

Children's voices can influence provision and practice in physical education

Associate Professor Maura Coulter (Dublin City University, Ireland)

Professor Stefan Ward (Central Washington University, USA)

There has been an increasing interest in children's ideas and understandings of the ways they engage with physical activity and physical education (O'Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010). The key purpose of primary school physical education curricula is to support learning through experiences that are satisfying, challenging, social, and enjoyable. These are more likely to lead to individuals committing to a physically active lifestyle. However, only if it has relevance to their lives, will a child actively engage in physical education (Kretchmar, 2000).



Children's agency in their own learning in physical education

Physical education contributes to holistic learning and development in the physical, cognitive, and affective domains by equipping children with skills knowledge and dispositions for lifelong physical activity involvement. Educators who focus on teaching appropriate children's

activities, developing relevant life skills, promoting a positive and safe environment, and involving children in programme decisions will contribute towards developing meaningful physical education and curricula (Guadalupe & Curtner-Smith, 2020). Listening to and accommodating children's voices can promote the quality of a child's experience. Individualisation and personalisation

of children's perspectives can result in more children finding physical education experiences significant to their lives (Beni et al. 2017; 2019). Without this collective voice, curriculum developers and teachers will not be in a position to facilitate and promote opportunities for meaningful learning experiences in physical education or children's physical activity habits (Coulter et al, 2011; 2021).

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In order to help children, connect their experiences and learning, it is first necessary to understand the nuances of the children's experiences and what influenced their enjoyment. This can help educators develop curricula that can help motivate pupils and work towards lifelong learning and a physically active lifestyle.

Children's own lives and experiences provide the starting point for teacher decision-making. Children may identify experiences as more meaningful when they involve social interaction, fun, physical skill learning, and appropriate levels of challenge (Beni et al, 2017; Hogman, et al, 2020). In our view a key part of the teacher's role is to improve the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed that will allow children to access different movement experiences supported by the reason they may want to engage in these experiences. The best approach to achieving this consistently is through the development of appropriate curricula.

Consideration by curriculum developers, teachers and teacher educators is vital in ensuring that all stakeholders can provide meaningful learning experiences for their children. In this way, the enactment of curricula becomes a process of careful negotiation between people and their context (Hitchings & Latham, 2017). Currently, in Ireland,

children are involved in consultation meetings with curriculum developers as they develop a framework for a new primary school curriculum.

Physical activity opportunities available after school and in the community should be considered in physical education ensuring that skills learned in school, such as gymnastics or football, can be easily transferred to other contexts. This has implications for the activities that can engage children motivating them and giving them the confidence and competence to take part. Utilising notice boards to advertise and provide details for local opportunities for physical activity and sports clubs and publicising these details in school bulletins or newsletter can be useful. Knowledge of the locality, availability of activities, and players involved (parents, school personnel, local community leaders) is the first step towards engagement.

As well as capturing the informal activities children prefer, physical education might also better acknowledge children's roles as spectators and consumers of physical activity through social media. Affirming the validity of children's interest in, for example, skateboarding and providing opportunities to explore and critically analyse connections between their own participation and their social media

engagement is fundamental to their physical education. The primary classroom is the ideal context for developing and affirming children's interest in other aspects of physical activity, physical education and sport. Cross curricular links provide rich opportunities for children to voice where their passion in relation to physical activity and sport lies such as: designing posters or sports apparel in art; league tables in numeracy; sports journalism or procedural writing in literacy; mapping opportunities for physical activity in your locality in geography (Patton & Parker, 2013); and measuring pulse rates in science. Digital technology and social media play a large part in children's lives and rather than criticise it, why not use it as a means of getting children physically active. Activities such as Geocaching, which involves using a mobile phone app along with basic orienteering skills, and using other apps or technology to film and review dance or gymnastic routines all have relevancy to children's physical activity experiences. Through these avenues, children's voices, priorities and experiences could then be more centrally located in influencing decisions about the 'what' and 'how' of primary physical education. (Hogman et al., 2020)

How can teachers listen to the child's voice?

