

Physical Education: “The future ain’t what it used to be!”*

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Introduction

The story of Physical Education contains a rich tapestry of initiatives, influences and developments, which have variously shaped, or contributed to shaping, national systems either through assimilation or adaptation. Taking evolutionary developments into account, it is unsurprising that different and various forms of structures and practices are evident across the world in which geo-political entities are characterised by diversity but with some elements of congruence in PE and school sport concepts and delivery. The congruence is seen in a presence largely grounded in the Aristotelian concept of 'harmonious balance' and variously linked with a range of instrumental outcomes.

Physical education is often advocated as a source of a plethora of positive developmental characteristics from early childhood, through adolescence to late teen-age and now, when it is perceived to be a lifelong process, throughout adulthood, epitomised in the notion of the 'physically educated person'. Over the past century and a half, there has been ebb and flow among differing, sometimes contradicting, physical education curriculum themes: *inter alia* physical, educational, social control (order, discipline and obedience to authority), physical fitness (labour productivity, military defence and strong mothers), health (therapeutic), body shape, competitive performance-related sports and associated physical/motor skills development, play and movement concepts, personal, psycho-social, social and moral development (collectively promoting character building), adventure education, individual, lifetime, or recreational activities, antidote to inactivity and sedentary lifestyle illnesses as well as an alleged obesity epidemic etc. The perceived role of physical education has expanded (it has been granted a role in achieving broader educational objectives such as whole school improvement, community development and effecting personal behavioural and attitudinal change) over the years and to some extent there has been a re-affirmation of its purposes for which some people have long such argued. Ostensibly as a school subject, with such broad brush scope and potential, physical education is in a relatively unique and indispensable position with some kind of responsibility in someway and somehow addressing many contemporary issues with its perceived distinctive features within the educational process with characteristics not offered by any other learning or school experience. A paradox here is the perception by many of physical education as a 'non-cognitive' subject, inferior in status to other so-called academic subjects and by association, inferior status of physical education teachers.

In order to convert the 'Mission Impossible' title of my presentation into 'Mission Achievable', I shall provide a rhetoric to reality worldwide situation overview of school physical education with specific attention to curriculum time allocation, subject status, and curriculum aims and content, including,

wherever appropriate, references to so-called ‘credit crunch’/financial crisis period developments. I shall then attempt to crystal-ball gaze by offering thoughts on the potential development of physical education as a life-long process **in partnership** with well-being/welfare and other interest-vested agencies with reference to issues such as quality and content of physical education-related curricula and preparation of teachers. My overall intentions are to provoke thought and reflection by raising issues, which may challenge some orthodoxies.

1. Rhetoric

The alleged distinctive profile of physical education with its unique characteristics is summed up in the November 2007 European Parliament’s *Resolution on the Role of Sport in Education* (2007/2086NI). The preamble to the *Resolution* alludes to physical education as “the only school subject, which seeks to prepare children for a healthy lifestyle and focuses on their overall physical and mental development, as well as imparting important social values such as fairness, self-discipline, solidarity, team spirit, tolerance and fair play...” and together with sport is deemed to be “among the most important tools of social integration”. The preamble also recognises a decrease in “the number of PE lessons... in the past decade” across Europe in both primary and secondary schools, that there are divergences in provision of facilities and equipment between the Member States and that physical education teacher training programmes differ widely with “an increasingly widespread practice whereby PE is taught in school by teachers with inadequate specialist training”. There is also recognition that “there is no appropriate coordination aimed at reconciling school and out-of-school sporting activities, and at making better use of existing establishments, and that the link between them varies from one Member State to another”. My own research (Hardman, 2007; Hardman & Marshall, 2000; Hardman & Marshall, 2009) bears testimony to these inadequacies, some of which I shall return to in due course.

Of the *Resolution*’s 62 items, a significant number have either specific references to, or have resonance for, physical education. At several points of the *Resolution*, physical education subsumed in sport, as a generic term, is linked with socio-cultural, educational and social values, psycho-social qualities, socialisation, inclusion, moral codes of behaviour, cognitive and physical development, healthy well-being, healthy diet and other benefits to be derived from engagement in regular physical activity. Implicit in the European Parliament *Resolution* is the view that physical education has the propensity to make significant and distinctive contributions to children, schools and wider society: respect for the body, integrated development of mind and body, understanding of physical activity in health promotion, psycho-social development (self-esteem and self-confidence), social and cognitive development and academic achievement, socialisation and social (tolerance and respect for others, co-operation and cohesion, leadership, team spirit, antidote to anti-social behaviour) skills and aesthetic, spiritual, emotional and moral (fair play, character building) development, a panacea for resolution of

the obesity epidemic, inactivity crisis and sedentary lifestyles, enhancement of quality of life etc. Two fundamental questions arise here:

1. Where or what is the evidence to support any or all of the educational outcomes or benefits claimed on physical education's behalf?
2. How can physical education deliver all that is claimed in its name?

