

# PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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Edited by  
David Kirk

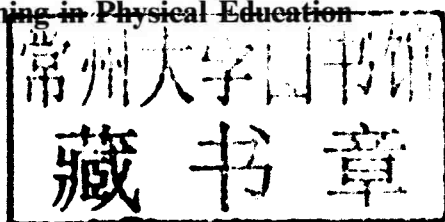
MAJOR THEMES IN  
EDUCATION

# PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Major Themes in Education

*Edited by*  
*David Kirk*

Volume II  
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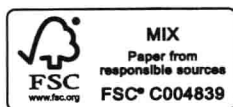
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# INTRODUCTION

*David Kirk*

The topic of learners and learning has, arguably, rapidly come to the fore in physical education research in the last decade and a half (Dyson, 2006). This concern to know about learners as persons and the process of learning represents a profound shift in scholars' attention. At the inception of the field of educational research in physical education the focus was firmly on teachers and teaching. As the papers collected in this volume demonstrate, researchers' interests in learners and learning has focused on students' perspectives, attitudes and motivation for physical education. As such, listening to the student 'voice' is possibly the most prominent marker of this shift of interest (MacPhail *et al.*, 2003). Research on learners and learning has stimulated an interest in theories of learning, as well as in learners' knowledge and skills, their abilities and learning styles. In addition to studying these topics, researchers have also investigated the ways in which young people's learning is infused by the cultural context in which it takes place, both within the school as an institution and within the physical culture of society more broadly. The focus on learners and learning represents at one level a democratic and inclusive moment. At the same time, this concern to produce a more intimate knowledge of learners and learning in physical education raises questions about education versus indoctrination and about whose interests are served by educational research (David *et al.*, 2001).

## **Students' perspectives on and motivation for physical education**

The earliest forms of physical education in schools serving the majority of the population took the form of drilling and exercising based on systems of free-standing gymnastics and some military practices. In this context, teachers uttered commands and pupils responded in unison. There was no room for individual interpretation of exercises on the students' part, and no opportunity to express their opinions, feelings or points of view. Even when school physical education underwent a fundamental shift from gymnastic to sport-based practices, this command style of teaching and learner passivity remained

in place. It is only relatively recently, since the mid-1990s Dyson (2006) suggests, that we have seriously begun to conduct research that solicits the perspectives of learners in physical education. In this context, Ennis, in Chapter 29, proposes that physical educators owe students an apology, particularly those students who find sport-based physical education incomprehensible ('what's the point?'), alienating or just plain frightening. Because traditionally pedagogy researchers and physical education teachers have not sought out students' views, they are, according to Ennis, often shocked to discover how abusive the experience of physical education is for some children.

As researchers have increasingly listened to the voices of students, they have encountered a range of students' perspective and valuable insights into the effects of physical education teaching and curriculum. In their study involving interviews with 15-year-old young women, Flintoff and Scraton (Chapter 31) found they held different though positive attitudes about being physically active outside of the school setting, in contrast to physical education classes where their choices about modes of engagement were limited by negotiations around gender. In a related study, Azzarito *et al.* (Chapter 26) discovered that physical education classes were a contested terrain for young women, who perceived that they had limited choices to participate compared to their male peers.

In Chapter 32 Green *et al.* challenge a popular and widespread public perception that sport participation among youth has been in decline, and show that sport and other physical activities are a regular and commonplace leisure time practice of adolescents in England. These authors consider that the multi-activity, sport-based form of physical education may well be responsible for this widespread incorporation of physical activity into adolescent lifestyles and cultures. Contradicting this interpretation to some extent, when asked to express their views on the nature and purposes of physical education, Smith and Parr, in Chapter 43, found that for the most part 15- and 16-year-old boys and girls experienced physical education as a fun activity and an opportunity for socialising with friends, alongside conventional justifications related to becoming skilful and contributing to health and well-being. Moreover, and consistent with other studies, they note that physical education is mostly viewed as a break from serious study rather than a place where valuable learning takes place.

Recent studies have also investigated the perspectives of young disabled people. Both Fitzgerald (Chapter 30) and Smith (Chapter 42) suggest that these young people's perspectives have been neglected due to a normative culture that exists in physical education classes. Smith shows that the games-dominated curriculum works against the inclusion of young disabled people even when teachers intend to so include them. Fitzgerald argues that the normative culture is so pervasive in physical education that the young disabled people she studied defined their own 'abilities' in relation to their

non-disabled peers. She concludes that notions of 'ability' need to be re-cast to include a wide range of abilities.

