A critical evaluation of the roles and responsibilities of the Physical Education teacher – perspectives of a student training to teach P.E. in Primary schools.

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion about some of the roles and responsibilities associated with being a Physical Education (P.E.) teacher as they are perceived by an undergraduate trainee teacher at Hope University. The paper will examine critically what are considered to be some of the key roles and responsibilities for the P.E. teacher, with an aim to developing a deeper understanding of how these roles and responsibilities may contribute to sound pedagogical practice in the school setting.

*NB. It is recognised by the authors that the “Every Child Matters” (ECM) legislation from the Government has become an extremely important initiative which has affected education provision profoundly in recent years. Every Child Matters (2004) states that, “Every Child Matters: Change for Children” is a new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age nineteen. The Government’s aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to; be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. In working towards these aims it is expected that,

“any organisations involved with providing services to children - from hospitals and schools, to police and voluntary groups [including universities], will be teaming up in new ways, sharing information and working together, to protect children and young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life”.

(Every Child Matters: Change for Children, 2004)

This major piece of government legislation is outlined here to acknowledge its importance for practicing teachers and students intending to become teachers. The original parameters of this paper did not include the ECM agenda and there was a potential that this paper may have become dominated by it or be guilty of only mentioning it superficially. A discussion of the ECM agenda would warrant a full paper as a stand alone discussion but is highlighted here for the reader to note that it has not been overlooked.

Quality and professionalism in teaching PE

When thinking of Physical Education in schools many people’s thoughts might focus, stereotypically, on the performance of sport, team competition, and taking part in
regular exercise. It is probably assumed that this will contribute to the child’s life-long awareness of fitness and the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle. From this generalised perspective, the role of the physical educator can sometimes become confused with that of a mere provider of sports activity. A Physical Education specialist, along with all their colleagues in the school will be working towards similar educational aims for their pupils, such as numeracy and literacy, with the additional demands of developing the physical skills of the children. This additional feature of the P.E. teacher’s role is very important and may help to further differentiate between Physical Education and sport, and perhaps many other subject teachers in the school setting. In order to provide experiences for children which educate them physically, a P.E. teacher may concentrate their efforts on increasing physical literacy (Whitehead, 2001). The physically literate child will be developing their understanding of for example, weight transference, balance, co-ordination, speed, and shape. Developing this kind of physical awareness, or core skills, may help to educate the child which might thereafter be adapted to participate in a codified sport. Such a demanding lead role for the P.E. teacher may be underestimated and may reflect a degree of complacency in the eyes of society when, “…a Physical Education teacher fulfils simultaneous roles of teacher, coach and sports participant” (Armour and Jones, 1998:3). By not developing fully these distinct areas of professional expertise, pupils could risk losing access to a range of physical skills, specialist concepts and learning experiences which may only be realised by a practiced and knowledgeable P.E. teacher working within the bounds of the National Curriculum. By comparison, a Sports Coach conducting after-school-sport might, rightly, not be concerned with educational aims or be obligated to follow the National Curriculum, with their select group of “sports” enthusiasts. Additionally, for pupils to achieve meaningful things in their Physical Education classes, a P.E. teacher must care for their sport, their tasks within education and the National Curriculum, and in particular, the children they are teaching. So what does being a P.E. teacher entail? Calderhead (1987) points to one major aspect of a P.E. teacher’s expertise; “…P.E. teachers should have background knowledge in sports sciences, human movement, sports studies or studies of physical education” (Cited in Mawer, 1995:31). Teachers should use this “background knowledge” to make professional judgements about a child’s fitness, performance potential and ability to succeed in the long term in order for them to get the most from their physically educative opportunities. An important part of this judgement for the teacher is to create a positive but challenging learning environment for each child so that they continue to participate in P.E. lessons.

