

The Visions and Voices of Physical Education Teachers (Part 4): Boundary Crossing as the Key to a Bright Future

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Introduction

PE is becoming more complex, educational and far reaching as it moves beyond the long dominant multi-activity curriculum. For all stakeholders involved in PE, particularly teachers, embracing this new-found complexity will be critical to the future development of the subject area. However, while describing the complexity of PE in today's world may be a relatively straightforward task, exploring how to embrace and harness this complexity is more difficult. In this fourth article of the Vision & Voices series, we therefore focus on the complexity of present-day PE and discuss why teachers' visions for PE are becoming such an important driver for future. Building on this, the second half of the paper explores how teachers' development as boundary crossers is central to their vision-making making and lies at the very heart of PE's future.

Why are Teachers' Visions for Physical Education so Important?

Since the turn of the century, PE has become more complex because the traditional features of the subject are regularly being joined by a myriad of new ideas, practices and activities. As the traditional and contemporary features collide, they generate '*rich interactions*': interactions that create a context for significant change. These new ways of thinking and practising come about because these '*rich interactions*' are not pre-programmed to work like a machine but involve some degree of self-organisation by those involved in the PE development process. This ability to self-organise is key because it means that the '*rich interactions*' between the multiple factors influencing PE can lead to outcomes that are unpredictable and, as a result, create different versions of PE. The PE landscape across schools, towns and cities is therefore becoming less predictable, more dynamic and more fertile.

As these changes take place the simplistic notion that teachers are technicians who implement pre-prepared programmes designed by 'experts' is fast becoming outdated. Teachers are not technicians but adaptive practitioners who are constantly in the process of negotiating the many factors/boundaries that influence the development of PE in their local context. However, before we consider this negotiation process, we present some of the key factors that are currently creating a more complex PE and discuss why teachers' visions for PE are subsequently such an important feature of the way ahead for PE.

The Complexity of PE in the 21st Century

In this section, we briefly consider some of the key factors that currently come together to generate those '*rich interactions*' that create a more complex picture of present-day PE (See Figure 1).

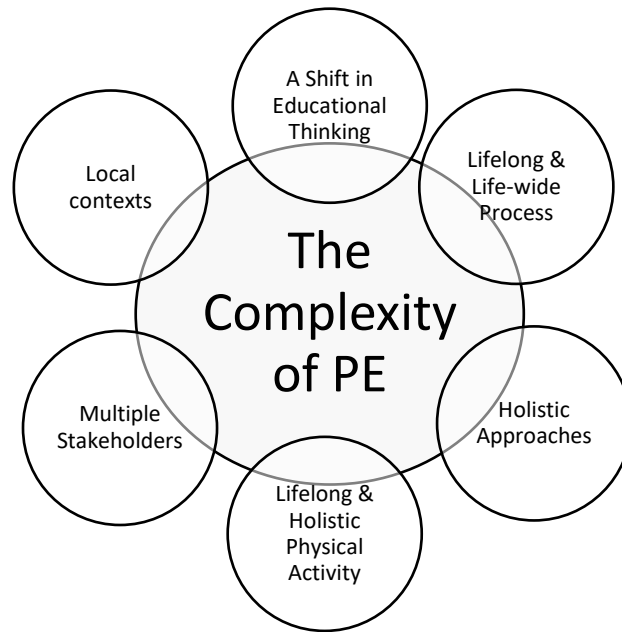


Figure 1: Key Components Influencing Physical Education Futures

1. *A Shift in Educational Thinking*

For most of the 20th century, with educational thinking focussed on the cognitive domain, a clear divide between the mind and the body was created: a divide that placed PE on the margins of the curriculum. This marginal status was aggravated by the narrow focus of the multi-activity ‘blocked’ curriculum that concentrated on the physical components of different sports and activities. In this context, PE became a ‘square-peg-in-a round-hole’.

However, in the 21st century, educational thinking is changing. Many professionals and academics are questioning traditional ways of thinking about education, knowledge and learning. We are increasingly seeing moves towards a view of knowledge that is more holistic, situated, emergent and ‘messy’. Learning experiences are becoming more personalised, engaging, open-ended and long-term. Consequently, the idea that PE is a narrow, time constrained and physical product is being replaced with a growing acknowledgement that there are multiple ways to approach PE: ways that offers significant opportunity for the subject’s future. This shift in thinking is presenting PE with a significant opportunity to align itself with contemporary educational developments.