Relevant to both questions is a list of associated questions. For example: how is it possible to impact on children's obesity with only one or two 30-minute physical education lessons a week?; how can we develop a broad range of movement skills in large class sizes of 30 or more pupils, seen, in some instances, by the physical educator for less than 36 hours a year?; is even an hour of daily physical education enough?; and with the knowledge that the intensity, duration, and frequency of physical activity do more than anything to immediately impact on student health, how can we successfully help students experience the joy of movement in physical education classes while urging them to meet target heart rates? Maybe it is an issue of 'changing minds' and, thereby, 'winning bodies'! We need to juxtapose advocacy rhetoric with scientific evidence. Let me now turn to some realities.

2. Realities

a) The Situation of Physical Education in Schools

Within general education systems, a majority of countries (89% primary schools; 87% secondary schools) have legal requirements for physical education. Together with countries where there is no compulsory requirement for physical education but where it is generally practised, this figure rises to 95% (in the European region, it is all countries). Physical education provision during compulsory schooling years varies across regions and countries according to age or year stage of attendance. Overall the average number of years during which physical education is taught in schools is 12 (range 8-14) with a 73% cluster of 11 and 12 years. The start-end years' continuum and associated access to physical education are significant for individual development and continuing participation in physical activity.

An initial reality is that despite legislation commitment to access to physical education in schools or as a matter of general practice, such provision is far from being assured. International surveys over the last decade indicate that almost 79% of countries (in Europe 89%; in Asia and North America only 33%) adhere to implementation regulations and delivery but they can, and do, differ from school to school in the majority of countries. Conversely, globally in 21% of countries, physical education is not actually being implemented in accordance with legal obligations or expectations. This proportion rises to 33% in Central and Latin America and the Middle East, 40% in Africa, and 67% in Asia and North America; in Europe only 11% of countries allege a shortfall in implementation.

The 'gap' between official policy and regulations and actual practice is geographically widespread. Pervasive factors contributing to it are seen in devolvement of responsibilities for curriculum implementation, loss of time allocation to other competing prioritised subjects, lower importance of school physical education in general, lack of official assessment, financial constraints, diversion of

resources elsewhere, inadequate material resources, deficiencies in numbers of qualified personnel and attitudes of significant individuals such as head teachers. Additionally, exemption from physical education classes, granted on presentation of a medical certificate, is only acknowledged by a few countries. Such exemption practice on medical grounds is recognisably widespread throughout the world, thus perhaps undermining its status within the curriculum. An issue here is that exemption is rarely sought from other subjects except, perhaps, for religious education classes in some countries.

Examples from across the world show disparities between state policy legal requirements and implementation with clear indications of non-compliance with regulations and especially so in countries where curriculum responsibility lies with education districts or individual schools and are, therefore, subject to local interpretations:

- **Venezuela**
There is “a national policy (but) the government does not take care of it; there are laws but they are not followed” (PE Teacher)
- **Finland**
“Legal status is the same, but in practice not. The freedom of curriculum planning at schools has led to situations where implementation of physical education is not done according to the regulations concerning the weekly lessons’ (University Professor)

b) Physical Education Curriculum Time Allocation

A second reality relates to achievability of all of the outcomes ascribed to physical education given the amount of curriculum time allocation. The issue of time allocation is generally complicated not only by localised control of curricula but also by practices of offering options or electives, which provide opportunities for additional engagement in physical education and/or school sport activity. Student ‘uptake’ of such opportunities can vary within, and between, countries and not all take advantage of the extra provision. Whatever, the options/electives available may be included in curriculum time allocation indicated in some countries’ survey responses and, hence, may not accurately represent the prescribed time allocation for all students in at least some schools in those countries where additional opportunities exist. However, data triangulation produces a scenario of policy prescription or guidelines not actually being implemented in practice for a variety of reasons as exemplified in Lithuania and Nigeria:

- **Lithuania**
Even though there is a legal basis, “it is difficult to put regulations into practice; the School Boards decide PE hours (obligatory and supplementary); the 1995 Law on PE and Sports stipulated 3 lessons but only 26% achieve this in classes 1-4, moreover, 38.9% do not have a third lesson; fewer than 10% schools comply with the 1995 Act for 3 lessons” (Puisiene, Volbekiene, Kavaliauskas & Cikotiene, 2005, p.445)
- **Nigeria**
“Theoretically, five weekly lessons... are recommended for elementary and secondary schools...Unfortunately, however, at neither level is the weekly workload really adhered to” (Salokun, 2005, p.501).

