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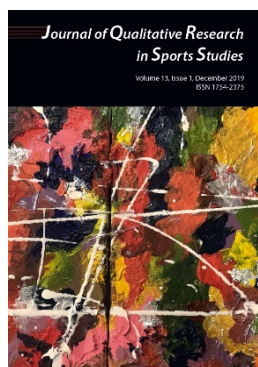
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# PE to Me: a concise message about the potential for learning in Physical Education

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(University of Central Lancashire)

Keywords: *physical education, learning, literacy, meaning making, creative writing*

## Abstract

Towards being physically educated in PE, this paper imparts a pedagogical message to school hierarchies; LEAs, Senior Management Teams, Governors, Parents Associations, and indeed, mainstream PE teachers ‘at the chalk face’, about the potential of their subject for intellectual development. PE is not just a fun exercise or a break from learning at school, it *is* learning in school. PE is a creative and demanding opportunity to think in engaging ways and this poem may be evidence for it. The message within *PE to Me* is delivered in student-voice, told here in a sonnet form of poetry. The verse cleverly uses repetition to make a 180-degree u-turn about the fortunes of what PE has to offer during the pupils’ week, or what might be anticipated in PE by these young people. That this kind of intellectual engagement from Primary (Year 6) pupils in PE became their expectation of PE teachers at Secondary school (Year 7-11) can, in our view, only be a good thing for the health and status of PE generally.

## PE to Me

*PE to me is compulsory.  
It's hard to learn and it's hard to do,  
but we're all in the same boat,  
we're all in the same crew.  
To some people it's fun and games,  
but to others it's just grey and plain.  
It doesn't bother me,  
it just passes day by day,  
it just passes day by day.  
PE to me is compulsory.  
But now PE to me is creativity,  
A chance to think and do.  
We're all in the same boat;  
we're all in the same crew.*

## Introduction

This perceptive but critical comment signals an opportunity for learning in Physical Education lessons to be communicated in alternative ways. The poem *PE to Me* was written by three Year 6 pupils at a primary school in the North West of England, which occurred spontaneously during a phase of ethnographic field research. Asking if they could perform this poem through the medium of song, the pupils took their learning one step further by integrating several forms of literacy (literacy, oracy and musical) into one short message about their PE experiences. The unsolicited nature of this performance speaks volumes about pupils' desire to learn, express themselves and communicate their voice in a PE context, providing they are given the platform (space, time and encouragement) on which to do so.

## Philosophy to practice in PE

In a curricular landscape which bolsters both competitive sport and health promotion (DfE, 2013), it is perhaps unsurprising that literacy in PE, as a means of demonstrating pupils' learning, is frequently avoided (National Literacy Trust, 2019). In fact, embedding literacy might appear, upon first glance, to be an unnecessary or onerous task for PE teachers. However, the development of literacy, as characterised by UNESCO, is a 'fundamental human right' and one which serves as 'the foundation for lifelong learning' (UNESCO, 2019). If PE continues to evade literacy as a pedagogical medium, then it might be accused of neglecting its educational duties, to develop the child holistically. Worse still, it could illustrate a chronic inertia within the PE community to do anything about it.

Expressions for learning in PE; that PE is *a chance to think and do*, raises some important philosophical questions about what it means to be physically educated. Or, more specifically, from the perspective of schooling, what does the process of becoming physically educated involve? (see *Out of Touch*, Palmer *et al*, 2014). The poem *PE to Me* provides some tangible evidence of sense-making and intellectual thought born from the pupils' experiences during a PE class. If the purpose of education is to facilitate learning, or to educe (from Greek notion of *educere*), which means to lead out or develop potential, then this poem illustrates one of myriad ways in which learning could be evidenced in PE lessons. In his book, *Philosophy and Human Movement*, David Best (1978) remarked that performing physical or sporting activities intelligently does not *ipso facto* mean that one is being intellectual. Amalgamating the habitual physicality of PE with deeper sense-making and intellectual reasoning; in essence '*think and do*', will only support and strengthen the holistic educational endeavours that the subject intends. In a time when PE is vying for curricular significance (Sprake and Walker, 2015; Sprake and Palmer, 2018), it seems prudent to give the pupils a proverbial *pen and paper* and allow them to reflect back, what they are said to be learning.

## Conclusion

*PE to Me* demonstrates a thirst for learning, joyful anticipation from the pupils who authored it, to communicate not only physically, but intellectually. These ideas and desires were born from a group-work exercise in a PE class and sung in unison. That is, *PE to Me* was preserved and shared through literacy for us to learn from but elevated to a higher aesthetic form; a sonnet that required new levels of bravery to perform on stage. As teachers, it was a privilege to witness such energetic learning in pupils from a PE class. The pupils have put the ball in our court.

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'It has been enlightening to see the quality of the children's learning with PE as the driver. Responses were more spontaneous with children seeming more ready to take risks in expressing their instinctive thoughts rather than searching for the expected 'correct' response. The value of learning through doing is widely recognised, and it seems that the depth of thought reached another level through the typically doing-context of PE. The PE context is a platform where children are accustomed to active learning with greater opportunity to directly feel and physically experience - a context which seemed to encourage the children to feel less inhibited in their responses. This was exemplified by the children when they were exploring the theme of Justice where their ability to philosophise and respond through a variety of media demonstrated a significant depth of understanding'.

Kay Beaty  
(Head Teacher)

## **Reviewer Comments**

There are, quite rightly, many strong voices calling for PE to become a more influential subject in the National Curriculum; often fuelled by the growing concerns over the state of the nation's health. But, as this article demonstrates, PE has the potential to be so much more if we, as the PE community, open our eyes and ears to the opportunities around us. Just listen to the voices in the poem. Take time to reflect on your own experiences. Yes, it can be challenging. Yes, it will take effort and some collaborative thinking. But, from my experience, many staff in the Primary, and indeed the Secondary, sector have the skill-set, the passion and the desire to hear this voice and respond to the powerful message these pupils are delivering. They too want so much more from PE, they want to have the chance to show what PE means to them. If we, as the PE community, really want a change, and really want to make a difference, then putting Education right back in there, alongside the Physical, could be the real learning opportunity the pupils and the subject are waiting for.