Teaching P.E. (as opposed to providing sporting activities) is an extremely difficult job, physically and mentally, as there are many different roles and levels of responsibility to consider each day. A logical place to begin this discussion is to describe and clarify a possible distinction between “roles” and “responsibilities” to explore more
fully what it means to say “I teach P.E. in a primary school”. Firstly, the “role” of a P.E. teacher is taken here to refer to their duties for sharing knowledge and good practice in P.E. and for them to have considered their purpose or objectives for teaching Physical Education in the Primary school. By applying selectively, their knowledge and understanding of performing appropriate skills, physical competence and confidence might be developed in pupils within a range of sporting activities. This is valuable educationally as Harris (1990:12) states, “…a P.E. teacher should promote physical activity and the promotion of enjoyable, life-long physical activity among young children”. For example, as Bailey (2001:13-14) points out, part of their role is to ensure that children take a lead in planning and conducting their own health and fitness by improving performance through self-evaluation and participation in a variety of physical contexts.

A key area of “responsibility” for a P.E. teacher is to be aware of the legal requirements and obligations that teachers have in maintaining safety and teaching to a high standard – their reaching being subject to regular scrutiny by inspectors who report to government and make public their results. It is part of a teacher’s responsibility to follow the National Curriculum, which sets out the activity areas that all pupils should experience, and to meet the expected standards of pupil performance – or attainment. This attainment expectancy is achieved through appropriate planning for each child in their P.E. lessons, including assessing and adhering to the safety rules and practices relevant to the subjects taught. In preparing to teach, an initial role of the teacher should be the consideration of the ‘climate’ in which they intend to teach P.E. as Bailey (2001:40) advises us that, “…all Physical Education classes should be characterised by an environment that is conducive to learning”. As with many learning situations in school, children may learn best in an environment that supports their emotional and physical needs as well as taking account of their preferred channels for processing information such as being a “visual”, “audio” or kinaesthetic learner (Kolb, 1976; Gardner, 1983; Honey and Mumford, 1992).

All P.E. teachers should understand their role in creating this kind of “learning climate”; recognising how a positive learning environment contributes largely to the interpersonal relationships between teacher and pupil, and how it supports both the teacher’s and pupils’ approach to lessons (Bailey, 2001: 40-41).

Alongside developing a positive learning environment, it is also important for a good P.E. teacher to adopt a range of teaching styles, such as those identified by Mosston and Ashworth (2004) which support their teaching and learning objectives; what they want the pupils to achieve after their lesson or unit of work. For example, when introducing a skill, such as throwing, using a “command” style of teaching, which allows all the decisions to be made by the teacher, may be appropriate to maintain control and ensure safety (see B.A.A.L.P.E., 1989; Severs, 2003). As the unit progresses
the styles may change moving through “practice” style, “reciprocal” and “inclusion” styles of teaching (Mosston and Ashworth, 2004). Using these teaching styles appropriately may allow the pupils to progressively increase their [throwing] ability. This may also develop the pupil’s awareness of the time demands for individual practice to improve their performance and perhaps share the action with others; catching. Towards the end of the unit of work [for throwing in this instance] the use of the “guided discovery” teaching style may allow the pupil to become more independent in their learning. For instance, questioning the skill more deeply and considering its wider applications in PE such as a throwing action in cricket, athletics or netball.

From the early stages of teaching Physical Education within Primary Education, the teaching of Health Related Fitness (HRF) is a key strand that runs as a continued theme through the “Knowledge, Skills and Understanding” section in National Curriculum. This places a large responsibility on teachers to ensure that all children receive a broad and balanced curriculum which increases pupil’s knowledge on important issues such as the psychological and physiological benefits of taking regular exercise. The aim of HRF is to sustain an embedded life-long approach to fitness and children should understand the importance of, and demonstrate the need for, healthy living. Obesity is a huge problem for the 21st century P.E. teacher and many children of school-age are overweight or even obese (Wardle, Brodersen, Cole, Jarvis, and Boniface, 2006) which, in the school environment, can adversely affect their motivation towards taking exercise. It is one of the P.E. teacher’s “responsibilities” to ensure that these children are included in each lesson, with intentions to increase their fitness level and motivation towards physical exercise, alongside the more physically active children in their class. Therefore, teachers are responsible for recognising and producing an inclusive approach to teaching P.E. - as Macfadyen and Bailey (2002:104) have usefully pointed out, that to teach Physical Education effectively, exercise experiences should be offered that meet individual needs and preferences. A good practitioner of Physical Education should make discernable efforts to meet individual needs within their planning for P.E. lessons. Good planning requires teachers to produce inclusive learning experiences, offering all children equality of opportunity to acquire and develop new skills. Planning for effective differentiated learning experiences may make the evaluation and subsequent alteration of the plan/approach more meaningful to ensure progression in children’s learning. If good planning and meaningful progress does not occur in P.E. lessons then, in time, the children themselves may become the teacher’s harshest critics.

