An Educational Justification for Movement in the Curriculum

Tony Rossi
University of Southern Queensland

A personal story- Back to the Future!

One might reasonably assume that if something (anything) appears on a school curriculum then some person (or persons), somewhere has deemed it to be worthwhile. I use the term worthwhile deliberately because I seemed to spend a large part of my time as an undergraduate trying to establish the ‘worth-whileness’ of physical education (health was not part of the so-called subject matter in 1970s British Physical Education Teacher Education [or PETE]). It was a frustrating time as almost everything else that was considered a ‘subject’ for study in British schools at the time virtually justified itself in terms of being worthwhile.

The thrust of this endeavour came from the work of Richard Peters (see Peters, 1966 #205) whose treatise on Worthwhile Activities provoked the world of school education to justify areas of study in educational terms rather than in terms of tradition, in other words to articulate why they were worthwhile. Peters’ position was particularly elitist immersed as it was, in the language of analytical philosophy which was popular at the time. What was interesting for me (and my fellow - yes they were all men!

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1 Forthcoming chapter in Tinning, MacCuaig & Hunter (eds) Teaching Health & Physical Education in Australian Primary Schools. To be published by Pearson Australia.
PETE students) was that physical education, sport or movement by any other description was conspicuous by its absence from Peters' analysis. None the less the exercise was a useful one and it seems to me that it has a contemporary flavour. Why for example, would we hold physical activity in the guise of sport so dear in our schools when there is a highly developed youth sport culture in just about every Australian town of any size? In addition, Tinning and Fitzclarence (, 1992 #208) indicated that what stands for school physical education in terms of the possible movement activities is losing its appeal. Twelve years on and I suspect things are not much better. It was apparent in this study that children were not so much inactive, it was just that the activities in school physical education lacked meaning ... they were just plain boring. Many of the children were highly active but in activities which held personal meaning for them. Tinning et al (, 2001 #206) argue, school physical education is immersed in the discourses of contemporary sport and as they say there is something which is seen as inherently good and wholesome about sport on the curriculum and its extension into the extra curricular life of the school with its emphasis on skill and performance. And so it was for us in the 1970s, however justifying this form of movement in educational terms was as slippery then as it is now. In addition health as part of a broader agenda certainly in Australian schools must also be justified as being worthwhile. On the face of it this might seem an easier task however in most states health has to be, for the most part, delivered through a program of physical activity hence we are still called upon to justify in educational terms, the place of movement on the curriculum.
Where to start? – A necessarily brief and incomplete history

We tend to take for granted the presence, shape, format and purpose of movement (as physical education) in our schools today. However modern forms of movement education are a world away from their origins though one could argue some legacies have lingered well into the 21st century. Kirk (, 1998 #196) indicates that the close ties between Britain and Australia also manifested itself in the transportability of schooling practices. Hardly surprising perhaps, when one notes that school systems in the fledgling nation were largely staffed by former British teachers. It is no wonder then that the appearance of military drill in the 1860s in Australia followed schooling practices to be found in Britain. The educational justification of this was discipline, docility and control. It was a relatively ad hoc affair until about 1875 when ‘class drill’ was established as a formalized practice. As Kirk (, 1998 #196) says the purpose of this drill was corporeal regulation aimed at making young people compliant and subservient to the economic demands and industrial output of a growing country. Whilst there were other developments, the practice of drill continued in some form or another through to the Second World War.

Sport made its appearance through the elitist private system and the formation of the Athletic Association of the Great Public Schools (a form of which is still with us today) during the 1890s. This was largely the domain of boys but private girls schools followed the pattern and government schools also felt that sport was a wholesome pursuit but it was not until 1934 in Victoria that sport appeared as a curriculum
activity, a year after the publication of he 1933 *Syllabus of Physical Training* in Britain which was used in Australia until 1946 when *The Grey Book* was published in Victoria. This represented a break with the confines of a colonial attachment to movement and exercise. What is curious in all of this is that the *educational* quality of what was evolving was always a limited discourse. It had to do with the therapeutic value of exercise particularly in certain forms of movement, specifically gymnastics. Indeed Munrow (, 1972 #207) suggests that that games, upon their introduction to schools in Britain, lacked the “corrective effect of ordered movement” (p.27) and were therefore considered inadequate as a form of exercise.

The liberalized forms of physical education which began to develop in the 1940s and have evolved into what we see today require a very different justification. Indeed, in a globalised world dominated by visual image, movement alternatives, and forms of entertainment that border on the banal, it becomes crucial to be able to articulate just why and how movement, in and of itself, is an educationally worthwhile experience that all children should have as part of their curriculum entitlement in Australian primary schools.