2. *PE as a Lifelong & Life-wide Process*

As views about education broaden, the traditional view that PE only takes place in the formal setting of the primary or secondary school is being questioned. While school may be the only context in which all children and young people are guaranteed regular physical learning experiences, PE is becoming more than a fixed, narrowly defined school subject. For Penney & Jess (2004), PE is “... a lifelong endeavour, not something that can be pre-defined, pre-prescribed, or simplistically ‘delivered’ in a specified shot” (p. 272). In this sense, PE is an ongoing process for everyone and extends to their lives outside school and across their lifespan. PE is no longer the sole responsibility of schoolteachers but is increasingly involving a wide range of inter-generational stakeholders who work with people of all ages. This lifelong and

life-wide focus, however, does not diminish the importance of school PE. In fact, school PE now has a more central role to play as the catalyst, or hub, that creates the foundation for a lifelong and life-wide view of the subject area.

3. *Holistic PE*

As the focus of PE expands, many holistic approaches are now becoming a feature of the subject area. Holistic approaches offer a more integrated way of viewing PE because they not only focusses on physical learning, but also recognise the influence of cognitive, social and emotional learning (see Bailey, et. al, 2008). In recent years, examples of holistic approaches are regularly being added to the PE curriculum and are having a significant impact on the way that learning approaches are being developed. Meaningful PE, strengths-based learning, physical literacy, inquiry-based learning, skill theme approaches, student-designed games, non-linear pedagogy, play-based pedagogies, developmentally-appropriate practices, concepts-based PE and models-based practices like sport education are just some of these holistic approaches. PE is no longer a 'one-size-fits-all' experience but a subject area that is increasingly becoming more complex and multi-faceted and able to offer more personalised learning experiences for students.

4. *Lifelong and Holistic Physical Activity and Sport*

Physical activity and sport projects with lifelong and holistic goals have also become a common feature across education, the community and the research world. Projects focussing on physical literacy and physical culture are now part of this more integrated and holistic physical activity landscape. Research studies consistently report the holistic benefits of regular physical activity in relation to developmental, lifestyle, health and well-being factors. For school PE, studies regularly highlight positive associations between children's physical activity and holistic factors such as "bone health, muscular strength.....self-esteem, anxiety/stress, academic achievement, cognitive functioning, attention/concentration, confidence, and peer friendship" (Chalkley, Milton & Foster., 2015 p. 18). As such, the benefits of increased physical activity for holistic wellbeing are contributing to a "*renaissance in the way PE related arguments about the education of the body are framed and considered.*" (Thorburn and Gray, 2020, p. 1). In addition, formal and informal sporting opportunities for all ages have become a common feature in most local communities.

5. *More Stakeholders*

With the education, health, physical activity and sport sectors all broadening their foci, many new stakeholders now have more interest in, and influence on, the development of PE. Politicians, policy makers, national organisations, local authority managers, school leaders, health professionals, sport coaches, voluntary groups, celebrities, parents/carers, the media, and the public are all becoming more involved in the future direction of PE. Further, there has been a surge in the number of inter-generational professionals now working in PE, physical activity and sport. As such, PE is no longer the sole domain of schoolteachers but is expanding to include an ever-increasing range of interested parties. These stakeholders, however, do not have the same vision for PE: some want one specific sport to flourish, others want to develop the next world champions, some want less obesity, others want regular physical activity and some still view PE as 'less important'. In this complex and congested arena, the vision and the voices of PE teachers is becoming increasingly important as they are the one group of

stakeholders most likely to have a broad educational overview of the benefits of this more complex subject area.

6. The Importance of the local context

With PE expanding beyond the ‘one-size-fits-all’ mantra, local contexts take on a crucial role in the ‘*rich interactions*’ that see different forms of PE emerge. In this ever-changing world, with schools housed in different communities and having different histories, different facilities, different staff and different students, teachers increasingly need to recognise the influence of their local context. Schools are simply not the same as each other and, as such, the visions of teachers within each school and the PE programmes they develop will likely be strongly influenced by the school context.

The Importance of Teachers’ Visions

This short section has highlighted how change and expansion have become regular features across the education, health, physical activity, sport and PE arenas. However, while notions of integration and connection have become key topics of interest across these different sectors, the ‘*rich interactions*’ that now take place often result in more difference between groups: difference that unfortunately leads to more disconnection. For PE, with so many new developments and so many new stakeholders, there is a growing concern that the subject area will splinter into many separate ‘camps’ (See O’Connor & Jess, 2019). Therefore, while recent developments may offer PE the opportunity to move towards the centre of education, integrating these developments into a coherent and connected subject area represents a significant challenge. It is with this challenge in mind that the ‘visions and voices’ of PE teachers become critical to the future direction of the subject area. As noted above, while many stakeholders will understandably have their own specific visions for PE, it is the more general and educational remit of PE teachers that positions their visions at the heart of the debates and discussions about the lifelong and life-wide future of the subject area.