Planning: Is there really a need to plan for P.E. lessons?

When discussing the roles and responsibilities of a teacher, the act of “planning” presents itself as one of the most important features of good practice. Although, from
personal experience on teaching practice, some experienced teachers have claimed that, “...to teach P.E. successfully, lesson plans are not always needed”. Wright and Sugden (1999:28) contest this view strongly urging that, “...it is lesson planning, and evaluation of teaching that leads to successful integration and progression of children’s learning in Physical Education”. Planning is the one of the most important responsibilities within a teacher's catalogue of challenging tasks. So what is planning? Planning is a record of a teacher’s intentions, it gives a clear indication of the organisation, structure, purpose and intended learning outcomes in a teaching episode (Bailey, 2001). Also, the act of planning is one basis for the teacher being accountable for how children’s time will be spent in Physical Education lessons. The level of detail in planning spans from a micro-view to macro-view of learning experiences and activities. This would include a micro view of detailed lesson plans progressing to larger overviews such as units of work and schemes of work and then onto the National Curriculum itself.

Detailed lesson planning offers a quick point of reference to equipment, the grouping and provisions for inclusive teaching. Diagrams can be included to remind a teacher of the presentation and structure of “things to do”, while other sections help to maintain good organisation and help to keep good time; ensuring continuity and progression. Perhaps one of the most important features of a lesson plan is the safety issues related to the lesson, and the action to be taken should an emergency arise. Accountability for health and safety is a large responsibility for P.E. teachers, as they have a “Higher Duty of Care” (BAALPE, 1995: 22-23) which indicates that they have specialised knowledge and training beyond that of normal classroom teachers. This is because in many P.E. lessons there is a wide range of equipment that may be used which could cause injury if not used correctly, or actions to be performed which if not attempted sensibly, could cause injury. Each activity taught in P.E. has its own safety regulations that children must be made aware of. Capel (2002:115) states that, “…high quality organisation, planning and management skills are required to ensure a purposeful, yet safe environment for children to practice new skills”. All teachers are required to carry out risk assessments of the equipment and the environment they intend to use before any lesson begins.

“Safety is arguably the most important factor in planning a P.E. lesson” (Capel, 2002:115).

A risk assessment should be made for different teaching scenarios or environments, each highlighting particular hazards; the potentially dangerous things associated with that activity/environment, and the risks; the likelihood of an accident occurring. The risk assessment should also include the control that would be used to reduce or possibly eliminate the risks involved. It is important also that Risk Assessment forms are simple enough to be amended, being cross referenced in some way to an incident
record book and forms/processes should be reviewed and updated at least yearly to indicate that they are current and have been maintained (HSE, 1999).

“Your first priority in any P.E. lesson is to ensure pupil’s safety”
(Capel, 2002:115)

Risk assessments, along with lesson plans, are a good way of monitoring and categorising the different risks associated within each Activity Area in the P.E. National Curriculum. As mentioned above, P.E. teachers have a “higher duty of care” placed upon them by virtue of the activities and challenges they set in place for children. In view of this, it is important that teachers select activities which they are qualified in and/or, are well within their comfort zone to organise for young children. There is clearly an expectation here that P.E. lessons might involve some actions that are more risky than sitting in a classroom, for example, learning basic gymnastics. To teach gymnastics safely as part of a programme in P.E. a teacher may need additional training to establish some competency and confidence to offer the activity to a whole class, approximately twenty five pupils, as a structured, controlled and developmental learning experience.