*In search of purpose*

One way to begin talking about justifying movement in the curriculum is to establish what purpose it might serve. The human organism was built to move. For some, this might be limited or impossible and forms of disability in varying degrees of severity can affect this. However in the main we are destined to move unless we construct a world where movement is surplus to requirements and certainly some types of work
and our technologized home life with its mecurial push button wizardry go some way to achieving this. Indeed simple tasks like doing the grocery shopping can now be conducted on-line and delivered and packed away in your cupboards by someone else. So the task of going to the supermarket, choosing a trolley (that works) and actually pushing it around may become an obsolete movement practice. In Singapore for example, this is the choice of upwardly mobile couples and families in what is one of the most technologically savvy and connected countries on the planet - indeed many of my ex-patriot colleagues used such a service. So continually ways are being constructed that enable us as organisms to avoid one of our most fundamental capacities - to move, to make choices about how we move and to use movement activities to enhance our well being. At an obvious level then we could argue that the place to learn about meaningful forms of movement, its benefits, its management and how we might be able to make choices about movement is school. Sounds reasonable but seldom are movement experiences at school (in the guise of physical education) framed this way, as we have already seen it is most often framed by instruction in a series of sports techniques the long term value of which might be questionable. We should therefore look at this issue of 'purpose' a bit more closely.

When considering the National Curriculum in Physical Education (NCPE) in Britain where there were originally six prescribed areas of physical activity, Len Almond {, 1997 #209} said

... I must take issue with the recommended activity areas articulated in the Orders for the new National Curriculum. The six areas appear to represent a balanced physical education
programme. What ends do these activity areas serve? It is difficult to clearly identify what purposes they serve other than ends in themselves. (p.1)

Almond goes on to say that by not articulating the purpose and educational roles of such activities other than saying they are part of a mandated curriculum or should be there by tradition, teachers simply become deliverers of content. Moreover in Britain (as in Australia) there are clearly some areas of activity which are conspicuous by their absence and we can only assume they are not considered to be representative of purposeful and meaningful movement forms such as yoga, cycling, archery, horse riding, martial arts and so on. Whilst we do not have a National Curriculum in the same sense, in Australia we still have to grapple with the same questions: why this activity and not that one, why this game and not that one? Almond {, 1997 #209} above all suggests that whatever the choices, they must be made on educational grounds. Almond {, 1997 #210} suggests that physical education as the medium of movement education should be framed by three elements; active living, cultural wealth and physicality. Almond’s vision shares much with the health promotion agenda and in this regard it is well placed to ‘fit into’ how we might think of movement experiences in primary schools in Australia. For example Almond talks about children finding ‘joy’ in movement (for being active), seeking opportunities to be active, using movement and physical activity to acquaint children with the cultural and social heritage available through movement be it sport, dance, adventure experiences or individual pursuits. Moreover Almond suggests there are possibilities in using movement to go beyond simple transmission of culture and consider the transformative potential movement culture can encourage. In physicality,
Almond (, 1997 #210, p.11) is referring to "a kind of challenge curriculum and for many people this may well be a better and more appropriate term". For Almond then the educational justification for movement as part of the curriculum rests with developing lifelong commitment to the joy and challenge of physical activity (both group and individual) with a view to its contribution to an individual’s well being and understanding of culture. This is a powerful discourse yet some might consider it incomplete as it fails to consider the intellectual development possible though a purposeful and meaningful program of physical activity. This however is a more complex form of justification and one which might play into the hands of Cartesian Dualists - those who seek to separate the mind and body to demonstrate the superiority of the mind.

**Intellectual activity as part of physical activity**

This represents an emotive area of inquiry. Great advocates of the 'healthy body, healthy mind' catch call, often point to the value of physical activity in stimulating intellectual growth. Even the Australian Sports Commission ran TV advertisement campaigns to support such an ideal. In truth the relationship is not a nice neat and tidy one. However, there are a range of discourses that seek to promote this relationship and its inherent good. Indeed in some countries the physical education community has had to show just how it will contribute to academic and intellectual development in the quest for certain kinds of citizens. So in Singapore for example, the *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* document which states the intention to produce ‘critical thinkers’ from Singaporean schools, physical education was no exception. In this case the physical education community argued that this could be done through a problem
solving approach to games an approach more broadly recognized as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) or as it is known in Singapore the Games Concept Approach (GCA). This approach to games is now a mandated practice (Rossi, 2003 #211). For the most part this has been fueled by the renewed interest in constructivism. Kirk and Macdonald (, 1998 #200) suggest

Constructivist approaches emphasize that learning is an active process in which the individual seeks out information in relation to the task at hand and the environmental conditions prevailing at any given time, and tests out her or his own capabilities within the context formed by the task and the environment. Learning is also situated in social and cultural contexts and is influenced by these contexts. (p.376)