Most teachers in primary tend to be generalist teachers and have developed knowledge and understanding of the children in their classes over time from a holistic perspective and have fostered personal relationships with the children. These established

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relationships with the children provide opportunities for the teacher to listen and respond to children's positions and to help guide lesson planning. Learning tasks need to be flexible and accommodate planned as well as unpredictable outcomes. The majority of children in primary education are taught physical education in co-educational and age-grouped classes with a range of developmental differences possible therefore planning for progression in learning is complex when each child is given equal or enhanced status in the learning relationship. When planning for progression developmentally appropriate activities should foster learning in all domains (physical, cognitive and affective) using actions such as performing, demonstrating, exploring, creating, problem solving, competing and reflecting.

Physical education is a shared experience so it is important to provide opportunities for interpersonal interaction and to avoid activities that exclude or isolate children such as those which may be overly competitive or eliminate children when planning for progression. In addition, provision of regular opportunities for 'checking in' or a short discussion throughout the lesson, supported by teacher input are important to ensure goals are achieved and adaptations made where necessary, while ensuring that the talk does not take over the lesson and take from the active components. Creating an environment where children are challenged in a fair and respectful way, where they feel supported and competent, and where they



have choice and voice will allow for meaningful learning experiences. The generalist classroom teacher is well versed in providing differentiated activities in literacy and numeracy and these pedagogical approaches can be adapted for use in the outside, pitch, sports hall or gym.

Children need to be continually consulted whereby a more current and accurate picture of what we as teachers and policy makers can do beyond the delivery of content, with a view to educating children to be more proactive in articulating what their needs are. For example, their needs might include any or all of the following: which activity they would like to undertake (soccer or gymnastics); where they might undertake the activity (outside or in the sports-hall); how they are challenged within that activity (provide three levels of difficulty and the child can choose which one to undertake); or how they might carry out an assessment (self-assess or

peer assess). We must acknowledge that children's experiences and voice have pedagogical relevance and implications for primary teachers. There are features of curriculum development and enactment which can also be considered such as acknowledging subjectivity and providing meaningful experiences, focusing on variety of content, ensuring that the child has agency (voice and choice) in the design of their physical education programme and for the teacher to be supported to enact these features (Ní Chróinín et al, 2020).

How can parent's support their children's voice and learning in PE?

Parents also have a role in how their child learns in relation to physical activity and education (Coulter et al., 2020). To ensure parents have positive attitudes and are well informed about their child's learning in physical education, teachers and school leaders take professional



responsibility as educators and ensure a two-way communication with parents. Teachers must encourage children to share with their parents what they did in physical education lessons and parents must ensure they seek this information in order to have a holistic view of their child's learning across the cognitive, affective and physical domains. Ways to ensure parents support their child's learning in physical education need to be explored. There are a number of suggestions to help with the sharing of this information already being used, such as: understanding parental contexts and communicating accordingly; using physical education associations and advocacy for the subject; displaying school physical education and physical activity policies on the school's website; advertising the physical education programme on the school newsletter with photographs showing the children participating in particular activities; using 'class dojo' or similar web based sharing platforms to share photographs of each week's activities which can be used to

prompt discussions about physical education activity at home and hosting information evenings and invitations to 'come and watch a PE lesson' have also proved useful in some schools.

Conclusion

Although, there is a growing body of research suggesting that incorporating pupil input should be integral to any learning process, it is still rare that they are directly consulted (Domville et al., 2019). Utilising the child's voice can be a very effective way to foster their knowledge in the physical, cognitive, and affective domains in physical education and physical activity. Allowing children to share their input in a safe and supportive environment ensuring that they have a sense that they are being listened to can promote a sense of autonomy that creates a reciprocal atmosphere between children, teachers and parents. This sense of reciprocity has tremendous potential to foster engagement and lead to lifelong participation in health and physically active lifestyles.

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Pen Portrait

Maura Coulter is Associate Professor in the School of Arts Education and Movement and Associate Dean for Research in the Institute of Education at Dublin City University. Her research focuses on self-study of practice and meaningful learning in primary physical education.

Stefan Ward is a visiting Fulbright Scholar at the Institute of Education at Dublin City University. He is a Professor and the Program Director for the Physical Education School Health Program at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington where he focuses on research areas that include physical education.

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