However, creating and articulating this lifelong educational vision does not ‘just happen’ but needs to be actively developed by physical educators as they work with each other, with other teachers and with other stakeholders. While the work of PE teachers may have traditionally been rooted in the gymnasium or school hall, as the subject area takes on a more complex identity, teachers increasingly have an important advocacy role for the subject area across and beyond the school setting. While these visions understandably help teachers recognise the complexities of their students’ learning in the classroom, they also make a significant contribution to debates about PE beyond the classroom and its relationship with education, sport, and health. These discussions and debates will likely be central to the ongoing development of a collective vision for PE and should help teachers build the confidence to share their ‘voice’ with other educators, professionals, academics, and lay-people. Given the current shift in contemporary thinking, the relationship physical educators develop with these other stakeholders will have a significant impact on many of these future developments.

Visions and Boundary Crossing

In the first article of this series, we introduced boundaries as the ‘lines’ that sets limits to the different spaces in which teachers think and practice. In the article, we explored how Lesley, a hypothetical teacher, had constantly developed and adapted her vision for PE during the early part of her career as she negotiated the different personal, task and environmental boundaries

she met in classes, departments and schools. In this current article, we return to Lesley and boundaries but now discuss how, as she progresses along her career-long vision-making journey, she not only negotiates boundaries but increasingly seeks to cross boundaries. Boundary crossing is becoming a key feature in the way we think about the way the PE world works. As noted earlier, instead of the simplistic ‘quick fixes’ that have long been pushed on teachers, there is a growing acknowledgment that PE is much more complex than originally thought. Subsequently, as teachers’ visions for PE develop over time, boundary crossing applies to both their thinking and their practice because it helps them explore different possibilities and move beyond the ‘same old, same old’. Critically, it offers opportunities for original and creative ways of constructing and sharing PE visions with others. In this sense, while boundary crossing may be a career-long personal activity it also takes place when PE teachers work with fellow PE teachers, with students in their school, with other colleagues across the school and also with other professionals and volunteers across the physical activity and sport communities. Because PE is no longer a ‘one-size-fits-all’ machine-like product, teachers now need to find ways to cross the many boundary lines that frame the different curriculum models, teaching approaches, student groups and stakeholder groups they meet on a regular basis. PE teachers increasingly need to push, blur and cross these boundaries to actively seek out the ‘*rich interactions*’ that will help them and others develop and enact their visions for PE. In particular, boundary crossing is imperative if more holistic and adaptive ways of thinking and working are to become a new reality. PE teachers therefore need to be the ‘boundary crossers’ who can initiate and support the integrated ways of thinking and working that lead to more coherent and connected educational visions for PE.

Becoming a Boundary Crosser

Since we last met Lesley (Jess et al, 2021), she has become head of a PE department in a secondary school. While Lesley had unconsciously crossed many boundaries during the early years of her career, in this new role, she now recognises the importance of boundary crossing as a means to continue the development of her personal vision and also that of her department colleagues. Over the last few years, the following 5 boundary crossing principles have acted as a useful framework for Lesley as she has purposefully set out to use boundary crossing as part of this collective vision making process. The principles are not presented in any specific order but often work in ways that are interconnected.

Table 1: Boundary Crossing Principles to Support Vision-Making (adapted from O’Connor & Jess, 2019)

- Develop a Hybrid Approach
- Enable Shared Voices
- Recognise Different Starting Points
- Create Flexible Support Structures
- Take time!!

Develop a Hybrid Approach

From the beginning of her new leadership role, Lesley realised that the knowledge and understanding informing the beliefs and visions of her departmental colleagues was not the same. While there seemed to be some similarities, there were many differences. She was also aware that some of her colleagues viewed the knowledge shaping the PE curriculum as a fixed product that was unlikely to change, while others saw this knowledge as much more dynamic and emergent. As such, the visions for PE across the department were contested and she was aware of some splintering and disconnection across the team. Lesley realised that compromises would have to be made, and that the best option would likely be a partial, negotiated agreement on the vision for the department. Because her colleagues each had their own personal visions for PE there would need to be some boundary crossing if some form of shared vision was to be developed. To make progress, Lesley set out to work with her colleagues in a boundary crossing exercise that would be the catalyst for a new hybrid PE programme.