Over the years, the various surveys' findings have revealed variations in the amounts prescribed or expected time allocated to physical education (and actually delivered). 'Guaranteed' access does not equate with equal amounts of access, testimony to which are the variations in timetable allocation. The situation is being exacerbated by curriculum time allocated to other ('competing') subjects and in some countries is deteriorating where recent educational reforms have resulted in physical education teaching time reductions as observed in Taiwan:

- **Taiwan**
"Mergence of PE with health education has led to the reduction in the teaching time of physical activities (and) the time allocated to PE (is) affected (by an increase in) the teaching time of English... and new subjects (e.g. computer and dialects) (have been) introduced into the curriculum" (PE Teacher)

Physical education has not escaped the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009. In California, USA, Governor Schwarzenegger proposed cuts to college physical education:

"Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed trimming state money for physical education classes leaving athletic programs at the two-year schools in doubt... Schwarzenegger's proposal comes as he tries to cut billions from the state budget" (Krupnick, 2009)

The allocated amount of physical education curriculum time can be determined from policy and/or curriculum documents but local levels of actual control of curriculum time allocation give rise to variations between schools and, therefore, difficulties in specifying definitive figures for a country or region. However, some general tendencies can be identified. During the primary school phase years, there is an average **100** minutes (in 2000, the average was **116** minutes) with a range of 30–250 minutes; in secondary schools, there is an average of **102** minutes (in 2000, it was **143** minutes) with a range of 30–250 minutes per week. There are some clearly discernible regional differences in time allocation: European Union countries **109** minutes (range of 30-240 minutes) with clusters around 60 and 90 minutes in primary/basic schools and **101** minutes (range 45-240 minutes) with a cluster around 90 minutes in secondary and high schools (notably, figures in 2000 were higher with an average of **121 minutes** in primary schools and **117 minutes** in secondary schools, thus representing a perceived reduction in curriculum time allocation in the period 2000-2007); Central and South America (including Caribbean countries) **73** minutes in primary schools and **87** minutes in secondary schools. There is a gradual 'tailing off' in upper secondary (high) schools (post 16+ years) in several countries and optional courses become more evident (Hardman & Marshall, 2009).

c) Physical Education Subject and Teacher Status

Legal and perceived actual status of physical education and its teachers is a contentious issue. Data indicate that equal subject legal status is claimed in 76% of countries. Africa, where only 20% of countries indicate equal legal status of subjects, represents a marked contrast with Europe's 91%. Data indicate that across all regions except Europe, in practice physical education is considered to have lower status than other subjects. Notably in the Middle East and North American regions, all

countries/states indicate that physical education's actual status is perceived to be lower than that of other school subjects. High proportions of perceived lower status of physical education are also seen in Africa (80%), Asia (75%) and Central and Latin America (67%), whilst in Europe lower subject status is reported in less than one third (30%) of countries. Exemplars of physical education's perceived lower status are widespread:

- **Italy**
“In primary schools, PE is often regarded as free play and in the upper levels of secondary schools, it has lower status than other subjects... Legally PE is like other subjects, but often it is the Cinderella of the school” (PE Teacher)
- **USA**
“PE is not an academic subject, so it is inappropriate to have it as an academic subject’... ‘We do not require students to go to the dentist, take showers, get more sleep, and eat balanced meals – we shouldn’t require PE either” (Grossman, 2009).

