 'fact'. Practices like these work to disengage Maori children from imagining themselves as competent and/or capable in any realm other than 'the physical', potentially disenfranchising them from the resources, both economic and social derived from involvement in the 'academic' or 'intellectual world'.

Debate around the inclusion of Maori cultural knowledge and pedagogy in physical education in NZ underscores both the potential and challenges implicit in any attempt to positively engage with the notion of considering 'ability' in cultural context. A raft of initiatives, ostensibly aiming to value, acknowledge and work with aspects of Maori culture have been initiated in mainstream schools in the past two decades (e.g. Te Reo Kori, Te Ao Kori, the introduction of Hauora as a key underlying concept for the New Zealand HPE curriculum; proliferation of kapa haka groups), yet in Hokowhitu (2003, 2004) and Salter's (2000), views, well-intentioned as they may be, these initiatives have largely failed to live up to their promise. Instead, what has sometimes resulted is an impoverished (see Palmer, 2000) and commodified version

of physical practice, divorced from its philosophical and cultural meanings. What initiatives, that *do* seem to genuinely engage with ‘abilities’ valued by Maori, have in common is a non-negotiable commitment to connect ‘physical’ skills to cultural values and to the histories within which particular skills and capacities have developed.

Our brief discussion of some of the ways physical ability is racially and culturally configured points to the importance of exploring meanings of ‘ability’ in a range of cultures and contexts. As we have argued throughout this paper, what ability might mean in physical education depends on the discursive contexts in which it is used. Questions about what ‘abilities’ count, why, how and with what effects cannot be considered outside of ‘culture’, yet in physical education, as in other spheres of schooling, there has been little evidence of meaningful engagement with cultural difference. As Fleras and Spoonley (2002) put it, schools are often too busy ‘managing diversity’ to have time for ‘engaging’ with difference.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has extended the discussions begun by John Evans (2004), but many issues still remain to be explored. ‘Ability’ is clearly not a neutral term; how it is understood, however, has important consequences for what happens in physical education and contributes to differentiating effects for young people in relation to gender, race and social class. The danger is always that the attributes associated with physical ability will be those most often associated with hegemonic forms of white

masculinity. Arguably this is currently the case, where the skills and competencies associated with organised sport continue to be privileged. These are also attributes that fit with other privileged discourses – those of nationalism, scientism and neoliberal notions of citizenship. As has been the case historically, the elite schools (now both for girls and boys) recognise the symbolic capital associated with such abilities and continue to place considerable emphasis on them in their curriculum and devote resources well beyond the capacity of government schools.

Performance codes persist in these schools, realised in discourses of competition and achievement (Evans & Davies, 2004). It is the government schools where perfection codes seem to be most in evidence, where students are positioned as ‘deficient’ as productive citizens and/or as needing the ‘abilities’ to prevent ill-health in the future through participating in ‘lifelong physical activity’. Ironically, the private schools seem to work from a more pragmatic position – improving performance in the present through expecting high standards; the government schools hope that through an experience of enjoyment in physical activity they will perhaps achieve something in the future. Their focus on physical activity for health (coded as ‘preventing obesity’) is also an intangible; a false hope, expressed in rhetoric but unable to be realised in practice. This is a discourse where improving ‘ability’, developing ‘embodied capacity’ seems to have a very limited relevance, except to acknowledge that some have it and some do not and this may influence their enjoyment of sport.

But if we are not then to fall back on those privileged notions of ability as equated with sports skills, where does that leave us? It seems that it is imperative to conceptualise ‘ability’ as embedded in social and cultural relations and that it needs to

encompass a wide range of movements and capacities and arguably not only those associated with sport, recreation and exercise (Kirk 1997). Although we did not have the space to pursue it in this paper, ‘ability’ seems to be integrally linked with what we understand as ‘physical culture’, that is, those movements, physical activities which constitute and are constitutive of a specific way of life, values, patterns of behaviour, which provide a way of ‘knowing’ the world, which are themselves a vocabulary of signs and symbols (adapted from Jirásek, 2003). ‘Ability’ therefore may not be simply the execution of a specific skill, or the capacity to demonstrate particular strategies, or even to choreograph movement, but the embodied capacities to perform movements that are located and valued because of their relationships with particular cultures and societies. From this perspective, the metaphor of ‘genre’ as ‘socially valued texts’ and the discussions that have ensued around this in the context of the literacy debates, might be useful. The mastery of certain genres is taken to be necessary cultural capital; however, in ‘New Times’ a critical literacy which recognises how genres are social products and which is about building access to literate practices and discourse resources, about setting the enabling pedagogic conditions for students to use their existing and new discourse resources for social exchange in the social fields where texts and discourses matter’ (Luke, 2000, p. 449) may be worth pondering.

What are the enabling pedagogic conditions, what are the ‘embodied capacities’ that matter and in which social fields? We realise that we have ended by raising more questions than answering them and such is often the role of the sociologist. To think differently about the notion of physical ability,

however, we need to look beyond the well worn paths, to use metaphors from other fields, to enable us to challenge the health and other discourses that currently dominate physical education, without reverting to narrow and reductive ways of thinking about ability which will inevitably be 'unjust'. We offer this paper as a beginning to what will inevitably be long but hopefully productive discussion.

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