### **Knowledge and motor skills**

In addition to investigating students' perspectives, researchers have also sought to understand what children learn in physical education in terms of skills and knowledge. Given the wide-ranging content of many physical education programmes, research studies of learners and learning reflect this range and include physical and social skills and student cognition.

The development of motor skills in a range of activity settings has been a traditional concern of physical education. In Chapter 37 O'Keeffe *et al.* sought to determine the extent to which there is transfer of learning from the practice of the fundamental overarm throwing action to related sport specific skills such as the badminton overhead clear and the javelin throw. Their results show transfer of learning from the overarm throw to both specific sports skills, but no transfer between the badminton and javelin skill, which they argue is evidence for the wider use of fundamental skill practices in physical education. Lee and Solmon, in Chapter 36, carried out a review of literature that provides evidence of active influence of students' thought processes on skills learning. Working within the 'mediating processes paradigm', they show that student cognition, including self-perceptions, motivation, perceptions of achievement goals, attention and perceptions of teachers' behaviours, acts to mediate between what is taught and what is learned.

In Chapter 41 Rovegno and her colleagues provide some clear examples of this mediating process in action in a study of students' learning tactics of invasion game play. They describe in detail student progress from immature to more mature use of tactics such as faking to get free from a marker, making sharp cuts to move into space and throwing and receiving catchable passes. This research makes the valuable contribution of demonstrating that these so-called basic skills are complex because they are situated and relational.

Focusing on social skills, in Chapter 33 Hastie studied student role involvement in a unit of Sport Education. He found high levels of congruence between students' actions and their stated tasks, strong engagement in both playing and non-playing roles, low levels of off-task behaviour, affiliation with their team as a persisting group and a preference for student over teacher coaching.

### **Learning styles**

An important contribution of this research literature to our understanding of physical education is that learners have different learning styles that need to be accounted for in terms of task design. Vincent-Morin and Lafont, in

Chapter 45, asked whether a student's cognitive style in terms of field dependence or independence is associated with their choice of instructional approaches to learning the badminton serve. They discovered that regardless of cognitive style, students chose a form of direct instruction that provided them with precise information on how to carry out the task. They sought to explain their results in terms of the nature of the task (badminton serve), self-efficacy and the social context of the physical education class.

This research focus on learners and learning has also challenged the traditional teacher-dominance of physical education lessons. In Chapter 47 Ward and Lee examine in detail the theory and research on peer-assisted learning in physical education. Their review shows that while peer-assisted learning has been widely used and researched in physical education, its practice has not been grounded in a strong theoretical base. Rather, its effectiveness has tended to be judged against more traditional, teacher-directed practice. Ward and Lee's recommendations for future research include a focus on the intended learning outcomes of the use of peer-assisted learning, in particular whether these are social or skill-based.

Due to the widespread use of directive teaching styles within traditional physical education lessons, student choice is typically limited. In Chapter 46 Ward *et al.* sought to measure the effects of choice of physical education units on student self-determination and physical activity levels, drawing on self-determination theory (SDT). They found that students who were given choices had higher levels of self-determination, while those who experienced choice first and then were denied a choice of unit had the lowest levels of self-determination. Consistent with SDT, they suggest the study provides evidence of the benefits of and need for student choice in physical education classes.

### Learning cultures

One line of research on learners has been concerned with the cultural contexts in which learning takes place. In a 38-year follow-up as part of a longitudinal study, Engström (Chapter 27) showed that neither membership of a sports club nor amount of time spent on sport activities at age 15 had a significant relationship with exercise habits in middle age. The key characteristics of middle age exercisers were their high cultural capital at the age of 15, including the breadth of their sporting experience and their grades in school physical education. The evidence from this study questions some orthodox ideas about the transfer of learning from school to adult life and has a number of significant implications for policy and practice in school physical education and youth sport.

In Chapter 44 Tinning and Fitzclarence foreshadowed the findings of researchers such as Flintoff and Scraton (Chapter 31), Azzarito *et al.* (Chapter 26) and Green *et al.* (Chapter 32) in their discovery that while

many Australian adolescents valued physical activity as part of their lifestyles, they found school physical education boring and irrelevant. In order to explain these findings, Tinning and Fitzclarence consider developments in the culture of televisual media and the information society. They argue that if physical education is to play a meaningful part in the lives of young people, it needs to be radically reformed in light of newly emerging and developing social and cultural trends.