Enable Shared Voices

Following a couple of awkward discussions, Lesley realised that successful boundary crossing was unlikely if she took a top-down approach that was primarily based on her own vision. She reasoned that a collaborative approach in which everyone had a 'voice' would be important in building points of agreement and some degree of shared thinking. This sharing process proved to be a bit bumpy in the early stages as she tried to get her colleagues to emotionally 'buy in' and recognise the value of working together to create a departmental vision and construct a hybrid approach. What quickly became apparent was that there needed to be a willingness for everyone to be flexible in their thinking, to trust each other, to communicate effectively and be part of a culture in which it was 'safe to fail'. Over time, as things moved forward slowly, the group recognised that there were periods when everyone 'got stuck', particularly when the ideas they shared were difficult to understand or unfamiliar and when colleagues were reluctant to let go of their own way of thinking. At its best, however, this participatory process began to reveal novel insights, a re-defining of some boundaries and, gradually, the development of new frameworks to integrate their thinking and practice.

Recognise Different Starting Points

Perhaps the most important decision Lesley made when she started her new job was to recognise the importance of the different starting points of each of the department members. She quickly realised that each group member had their own different histories which meant that from a boundary crossing perspective they all had different starting points. These differences were apparent in their knowledge, experiences and motivation to work in a collective boundary crossing manner. In addition, the group members had a history of working together before Lesley became the department head, so she also needed to understand this important collective starting point. This early stage of the boundary crossing exercise offered Lesley an opportunity to work out the main task, individual and environmental boundaries most likely to influence the future direction of the project (See Jess et al, 2021). For Lesley, seeking to understand these different starting points resulted in some unexpected changes to her plans, particularly in relation to those colleagues who were uncomfortable in looking beyond the fixed boundaries of the activities they taught. However, as the different perspectives began to weave together, the boundary crossing process gradually led to new, often unanticipated, outcomes as her colleagues individually and collectively began to find their own 'voice'.

Create Flexible Support Structures

Although Lesley made good use of the different starting points, she made the mistake of trying to cross the boundaries too quickly, almost in an ‘anything goes’ manner. It all got a bit ‘messy’ and she was worried that the situation might become too chaotic. Fortunately, following a discussion with one of her previous heads of department, she was able to re-orient the project by working with her colleagues to put structures in place to help guide the boundary crossing process. While this proved to be a stressful period for Lesley, the group managed to reach agreement on the nature and frequency of their meetings and decide which roles the different group members would take e.g. scheduling meetings and identifying tasks for discussion. Setting the boundaries of these tasks and deciding how the discussions would be carried out proved to be helpful, particularly in the next phase of their project. Agreeing what could and could not be discussed, the ways communication could be supported and focussing on a shared decision-making process proved to be key to the way that the project progressed. However, because the boundary crossing process was becoming more creative and non-linear, the group also agreed they would need some flexibility in these structures as the process progressed.

Take Time!!

Early in the boundary crossing exercise, Lesley realised that while their collective efforts may yield a positive and sustainable vision for the future, this would not be a ‘quick fix’. If nothing else, boundary crossing needed time to evolve and develop. Time was needed to develop relationships, build trust, understand different viewpoints and work through the translating process in a face-to-face manner. Time was needed to identify and create the shared understandings that emerged from the different ideas, resources and approaches. However, the impact of this collective exercise was not always predictable with some discussions seemingly leading nowhere while other discussions saw one boundary being crossed and leading to another unexpected development or additional boundary. Critically, Lesley recognised that developing an organic and flexible boundary crossing approach with appropriate structures in place is a time-consuming and emotional exercise. From a vision and practice perspective, by giving the project time, boundary crossing has started to produce both adaptive and creative results and has gradually become a key open-ended feature of the department’s work.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed how the future for PE looks bright. As present-day PE becomes more complex, educational and far-reaching, we have presented the view that teachers’ visions for PE are fast becoming the key driver for this bright future. With many old and new developments informing PE, the ‘*rich interactions*’ that take place between these different factors creates a context in which many different and new versions of PE are being introduced. To harness this complexity, we have argued that PE teachers will need to become the boundary crossers of the future who can develop and share the forward-thinking visions that will lead to this bright future for PE.

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