Constructivism then places the learner at the heart of the learning enterprise and assumes that with well conceived tasks and an appropriate environment will assist in the learner coming up with an appropriate response that solves the problem of the task having weighed up the options in the form of evidence and having drawn upon some previous experience. This ‘discovery’ approach to learning in physical activity and movement is not new and examples from over 20 years ago form part of the literature in educational gymnastics (Mauldon and Layson GET THIS REFERENCE), in games (Mauldon, 1981 #195), in primary school physical education (Bilborough, 1970 #212) and a little more recently in movement science (Vereijken, 1988 #213). There would seem then to be some educational justification for movement in the curriculum that encourages this kind of learning.
Historically not everyone has been as enthusiastic about the learning potential and intellectual activity in discovery forms of learning in movement. For example Best {, 1978 #214} felt that there were two major misconceptions when trying to articulate the intellectual qualities in movement. First he claimed that ‘the intellect” was often conflated with ‘the mental’ that he claimed was meant to refer to some general capacity for thinking and second “that the intellect is a distinct, inner faculty which causes thoughtful actions” (p.50), in other words the dualist position which he and others have argued should be avoided because of its inherent falsehood {see \Tinning, 1993 #216}. As Best {, 1978 #214} argued,

...it is misleading to conceive of the intellect in terms of a general faculty which can be 'nourished' (by exercise for example), since the assumption on which it depends, that there is an essential homogeneity in or underlying all types of thinking is manifestly false. For the term ‘thinking’ and ‘mental’ cover a heterogeneous range of cases.” (p.51) (parentheses added)

The case that Best makes particularly in the last part of the previous quotation may in fact support the constructivist view that there are many solutions to the same problem and how learners might arrive at those solutions is also likely to be diverse. This also has support from the work of Newmann {, 1996 #115}, and in Queensland, various Education Queensland documents {see \Education Queensland, 2000 #57;Education Queensland, 2000 #58;Education Queensland, 2002 #130;Education Queensland, 2004 #113} and the Australian Council of Deans of
Education (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001 #12). It seems reasonable then that movement can be justified on the grounds that like other areas of the school curriculum it provides opportunities to solve problems but what makes it unique is the medium in which problem solving has to take place.

**The value of movement ... for its own sake!**

If you were to look at most ambulatory mammals, humans in particular and study the structure of such organisms, it would be plain to see that the way the musculo-skeletal system is organized indicates that we are built to move. Not only that, we are built with a vast array of muscular angles of pull and skeletal articulations (what motor control scientists call degrees of freedom in movement) that makes us highly adaptable and renders us able to move in a range of different environments. We are unable to move with the grace and fluidity of say a grey seal in water ... but then unlike us, a seal cannot climb. Similarly, we could not compete with various members of the ape family in a high jungle canopy ... but there again a monkey cannot swim – at least not especially well. The unique capacity of human beings means that we can also draw upon our capability to reason in order to solve problems through movement and then adapt our movement to suit the environmental demands. So given all this, it is something of a surprise that we have structured a world, over successive generations, (and continue to do so) where movement is unnecessary or in some cases obsolete but for the merest hint of muscular activity in flicking a switch. This is not especially helpful as part of our bodily maintenance is contingent upon movement.
This does not necessarily mean the sort of narcissistic gyrating one might find in a cardio-funk class (though this might be included). It is about engaging in a range of movement activities that require us to perhaps work a little harder for a little longer than we usually do. For other purposes like fitness-for-sport training, this might require a different sort of movement with different levels of intensity and duration. Movement in the curriculum should be about creating opportunities for children to begin to understand this so that general body management and maintenance can become part of a broader physical literacy. Moreover, becoming physically literate as part of a wider literacy agenda creates possibilities for learners to transform their movement practices where designs of meaning drawn from a range of movement experiences can be transferred from one situation to another (see The New London Group, 2000 #50, see also the chapter by Rossi and Ryan in this volume for a fuller description).

It is important to note that I am not talking here about movement competence (we might call this technique) as being directly transferable to another completely different situation. Motor behaviour scientists have told us enough over the years for us to know that this kind of transfer simply does not happen (Schmidt, 2002 #217). I am talking more about how a young learner can come to know and understand, through movement, something about managing their body such that she can make good movement decisions in other situations. This might mean understanding game strategies, how to position the body to lift a heavy weight, how to shift body weight for effect, how to move through water for recreation but for safety and lifesaving purposes particularly when at the beach, knowing what type of exercise has what type of effect,
knowing how time and space are related through movement tasks, being able to weigh up movement risks whether it be a decision to try an ambitious pass in a game or making a judgment about alternatives when faced with different routes down a mountain when on a ski holiday and so on.

**A final thought**

The list of movement possibilities is endless and clearly schools are not in a position to offer every different movement challenge young people will face either in their primary school years or as they move into adulthood. However, schools are in a unique position to help children understand their own movement capacities and capabilities and to appreciate and understand the movement capacities and capabilities of others. This means that schools have at their disposal a medium of learning which is unique. If used well, movement can contribute to the educational development of primary school children in ways that no other school experience can and should therefore represent part of their entitlement curriculum.