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Clark, Sean and Sprake, Andrew (2011) Fit for purpose? Fit for life? A critical review essay. Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 5 (1). pp. 1-8. ISSN 1754-2375

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Published in the UK by:

University of Central Lancashire, Preston.

SSTO Publications: School of Sport, Tourism and The Outdoors,
in association with the Centre for Research Informed Teaching



Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, December 2011

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ISSN: 1754-2375

ISBN: 978-0-9566270-3-2

JQRSS Article No: 1/16-5-1-2011-UG2[8]-047

To cite this article:

Clark, S. and Sprake, A. (2011) Fit for purpose? Fit for life? A critical review essay.
Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, 5, 1, 1-8.

Self-archived URL link to this article:

https://www.academia.edu/3515222/JQRSS_Volume_5_Issue_1_December_2011

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Fit for purpose? Fit for life? A critical review essay

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Journal Article Reviewed:

Dodd, R. and Palmer, C. (2009) Fit for purpose? Fit for life? A discussion about the National Curriculum for Physical Education (QCA, 2007) programme of study for key stage 3 and attainment target. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 3, 1, 37-44.

In writing the paper *Fit for purpose? Fit for life* (Dodd and Palmer, 2009), the authors highlight some key issues from the National Curriculum for Physical Education (QCA, 2007), exploring and challenging the notion of physical activity becoming a central part of pupils' lives as a consequence of PE in schools. The article, stemming from work produced by Dodd when he was a first year undergraduate, raises some provocative and rhetorical questions which could become issues of further enquiry. Thus, by recalling recent personal experiences in PE Dodd makes a potentially valuable contribution which might spur pedagogic research. However, by citing recent formative memories of his PE at school the discussion becomes a highly personal reflection that may overlook an opportunity to triangulate data or to complement the discussion with other perspectives, in order that a more balanced view might be offered. The author is within his rights to express these valid opinions but without any supporting evidence from additional parties, and notwithstanding the importance of these personal experiences, there may be a lack of primary data that may threaten the paper's credibility (Walton, 1998).

One of the main aims of the National Curriculum; to help 'young people become successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve becoming confident individuals' (QCA, 2007), has been scrutinised by the author using his own experience as evidence. He questions whether or not his experience of Physical Education is out-dated following developments in the curriculum since his own education. Further to this, the author highlights additional aims of the National Curriculum, to make young people become 'responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society' (QCA, 2007). The criticisms of these statements were posed as rhetorical questions, such as 'does it mean that after 2007, if anyone makes a negative contribution to society, the new PE curriculum will be deemed to have failed?' (Dodd and Palmer 2009:38). These questions are effective at prompting further discussion and perhaps the author missed an opportunity to consider alternative perspectives and/or theoretical assumptions. The irresponsible

behaviour of any individual or society cannot, under any circumstances, be blamed upon education entirely. The National Curriculum and physical education only form a small part of teaching/helping young people to make a positive contribution to society so the suggestion, seemingly sarcastic in nature, of it being held accountable for society's problems is perhaps unjustifiable. Perhaps an alternate view to these statements, for instance through sociological theories such as Functionalism and Marxism, could have been considered. From a Marxist perspective, perhaps the introduction of a new curriculum, or providing enhanced experiences for pupils, is a way of investing in future economic potential? From a functionalist perspective, in order for society to function in a maintained state of equilibrium, the main social arrangements such as family, education, the economy, politics and religion must contribute to each other through a set of shared values (Coakley and Pike, 2009). Perhaps the new National Curriculum provides a better basis for ones understanding of the values and shared beliefs within society? By no means are they essential, but theoretical perspectives can be useful when studying social uncertainties. However, we should remember that they are only theories and this discussion is based on real-life experiences. Furthermore, the author seemingly overlooks other social influences that may affect young people and society: the media, and claims that video gaming has numbed childrens' sensitivity to the concept of violence; socio-economic inequalities and the breakdown of family life, though he may have deemed this beyond the scope of the discussion.

A further point raised is the challenge that the NCPE faces in attempting to make physical activity a central part 'all' pupils lives. The author suggests that 'only a few' pupils at school consider physical education to play a central role in their lives and that those pupils are more likely to be 'the sporty types...who may go on to be elite performers' (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:38). This statement is again a personal one and there is no other evidence to support it. The sporty types probably do consider physical education and/or activity as central to their lives, but what of the pupils who value PE as a diversion from classroom subjects? Or those who excell in teamwork, co-operation or leadership, all of which can be developed through PE? Perhaps this is dismissive of the pupils who consider physical education as a central part of their school life but are not considered sporty. A valid argument in this section is that achieving all of the aims of the NCPE is a tough task given just two hours per week in which to teach and meet them.

