

# Physical Education Down Under: Fusion or Confusion

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## Background

At the International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport and Dance (ICHPER-SD) Conference held in Wellington in October 2006, the authors presented a keynote titled: *Physical Education Down Under: Fusion or Confusion*. This presentation was somewhat unusual as it took the form of a three act play. The story line was based around a final year teacher education student (Digger) who had a passion for physical education – doing it, studying it and wanting to teach it. In the first two scenes the story evolved around Digger planning for an in-class assessment – a 10 minute presentation on an issue relating to physical education and/or sport (in school). Digger was a dogmatic character who relished the opportunity to engage in arguments with his lecturers and fellow students about matters to do with physical education. Although a ‘novice’ this helped him develop a good understanding about the purpose of physical education and its place in the school curriculum.

The setting for the third scene was a lecture room at the university where the students were to give their presentations. To ensure the students took this task seriously, the Professor made it a competition. The prize for the student with the best presentation was a trip to the ICHPER-SD conference. Five minutes into the scene Digger was asked to step forward to deliver his presentation to the Professor and ‘Lady PENZ’. It was titled ‘Food for Thought’.

## Digger’s Presentation – “Food for Thought”

Physical education and sport are rich with social issues, value questions and moral dilemmas. Everyone has a strong opinion and speaks powerfully about these from a personal perspective. But what about the educative voice? Ninety years ago de Coubertin (cited in Muller, 2000) said physical education and sport, is more than ‘animal function’, it’s more than ‘pure physiology’. He argued it had a moral and ethical base and questioned what degree this influences decision making about future developments. The same question needs to be asked today.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are many actions that stir our emotions, generate curiosity, provoke argument and present challenges. This richness should be celebrated, but for some reason we seem to focus more on the technical things, the pragmatics and the doing. Our thinking and teaching doesn’t always seem to be driven by moral and ethical considerations.

If we (i.e. physical educators) are silenced and marginalised, we let ourselves get locked into an iron cage which captures our thinking and actions. This cage is designed, created, nurtured and seems to be locked by external forces such as the media, political agendas and even schools. From such a position it is difficult to liberate our thoughts. Consequently we keep reproducing the same ‘ole’ same ‘ole’ in physical education and sport. I often wonder why this happens.

Where is the debate about the big ideas? Michael Apple (1990) says our profession has become obsessed with individualism, excessive competition, elitism, winning and performance based on science. Brohm (1978) called this a ‘prison of measured time’. Surely the BIG idea or the WHY we do things has got to be more important than

the WHAT. The WHY informs us about what we can do. The WHY is the thing that helps us construct a system of beliefs and social reality which in turn affects and informs our practice. Fernandez-Balboa et al (2006) claim that there is three parts to these realities: ideology - general beliefs, habitus - the actions of many and discourse - the use language.

The interaction between the ideologies, habitus and discourse associated with physical education and sport form awesome structures of hierarchical power. These structures are not easy to identify or understand and almost impossible to change. This is evident in physical education and sport by the emphasis given to the technical aspects of movement. It also prioritises objectivity as determined by the measurement of biological function, time, space and distance. The information is then used to specify pre-determined standards of performance such as fitness tests and measures of obesity. It is these standards, along with on-going assessments that shape our day to day practices. In essence, it subdues our engagement in the subjective meaning of movement, and inhibits our exploration of the moral and ethical nature of what our subject could and should be. Such a subjugation can exclude human sentiment, dehumanise the richness of our practice and has the potential to undermine the educative value of our subject. More importantly it misses the BIG idea.

So what is the BIG idea that I am referring to? FernandezBalboa et. al. (2006) refer to the BIG idea as The Guiding Principle. For them the BIG idea in physical education and sport goes way beyond the technical and into something much more universal. It is the guiding principle of universal dignity – that is valuing and protecting people from all walks of life. Without adopting such a view it maybe impossible for physical education and sport to excel and:

- make a unique contribution to human growth and development
- improve the quality of people’s lives, and
- help people find and extend themselves physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and morally.

I am heartened by the idea of universal dignity for this implies the growth of people is inherent in Health and Physical Education in the NZ Curriculum (Ministry of Education 1999). Even in the 1980s and 1990s scholars such as MacIntyre (1985) and Arnold (1998) argued that people value physical education and sport more when they are practised in a moral and ethical way. Arnold (1998) made two significant points about this claim. First, physical education is best understood as a valued human practice when it is concerned with the moral. Secondly, physical education and sport in schools, no matter what other purposes they have, should be a form of moral education. In essence, Arnold was arguing that through our subject we have the potential to transform the lives’ of young people. Now that is food for thought – and perhaps the salvation for our subject.

This same sentiment was argued by de Coubertin (cited in Muller 2000) when he suggested that through the philosophy of Olympism it would be possible for physical education and sport to work towards:

- the harmonious development of people
- having people strive to excel
- using activities that foster the ethical position taking
- contributing to peace and goodwill and
- the emancipation of individuals and groups.

These ideas can be used to form the basis of change. Talking of change, there is a lot of literature that talks about the need for change in physical education and sport. One of these areas is the need for a greater focus on critical pedagogy.

Contemporary scholars such as O'Sullivan, (2004), Wright, MacDonald and Burrows (2004) and Tinning (1997) argue that critical pedagogy is essential in assisting our students become critical consumers of the movement culture. This means they develop self knowledge, knowledge of others and learn to behave in an informed and moral way. If this can be realised, then the sustainability of physical education and sport as a valued and educative practice is assured.

Although I have had snippets of critical pedagogy while learning to be a physical education teacher, I am hungry for more. I would expect the ICHPER-SD Conference to be oozing with such where I could learn more about:

- Who has the influential voice in physical education and sport and is it educative?

- What is the place of physical education and sport in education?
- What is the moral and ethical base to the arguments around such things as obesity, physical activity, sports performance and its funding?
- What is critical pedagogy really about?

Professor and Lady PENZ, I trust you recognise my potential as a teacher and in so doing send me to the ICHPER-SD conference later in the year. You know my goal is to use physical education and sport to capture the hearts and minds of young people. As de Coubertin said, be joyful because it is the joyfulness that feeds the effort to create the change. I want to be part of creating change and shaping a new future.

### Final Comment

As in any play, the outcome of the story is not always predictable. In this case Digger (who gave his presentation) was given feedback and marked according to the criteria. He expected to win! At the end of the scene the Professor said that this competition was like sport and there are sometimes surprises. He duly announced they were all winners and would all be going to the ICHPER-SD conference. Although Digger thought he was the best and offered a mild protest, he did concede that it was probably a fair result. After all, it takes more than one to create change.



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