Assessment in P.E. – judging them, evaluating you…

Implementing assessment is a major part of teaching and constitutes a vehicle by which all pupils’ progress might be plotted. Assessment strategies for particular groups of pupils and activity areas also provides a means for evaluating the quality of teaching and learning opportunities that are designed by the P.E. teacher. However, since what each child takes away from the lesson may be different in both understanding and ability, the assessment should always focus on improving the individual’s teaching and learning experience (Capel, 2002:159). Many key authors who have written about assessment in P.E. believe that effective assessment lies at the heart of effective teaching and learning (Carroll, 1994; Capel, 2002; Mawer, 1995). Therefore, it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that the forms of assessment used are appropriate to the needs of the individual (and the needs of the task) and offers the best possible chance of learning and progression in that subject area. An Ofsted report (1995), measuring how effective secondary schools are with assessment in P.E., revealed how “…good practice in recording of attainment and progress was hard to find and very few teachers had a clear vision of what system might be appropriate” (Ofsted, 1995:14) However, Capel, Leask and Turner (2001) bring to our attention the fact that there are many different forms of assessment; formative, summative, ipsative, norm and criterion referenced assessment that might be used by the P.E. teacher. Within primary education a teacher should consider varying the forms of assessment to determine how well a pupil performs on their journey through Key Stage 1 and 2. In this vein Capel, et al (2001) points out that to monitor progress effi-
ciently, the assessment of pupils should consider their ability, long-term potential and previous educational performance. Using various forms of assessment would enable a teacher to taper their lesson objectives to suit the needs of individuals and groups within their Physical Education classes.

Reflection and assessment are key phrases within the educational setting and to develop a child’s physical abilities, a teachers’ ability to reflect on past and present performance is vital. Therefore it may be reasonable for P.E. teachers to make a baseline assessment of a child’s ability in certain activity areas at the start of the year/unit of work in order to be able to present some evidence that the child’s physical repertoire of actions, in say gymnastics, has improved. This kind of recording – “before and after” might in itself be useful as a pedagogic tool for teaching P.E. in primary schools. When planning for assessment, a good teacher will always consider whether the assessment is worthwhile and educationally useful for the pupils. They will think about when in the school day assessment will take place, how they will assess, who they will assess and why they are actually assessing. If these guiding principles are followed, the assessment, alongside effective planning and reflection on personal delivery of lessons, will contribute significantly to the child’s education overall, to the satisfaction of all parties involved, most importantly, the child himself.

**Conclusion**

Trainee teachers entering the world of Physical Education need to appreciate fully the challenges of educating children through physical means, particularly towards meeting shared educational aims such as numeracy, literacy and citizenship. The distinct roles and responsibilities involved with teaching P.E. make strong temporal demands upon the teacher that may lead them to question their personal ideals and aspirations in sport. The P.E. teacher must not lose sight of their obligations and responsibilities for providing an education in a physical realm that is part of the jigsaw that makes up a child’s experience of schooling and learning about the world.

**References**


Bailey, R. (2001) *Teaching physical education – a handbook for primary and secondary teach-


JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote

1. I would like to thank my mentor for helping to improve my academic confidence to present my thoughts in writing - developing my understanding of how to analyse, critically evaluate and process an argument. I hope the reader is able to use this article as a starting point to develop their understanding of the enormity of expectation placed upon Physical Education teachers in the 21st century. I have a great passion for teaching children and have found researching and writing this article a very steep but rewarding learning curve.

2. Emma is a 28 year BA QTS (Hons) Sports Studies student (3rd year) who's life-long ambition is to become a innovative and inclusive primary educator. Emma has particular interests in children’s physical and mental health and hopes to use her love for sport to create a healthy and balanced learning environment for the children she will teach. Emma has used sport previously as a medium for re-integrating the more socially-difficult or socially-deviant child, and intends to further develop these skills in an educational setting.

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: 10080014@hope.ac.uk or palmerc@hope.ac.uk