

Physical Education and Core Experiences in Special Education

Physical education in our schools often tends to show a preoccupation with sporting activities and competitive experiences. Learning in physical education, especially where special needs are concerned, needs to be more "person centred". A programme of core experiences can greatly contribute to a broader developmental approach.

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PHYSICAL EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

Physical education as a school subject offers a myriad of activities and experiences which are capable of enhancing "the harmonious development of the child's body and mind" (Churcher, 1927, p.13). Heretofore the primary guiding format for organising the physical education curriculum has been the selection of physical activities from a wide range of areas. The seven categories traditionally offered are athletics, swimming, gymnastics, games, dance, outdoor pursuits, and health and fitness (Kane, 1974). In special education the range has been broadened to include such things as developmental activities, adapted games, Sherbourne activities, educational rhythmic, Special Olympics and most recently, motor activities programmes for the student with a severe or profound mental handicap.

It would appear from such a broad canvas that ample scope exists to cater for the interests and needs of all ages and abilities. The picture however is not quite so simple. It is the actual diverse nature of the subject matter, the amount of actual activities which exist and the problems of synchronising activity aims and objectives with the needs of the individual that cause much concern in planning physical education programmes. The physical education teacher can choose to cover a wide range of activities superficially or alternatively, a select few in depth.

The problem remains however, what activities should we include and why? From a curricular point of view these questions are perhaps best answered if we take

account of Len Almond's suggestion that: "by basing a curriculum on activities it is too easy to forget that there can be a variety of *challenges* and neglect important areas of a child's development" (Almond, 1986, p.9).

Almond has examined closely the activities offered in physical education and argues that they may be categorised into five broad areas of experience.

AREAS OF EXPERIENCE IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

- 1. Body Management**
- 2. Artistic**
- 3. Aesthetic**
- 4. Outdoor living and learning/adventure challenges.**
- 5. Games**

AN OVEREMPHASIS ON GAMES AND COMPETITION

Despite the varying circumstances of many schools and despite the wide range of available activities to choose from, it has been acknowledged by many authors that the physical education curriculum tends to show a preoccupation with sporting activities and competitive experiences (Almond, 1986; Hardy & Sparkes, 1987; Leman, 1988; Orlick, 1978; Pollard, 1988; and Wilcox, 1980). It is also widely acknowledged that physical education, unlike other school subjects on the mainstream time-table, is free of impositions from a central examination system (Bell, 1986; and Woollam, 1979). With such freedom in choosing what to teach it is perhaps difficult to understand the limited and restricted portrayal of the subject in some schools.

A survey of schools in a local authority in Britain, found that over half the physical education timetable was given up to games. In fact it showed that for boys it was 61.1% and for girls 53.4%, (Hardy and Sparks, 1987, p.29). Similarly the Department of Education survey (1977) on the teaching of physical education in primary schools in Ireland found that games and athletics were taught most often. Closer to home the relationship between the physical education curriculum and the sporting ethos of schools needs examination. The autonomy of physical education relative to the emphasis on some school sports such as rugby, hurling,

gaelic football, camogie, hockey and basketball is an area lacking in research in this country.

It is perhaps interesting to note that in the private sector of education who “sell direct” to the public, information about physical education speaks almost exclusively of games (Williams, 1985, p.411).

Games however represent only a small fraction of the myriad of activities that go to make up physical education. The competitive experience represents only a small aspect of the experiences and challenges which physical education is capable of offering. Peter Glew points to the danger that:

“match results may be seen by many as a barometer of effective teaching, producing successful teams can also be regarded as an important part of what it is to be a good P.E. teacher contributing towards a stereotyped view of the P.E. teachers role” (Glew, P., 1983, p.100).

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The underlying competitive ideology referred to above would appear to be in almost direct conflict with the general aims of primary education. These are:

- To enable children to live full lives as children.
- To equip them to avail themselves of further education.
- To prepare them to live full and useful lives as adults in society (N.C.C.A., 1990).

In a review of the general aims and approaches of physical education in the Primary School Curriculum, it is stated that the subject “makes a valuable contribution towards the aesthetic, emotional and moral development of the child” (Curaclam na Bunscoile, 1971, II, p.289). This is indeed far removed from an emphasis on sporting excellence and inequality in provision and participation.