In terms of life-long participation, the author raises a good point in saying that based upon pupil's experiences in PE, they may be put off and 'choose not to do physical activity in later life' (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:39). This is a credible argument with the potential to inspire further research into an explanation as to why this may be the case. The notion that physical education may actually deter young people from

continuing physical activity in later life could perhaps have been explored through the use of a focus group. This technique is a valued method in qualitative research as it enables the researcher to understand ‘why people feel the way they do’ (Bryman, 2008:475). A good question is raised in the following section asking what is the likelihood that pupils engage in physical activity for the health benefits, stating that most pupils at his school considered themselves to be healthy already and ‘even the overweight pupils seemed to understand’ what they would need to do in order to lose weight but it didn’t seem to help them (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:39). Nevertheless, it is still important for young people to understand the benefits of a healthy active lifestyle and to make ‘informed choices about lifelong physical activity’ (QCA, 2007). Regardless of why pupils are engaged in physical activity, as one of the most important social arrangements, education has a responsibility to encourage it but the curriculum can only be expected to lead the horse to water! Perhaps the author had the opportunity to make recommendations for the National Curriculum with regard to health promotion. Again this appears out of the scope of the discussion.

The author then goes on to critique a statement of the National Curriculum in relation to one of its separate aims, that ‘a high-quality PE curriculum enables all students to enjoy and succeed in many kinds of physical activity’ (QCA, 2007:189). Through a useful analogy, he proposes that PE’s ability to be high-quality is dependent on whether the pupils choose to be active or inactive, as if attending a PE lesson is optional, when the fact of the matter is they have no choice. Furthermore, in relation to Physical Education’s contribution towards a good attitude to health in later life, whether PE is high-quality or not, cannot control what happens outside the school gates. It cannot ensure that pupils are engaged in physical activity outside of school. What it can do is introduce pupils to ‘many different kinds of physical activity’ (QCA, 2007:189) which in turn may lead to life-long participation in something that might be identified as a positive choice for health maintenance. This section ends with an effective question about how pupils’ enjoyment of Physical Education, considering their changing views at different times, can be continually and realistically measured. All manner of research methods, whether qualitative or quantitative, may struggle to measure and explain this phenomena and the author has posed a valuable question if this area were to be researched in greater depth.

Practical activities and some practical considerations in PE

The opening paragraph in this section discusses the implications of over-competitive physical education and the impact this may have on pupils’ enjoyment and determination (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:40). The article celebrates a strength here by acknowledging that a fundamental aspect of physical education, while providing euphoric occasions for some pupils, could in actual fact be having a detrimental

effect on others. This is not a new trail of thought. In fact the use of PE has been subject to a political tug of war for some time. Although the point raised is a valid one, it comes across as though the NCPE is to blame. Instead he might have considered drawing evidence from, and passing the responsibility/blame to, contrasting policy documents from both the labour and conservative governments, for example, Game Plan (2002) and Playing to Win (2008). The remit of Labour's Game Plan document included a focus on mass participation in sport, crime reduction and health promotion, whereas the conservative's Playing to Win document reinforced the concept of more competition for young people in order to generate more medals and international success at competition. The implementation of these governmental policies may have had a profound effect on pupil's enduring physical education memories and this could have again strengthened the suggestion that over-competition may be having detrimental effects on some pupils. This same section considers the impact that engaging in different physical activities, such as dancing, karate or skateboarding, may have on pupils' life-long participation, suggesting that the wider the net is cast, the greater the number of pupils the National Curriculum will catch. Following this, the author considers the equity, or lack of it, between pupils throughout regions that the National Curriculum controls. He does this by highlighting that certain activities, and their availability to pupils can often be determined by the school's geographical location, for instance, schools in the country are more likely to have easy access to climbing and hiking activities rather than a school in the centre of a city (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:41). This is an relevant issue in the critique of the National Curriculum and this inequality is well-observed by the author.

Following a statement from Lipsett (2008), that teachers are anxious about straying from the National Curriculum, the author proposes that perhaps teachers are being 'robbed' of the 'competence and confidence' that the National Curriculum claims to provide. This view is perhaps unnecessary in the context of asking whether the National Curriculum is fit for purpose as the desired outcomes are aimed at pupils, not the teachers. The final paragraph in this section considers the importance of funding, and rightly so. The author demonstrates an awareness of practicalities and limitations affecting different schools and their abilities to provide equal access to the various activities.