Paralleling the research on embodiment and the nature and purposes of physical education included in Volume I, in Chapter 38 Oliver and Lalik propose that the 'socially constructed' body is an appropriate topic of study in itself. Their particular focus is on language use among students to construct the body. Working with four adolescent girls, they conclude that being noticed and regulating their bodies were overwhelming concerns for the girls. They recognise the need for a curriculum that integrates physical education and language arts into an inquiry-based approach focusing on girls' questions and concerns about the body. By attending closely to teachers' language, Wright, in Chapter 48, notes how gendered cultures are constructed in physical education lessons. She argues that these cultures are experienced very differently and inequitably by girls and boys in both single-sex and co-educational lessons. She proposes that the study of teachers' language provides a means of highlighting not just gender inequalities but a range of other forms of social injustice.

In a study of aspects of physical culture beyond schools in the UK, Evans, in Chapter 28, is concerned to interrogate commonplace and taken-for-granted notions of ability that pervade physical education, dominated on the one side by elite sport and on the other by concerns about health and obesity. He advocates the search for a definition of ability that more accurately reflects the wide-ranging cultural differences young people bring to physical education classes in order to better serve students' needs and interests. In the USA, Pope and O'Sullivan (Chapter 39) also discovered wider social forces operating within the 'free gym' lunch time and after school opportunities that were available to young people. The culture of these classes was strongly hierarchical, dominated by a few African American male students who were skilled at basketball, while others merely survived or were marginalised. The authors argue for a restructuring of the free gym sessions through more democratic aspirational pedagogy.

### **Learning theories**

The increased interest in learners and learning in physical education has prompted researchers to seek out theories that can provide explanations of and insights into students' experiences, perspectives and knowledge. Arguably more than in any other research topic, the focus on learners and learning has prompted researchers to become theory conscious. Azzarito

*et al.* (Chapter 26) and Flintoff and Scraton (Chapter 31) among others employ various feminist theoretical perspectives. Some of the papers included in this volume make use of theories such as constructivism, social constructionism and cultural analysis, as discussed by Quay (Chapter 40). Kirk and Macdonald (Chapter 35) and Rovegno *et al.* (Chapter 41) explore the possibilities of situated learning theory for understanding learners and learning. It is also increasingly common to find researchers bringing together a number of theoretical perspectives to investigate learners and learning, such as Kirk's paper (Chapter 34) on early learning experiences, which draws together theories of sport socialisation, motivation, gender and socio-economic status.

### Conclusions

In contrast to other dimensions of pedagogy, studies of learners and learning in physical education are relatively recent, dated by Dyson as beginning in earnest from around the mid-1990s. The flow of research since this time has increased and along the way has enriched our understanding of young people's experiences, thoughts and feelings as well as what and how they learn in physical education. Sometimes, to our dismay, what they learn and how they think about physical education are not what teachers and curriculum makers intended them to learn. On other occasions, as the papers included in this volume demonstrate, research has provided invaluable new insights that enrich our understanding of physical education and consequently must be put to use in reforming physical education so that it is personally meaningful and culturally relevant to future learners.

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“ . . . IF I HAD A CHOICE,  
I WOULD. . . .”

A feminist poststructuralist perspective  
on girls in physical education

*Laura Azzarito, Melinda A. Solmon and Louis Harrison, Jr.*

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A significant number of studies evidence girls' lack of participation in physical education. This study used feminist poststructuralism to examine the ways in which high school girls participated in or resisted physical education. Using qualitative research methods, researchers collected field notes, informal interviews, and formal interviews with the teacher and 15 female students. In contrast to previous studies, girls in this study enjoyed and valued physical activity. As active agents, they chose to participate in or resist specific physical activities through their negotiations of gender relations. Physical education classes emerged as a contested terrain in which girls supported the notion of equal opportunity in physical activity but perceived limits on their choices in physical education as compared to male peers.

The intent of Title IX, enacted in 1972, was to provide equal access for girls in all educational arenas, including equal opportunities in physical education classes. Since the implementation of Title IX, physical education teachers have struggled with the issue of providing quality instruction in coeducational classes. Researchers who have examined girls' participation in physical education have argued that girls' success is limited because of continued sexist practices. A significant number of studies in physical education provides evidence of girls' alienation and lack of participation in physical education classrooms (Bain, 1995; Ennis, 1999; Griffin, 1984, 1985, 1993; Hastie, 1998;