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Curriculum

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Curriculum

Curriculum refers to a range of educational experiences, planned and unplanned, associated with student learning. Content is only part of the educational experiences. Physical education is distinguishable from other curricular areas by its focus on the body and movement, seeking to build on previously learned movement skills through participation in a diverse range of physical-activity related experiences. The physical education curriculum is concerned with instilling a desire for, and encouraging lifelong involvement in, physical activity. Most physical education curriculum constitute a rationale, aims, objectives, areas of study / range of practical activities (e.g., dance, games), learning outcomes and assessing student learning, hoping to produce ‘physically-educated’ young people. There is consensus that the physical education curriculum applies a holistic approach to the concept of physical activity for school-aged students, providing opportunities to;

- enhance physical, mental, emotional and social development
- develop physical creativity, competence and confidence to perform a variety of physical activities
- examine human movement from different key perspectives
- work as individuals, with partners, in groups and as part of a team, in both competitive and non-competitive situations
- encourage an appreciation of physical activities and promote positive attitudes towards establishing and sustaining an active and healthy lifestyle

The work of Catherine Ennis discusses how curriculum reflects an educational philosophy, illustrating that teachers’ expertise in the subject area and beliefs about best practice informs the way in which the curriculum is delivered. Ennis’ work focuses on value orientations in curricular decision making and explores the educational beliefs of

(physical education) teachers – disciplinary mastery, learning process, self-actualization, social responsibility and justice and ecological integration. Ennis examines how each reflect teachers’ educational beliefs about what students should learn, how they should engage in the learning process, and how learning should be assessed. The ability to teach (physical education) curriculum in a manner consistent with value orientations is aided or constrained by the complex school environment.

International barriers to the provision and delivery of the physical education curriculum and to affecting the implementation of developments in physical education curriculum are well documented. They include inadequate facilities and equipment, shortage of time on the curriculum (marked reduction in time allocated to physical education in the upper secondary school), inadequate physical education training for primary teachers, inappropriate staffing levels and a lack of sufficient and appropriate professional development for physical education teachers. These factors interact and addressing one constraint in isolation will not necessarily lead to enduring change in the physical education curriculum.

The extent to which the delivery of a physical education curriculum is enforced varies considerably. In England, physical education is statutory but with no time requirement stipulated. In some countries, schools are required to offer a programme of physical education to all students with a minimum time allocation for physical education stipulated. In other countries schools ‘should’ offer a physical education programme within a ‘suggested’ time allocation. In others, physical education has been removed from the curriculum or further reductions in physical education curriculum time allocation have been pursued.

One similarity that is evident across countries delivering a physical education curriculum is the amount of time invested in teaching games, usually at the expense of other activity areas. Physical education curriculum has tended to focus on discrete activities such as soccer and basketball. Michael Metzler, Jacalyn Lund and Deborah Tannehill present curricular models as an attempt to introduce a medium through which teachers can teach

towards learning goals (re-focusing attention from the particular activity) and communicate such learning goals to students and extend the opportunities students can experience by designing the physical education curriculum on specific themes and different pedagogical principles. Such models include Personal and Social Responsibility, Sport Education, and Teaching Games for Understanding.

By offering extra-curricular activities that are available to all students if they wish to be involved, physical education contributes to the 'extended curriculum'. That is, curriculum that enriches the social and cultural life of the school and is separate to the more formal curriculum pursued throughout the school day. Such activities are not necessarily part of a teacher's contractual agreement though many teachers may choose to coach or supervise on a voluntary basis. By its unique nature, physical education can also contribute towards 'whole school curriculum'. That is, promoting a shared responsibility from everyone in the school to support the importance of active living, health and well-being, priorities that significantly contribute to the life of a school.

The national curriculum in England applies to students of compulsory school age and is organized on the basis of four key stages;

- Key stage 1 covers ages 5 to 7 (Years 1 to 2)
- Key stage 2 covers ages 7 to 11 (Years 3 to 6)
- Key stage 3 covers ages 11 to 14 (Years 7 to 9) and
- Key stage 4 covers ages 14 to 16 (Years 10 to 11).

The new secondary national curriculum in England introduces changes to the curriculum at key stages 3 and 4. While maintaining the discipline of subjects, e.g., Art and design, English and Physical education, the new secondary national curriculum allows sufficient flexibility for schools to design their own locally determined curriculum that meets their learners' needs, capabilities and aspirations. It is envisaged that the curriculum should enable all young people to become (1) successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve, (2) confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives and (3) responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.

For each school subject at each school stage there exists a ‘programme of study’ and ‘attainment target’.

The revised programmes of study at key stages 3 and 4 focus on key concepts and processes that underlie each subject than on prescribed subject content. Four key concepts that underpin the study of physical education are listed in the physical education programme of study for key stage 3 and key stage 4. These are (1) Competence, (2) Performance, (3) Creativity and (4) Health, active lifestyles. The key processes sections in the programmes of study highlight the essential skills that learners need in order to make progress and achieve in each subject. The five essential skills and processes in physical education are listed as (1) Developing skills in physical activity, (2) Making and applying decisions, (3) Developing physical and mental capacity, (4) Evaluating and improving and (5) Making informed choices about healthy, active lifestyles. The programmes of study also outline the breadth of the subject on which teachers should draw when teaching the key concepts and key processes and also curriculum opportunities that are integral to pupils’ learning and enhance their engagement with the concepts, processes and content of the subject.

The attainment target sets out the knowledge, skills and understanding that students of different abilities and maturities are expected to have by completion of each key stage. Attainment targets consist of eight level descriptions (describing the type and range of performance that students working at that level should characteristically demonstrate) of increasing difficulty and there is a description for exceptional performance above level 8. The level descriptions in physical education indicate progression in the aspects set out in the programme of study and provide the basis for making judgments about students’ performance at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3. There is an expected attainment for the majority of students on completion of each key stage.

Physical education is being inextricably linked to the promotion of positive attitudes towards establishing and sustaining an active and healthy lifestyle. Consequently, school physical education curriculum is prompted to more closely align with opportunities

available to young people to be involved in school sport and sport in the community. In England, the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy was launched in 2002 to transform physical education and school sport. In December 2004, the UK Prime Minister, announced the Government's long-term aim to offer all children four hours of sport by 2010, arising from at least two hours curriculum physical education and an additional two to three hours beyond the school day, delivered by a range of school, community and club providers. While such an ambition supports physical education as a discrete curriculum area, there continues to be interest and debate in the relationship between physical education, sport, health and recreation. As support for physical activity to be promoted through a coordinated school health programme, with links established between the school, family and community increases, it may be deemed that school curricular alone cannot develop an active lifestyle. In fact, school physical education may be creating a social vacuum of physical activity where the expectations to become involved in, and maintain, an active lifestyle resides solely with physical education. If physical education is to sustain a place within school curriculum it is imperative that it engages with those forces in operation outside the school that shape the substance of what is taught through the physical education curriculum. The future role and survival of the physical education curriculum remains uncertain.

References for further reading

Penney, D. (2006) Curriculum construction and change, pp. 565-579 in Kirk, D., Macdonald, D. and O'Sullivan, M. (Eds.) Handbook of Physical Education London: Sage.

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