At the same time however, the provision of physical education in primary schools has proved problematic. The I.N.T.O. survey of 1976 expressed concern that only 64.6% of teachers were teaching the subject with only 34.2% of these being satisfied with the way they were teaching it (P.E.A.I., 1988).

In a more recent survey on physical education in special schools the majority of teachers expressed some disenchantment with the organisation of the teaching of the subject. Particular problem areas such as lack of a standard syllabus,

facilities, inservice and teacher education were highlighted. Up to 75% of those surveyed felt that there was a huge need for physical education but that there was little support coming from the Department of Education (Deenihan, 1989-90). There is little doubt that it would prove difficult to provide a comprehensive physical education programme without first addressing these physical limitations. However, it has been suggested that the real limitations in physical education are not so much physical but "self imposed" limits related to views, attitudes, outlooks and emphases (Moles, 1985, p.42).

An emphasis on basing the physical education syllabus on activities is prone to pitfalls. Almond (1986) has suggested that learning in physical education needs to become more "person centred" and by focusing on experiences as opposed to activities across the curriculum that teachers of the subject will be able to realise the potential of physical education and its contribution to the development of the whole person.

CORE EXPERIENCES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS PHYSICAL EDUCATION

In the same way we may perhaps view the concept of *core experiences* in physical education as a means by which we might meet the wide-ranging needs of our special education population. A core curriculum would, without doubt, provide: "a challenge for those involved in syllabus construction to develop to the fullest the potential of each subject area" (C.E.B., 1986, p.20).

The variety and breadth of the programme would not be compromised as each experience area could be realised through a variety of different activities.

For example, the core experience **Body Management** is an umbrella term which refers to a general capacity or ability to control movement in a variety of situations. The activities which might be included under this core experience are many and varied; they will most likely depend on the circumstances of each individual school and the aspirations of the programme. For example, **Gymnastics** might be included as an activity which can contribute to the development of the natural activities of running, jumping, climbing, swinging, rolling, balancing, etc. (Lewis, 1975, p.76).

Aquatics might be included as an activity which can contribute to the child's self-sufficiency in a water environment. The emphasis here might be placed on the child's water confidence and his/her ability to get into the water, move through/up/down in the water and exit from the water in a variety of different

ways. Water safety can be taught to ensure that children are not likely to drown. **Educational Rhythmics** might be included to develop aspects of bodily control and coordination. **Creative Dance** can develop spontaneity and imagination while still demanding an adherence to clarity and skillfulness in the movement itself. **Motor Activities Programmes** can develop as much as possible, the physical capabilities of the person with severe and profound learning difficulties.

The range of activities which might be included is huge but the common thread is an emphasis on the Body Management experience. As long as the teacher provides learning situations across the five different categories of experience (Body Management, Aesthetic, Artistic, Games and Outdoor Adventure Challenges) he/she can at least be assured that the balance and coherence of the programme is being maintained. Teachers can in this way teach from their own strengths. It might well be argued that set dancing or trans terrain treading, taking due regard of the elements of learning (skills, attitudes, knowledge/concepts), have just as much potential to develop hand-eye/foot-eye coordination, balance, agility and loco-muscular and cardiovascular function as do the more popular activities in physical education.

In this way the subject might contribute more fully towards "the organic well-being of the child" (Curaclam na Bunscoile, 1971, II, p.289) through a more varied group of activities with the stress on *education* within the *physical* experience.

CONCLUSION

A report from the Council of Europe in September 1985 identified four basic needs which children have which physical education can satisfy (ie. physical demands, motor experiences, challenges, and appreciation and play). To realise this potential it is pointed out that: "physical education for children should be built on the principle of variety and diversity, not specialisation" (Council of Europe, 1985, p.1). If we must confine ourselves to a narrow and myopic view of the subject with the emphasis on games then perhaps we should consider the variety of challenges and experiences games are capable of giving.

The adoption of a physical education programme based on core experiences as opposed to the more traditional activities based programmes is much more likely to suit the individual needs and wide range of abilities in special education. It must be emphasised that the competitive experience represents only a small

portion of the activities and challenges which a balanced programme of physical education is capable of offering.

A NON-COMPETITIVE GAMES PROGRAMME

- 1. Games which involve competition against self/an object**
- 2. Team games**
- 3. Co-operative games**
- 4. Street games**
- 5. Making Games**

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