Conclusion

During the conclusion of the article, a clear statement is made. The author insists that Physical Education 'needs to be taught more often and for longer sessions' in order to achieve the outcomes of the National Curriculum and have a lasting effect on children (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:42). This point is perfectly valid, and is

probably a discussion point in PE departments, but perhaps in order to strengthen this statement, the use of focus groups with ex-pupils may have helped. Perhaps doing so would counteract the statement and discover that ex-pupils are engaged in physical activity because of PE? During the discussion about the lack of time allocated to Physical Education, the author speaks of those pupils who forget their kit being made 'to do lines or wear a spare kit' (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:43). This is a personal reflection which perhaps demonstrates a point but, the author does not draw on any other experiences to support this negative experience. The experiences of other pupils and the sanctions of other schools are seemingly overlooked. Schools are now positively encouraged to include every pupil in every lesson of Physical Education and, as a consequence, if someone forgot their PE kit they would be expected to officiate, write down scores or assist in any way appropriate. Gone are the days, or at least they should be, where pupils are required to write out lines as a punishment. The final point highlights the author's uncertainty as to whether Physical Education lays the 'foundations for people to lead a fit and healthy life' (Dodd and Palmer, 2009:43). Memories of physical education may become distorted over time so the validity of any research into this may be threatened from the start.

The points raised in this article are certainly worthy of some consideration. It is a highly personal discussion that challenges the clarity and attainability of the aims of the National Curriculum for physical education. It is refreshing in it that it is written from a critical and inquisitive perspective based on the author's recent experiences. Highlighting statements from the National Curriculum and interrogating them as if they were standing trial is a provocative and effective way of raising the issues. Whether or not the author's opinions are shared by others appears to have been overlooked but leaves great scope for inviting new perspectives on the issues raised. The article is well-written and raises relevant issues for teaching PE, particularly during the current economic crisis when budget cuts are curtailing aspects of provision, for instance, the withdrawal of funding for specialist school status including sports colleges. These are already having an effect on education 'at the chalk face'.

'Fit for Purpose? – Fit for Life?' is an article which provides students, academics, teachers and researchers of pedagogic discourse with critical questions that, if addressed, may influence the future development of the National Curriculum in their school. It would be interesting to hear the author's opinions if he does become a PE teacher, as this may provide another side to his own story.

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JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote

1. *Author's reflective comment:* At the time of writing both Sean and Andrew were undergraduates, in transition from the second year going into third year. I would like to thank Andrew for mentoring me on this essay; he has given me the confidence to write more critically in the future.
2. *Author profiles:* Sean Clark is in his final year of his Sports Coaching programme and Andrew Sprake is in his final year of a Sports Studies programme. Both are in the School of Sport, Tourism and The Outdoors at Uclan.
3. *Dear reader,* if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: Sean Clark: SClarke7@uclan.ac.uk and Andrew Sprake: AJSprake@uclan.ac.uk.

Reviewer's comments:

Merits of the paper/review:

The paper offers a critical review of an interesting reflective piece on experiences of PE and the National Curriculum. The authors discuss some of the issues to emerge from the article with authority and provide constructive criticism. The paper is written well, accessible and will certainly be of interest to any undergraduate students interested in debates surrounding the National Curriculum. The review

highlights a range of additional issues and arguments that were not considered or were glossed over in the original article, but the authors do so in a productive way. Consequently, their article may make a worthy contribution to discussion on the merits of PE and the National Curriculum.

Suggestions for further elaboration and/or amendment:

Although it is useful to highlight potential research, it seems a little misplaced to be suggesting that the original author had undertaken research in order to inform his article. The original article by Dodd clearly stated that it drew from personal experiences and further research of the nature suggested by the authors seems outside its scope. This is not to say that identifying areas for further research is not a worthy aspect of this review, but this should be more of a general point rather than a criticism of the original article. It could instead be suggested that Dodd's arguments provoke or could inspire further research in a range of areas. Or it may be useful to identify research which may have already been conducted on these issues. The suggestion of conducting focus groups, therefore, seems a little random and not particularly relevant to the intentions of Dodd's paper. I also feel that the short quote by Bryman which is used to highlight the value of focus groups is a more generic claim of any qualitative research method and in light of the comments above, I'm not sure it really adds value. Near the end of page three some reference could be made to the potential for longitudinal research. Also, it may be interesting to offer a brief background to the authors in order to set their arguments into the context of their own experiences.