1999

Developmental discourses in school physical education

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Developmental Discourses In School Physical Education

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

From

The University of Wollongong

by

Lisette Burrows
BPhEd, BA, PGrad Dip Arts (Education) (Otago)

Faculty of Education
November, 1999
Abstract

This poststructuralist study critically examines the nature and function of developmental discourses in New Zealand school physical education. Since the inception of formal schooling in New Zealand, physical educators have insisted that physical education can and does assist children to develop their physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual selves. These disciplinary claims provide the conceptual foundation upon which the profession rests. They legitimate particular professional and research practices, dispositions toward children and relationships between students and teachers. This thesis explores the historical and contemporary discourses about child development that physical education theorists and practitioners have drawn on to argue for a central role for physical education in the development of children. Despite the resonance of orthodox disciplinary claims with our commonsense understandings about child development, there are good reasons for subjecting these claims to close scrutiny.

Drawing extensively on poststructural social theory and the insights of Michel Foucault, in particular, the thesis interrogates the ‘regimes of truth’ which have contributed to the incorporation of developmental discourses in school physical education throughout history. It argues that developmental explanations of human change have shaped the way contemporary physical education theorists have come to think about the ‘child’ and his/her ‘development’. It also argues that when discourses of child development are examined within different social, cultural, political, economic and historical contexts, the truth status of those regimes is substantially ruptured. Appealing to a relatively recent branch of psychological study - critical psychology - this thesis problematises orthodox conceptualisations of the twin objects of developmental psychological enquiry - ‘the child’ and ‘development’. The study shows how commitments to an individualised conception of ‘the child’ and a sequential, hierarchical pattern of ‘development’ construct the child at the centre of physical education practice in ways which privilege one, narrowly conceived version of ‘childhood’, over the possibility of multiple, diverse ‘childhoods’. 
A detailed analysis of two recent New Zealand physical education syllabi is used to show how ideas about who children are, and how they develop, remain embedded in the practices of contemporary physical education curriculum writers. This analysis suggests that developmental discourses are not merely intellectually interesting, but also yield consequences in the realm of practice. Discourses of 'child development' construct particular subjectivities and power relations in schooling which normalise and exclude many children.

Results of the study indicate that although developmental discourses remain entrenched in much of the practice of the discipline, there are 'spaces' or 'conditions of possibility' opening up in new physical education syllabi which may enable teachers and students to experience and practise child development differently. In addition, the study suggests several theoretical and empirical research routes which could assist in a re-conceptualisation of the raison d'être of school physical education - the 'developing child'.
**Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I want to thank my supervisor, Jan Wright for her generosity, warmth and humour and agreeing to take me on as a bumbling doctoral student. Jan’s willingness to share her intellectual acumen, her time and her experience with me has been wonderful. Her capacity to engage with my work, support, challenge and critique it has enriched the experience of doing a thesis immeasurably. One couldn’t hope for a better guide in writing a doctorate.

My colleague, assistant supervisor and friend Bruce Ross also provided unwavering help and encouragement throughout the process of writing this thesis. His passion for thinking, reading, writing and singing ‘the physical’ has been a constant source of inspiration to me. So too, has been his insistence that academic work can be both creative and liberatory. Bruce’s reading of thesis drafts, his editorial advice and most of all, his regular reminders of what’s ‘really’ important in life have been invaluable.

I am also grateful to John Morss, whose lectures and writing provided much of the impetus for beginning this study in the first place. His conviction that the problem with orthodox psychological approaches to development is that they are “too developmental” provided the launching point for my thesis. Mark Olssen assisted tremendously by providing comments on early drafts of the project and expressing consistent enthusiasm for the project.

I acknowledge the financial assistance of the School of Physical Education, University of Otago and the support of Professor Les Williams in the production of this thesis. I am also grateful to the University of Wollongong Department of Education for providing both financial and personnel support.

I am indebted to Rachael Brinsdon, whose technical assistance in preparation of thesis has been invaluable. Many other colleagues, friends and family, have discussed ideas with me, given me encouragement and practical support. Among
them are Sally Haughton, Shona Neehoff, Tania Cassidy, Karen Margetts, Pam Ponic, Roger Le Blanc, Mum, Dad, Marty and Hilary. Thank you all.

A special thank you must go to my friends and colleagues Robin Peace at Waikato University and Megan Gollop at the Children’s Issues Centre, University of Otago. Both have helped tremendously, providing thoughtful critique and editorial assistance in production of the thesis.

My Dunedin family, Kate and Talia have been pillars of support. Their faith in my capacity to begin and then finish this project has kept me going. Kate’s capacity to support and challenge my ideas and her willingness to engage with my writing has substantially contributed to my thinking. Her wisdom and sense of humour have sustained me throughout.
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