Physical education's inferior status and lower value as a mere antidote to academic subjects are evident in parental pre-disposition to favouring academic subjects with time spent on physical education perceived as a threat to academic achievement as testified by European observers:

- **France**
“Unfortunately parents don’t protest (when physical education lessons are cancelled) and it (physical education) is not considered as fundamental” (PE/Sport Teacher)
- **Germany**
“There is absolutely no protest from parents, when PE lessons are cancelled. There is always a protest if lessons e.g. maths, German, English, etc. are cancelled. Occasionally parents demand that PE lessons are ‘converted’ to maths etc.” (PE Teacher)

Frequency of cancellation of lessons is one indicator of subject status. Evidence indicates that the low status and esteem of the subject are detrimental to its position: in many countries (44%), physical education lessons are cancelled more often than other so called academic subjects; 41% of countries indicate that physical education is the same as all other subjects when it comes to cancellation; and 5% indicate physical education is less likely to be cancelled than other subjects, with 10% indicating that it is never cancelled. Apart from its attributed low status as of little educational value etc., other reasons for the cancellation of physical education include: government financial cuts; insufficient numbers of qualified physical education teachers; adverse weather conditions; the use of the dedicated physical education lesson space for examinations; preparation for examinations; concerts; ceremonial occasions such as celebratory prize giving; spiritual exercises as at Easter time; and use as dining areas.

Table 1 shows that in 28% of countries physical education teachers do not enjoy the same status as other subject teachers but there are regional differences. In Central and Latin America, Asia and Europe, over two-thirds indicate that the status is the same. However, in Africa, North America and

the Middle East the situation is reversed and in a majority of countries, there are clear indications of lower status accorded to physical education teachers when compared with other subject teachers.

Table 1.

Physical Education Teacher Status: Globally/Regionally (%)			
Global/Region	Higher Status	Same Status	Lower Status
Global	-	72	28
Africa	-	40	60
Asia	-	67	33
Central/Latin America	-	67	33
Europe	-	85	15
Middle East		33	67
North America		25	75

A Ghana example illustrates the different status suffered by physical education teachers:

“PE teachers do not enjoy the same respect as teachers of compulsory academic subjects... The status of most PE teachers, particularly in suburbs and villages, leaves much to be desired. It is often argued that they lack professionalism in the way they go about their job” (Ammah & Kwaw, 2005, p.321).

d) The Physical Education Curriculum

With educational reforms, associated philosophical and pedagogical changes, and in response to concepts of active life styles in life-long learning contexts and the perceived obesity epidemic, some curricular changes are now occurring in some parts of the world. Some shifts in aims, themes and contents are evident with signs that the purpose and function are being redefined to accommodate broader life-long educational outcomes including healthy well-being and links with personal and social development are occurring in some countries. New activities are being incorporated into some programmes (fitness-based activities such as aerobics and jazz gymnastics and popular culture ‘excitement’ activities such as snow-boarding and in-line skating etc.). Increasing attention to quality physical education concepts and programmes is also evident.

i) Physical Education Curriculum Aims

Examination of the thematic aims of curricula suggests that physical education is primarily concerned with development of motor skills and refinement of sport-specific skills (35% in primary schools and 33% in secondary schools respectively). This tendency is encapsulated in a South Korean commentary, where “... PE strongly focuses on sport skills rather than health promotion and the affective domain. Most physical educators still have a traditional perspective that the subject’s basic role is to develop motor skills in a variety of sports” (Kang & You, 2005, p.583)

Aims linked to broader lifelong educational outcomes such as promotion of health-related fitness (17% of primary and 18% of secondary schools’ curricula) and active lifestyles (12% and 14% of primary and secondary schools respectively) as well as recognition of physical education’s contributory role in personal and social (21% and 23% of primary and secondary schools’ curricula

respectively) but less so of moral (4% and 3% of primary and secondary schools' physical education curricula respectively) development are apparent.

ii) Physical Education Curriculum Activity Areas

According to 'official' documents, many countries commit to a 'broad and balanced' range of curricular activities' opportunities and at one level, this would appear to be reflected in practice with the range of different activities taught within many physical education programmes. However, analysis of data gathered from international surveys challenges the actual extent to which breadth and balance are provided. Examination of activity areas' time allocation across the world reveals how, in practice, competitive sport activities such as Games and Track & Field Athletics dominate the physical activity experiences of pupils globally, thus echoing the indications in the World-wide Survey I (Hardman and Marshall, 2000) of an orientation to a performance sport discourse in which there is in both primary and secondary schools a predominantly Games (team and individual) orientation followed by Track and Field Athletics and Gymnastics. Together these three activity areas account for 77% and 79% of physical education curriculum content in primary and secondary schools respectively. Collectively, swimming, dance and outdoor adventure activities are accorded only 18% of activity time allocation at primary level and only 13% at secondary level (refer table 2.). Such orientation runs counter to societal trends outside of school and raises issues surrounding meaning and relevance to young people as well as quality issues of programmes provided.

Table 2.

PE Curriculum Activity Areas		
	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
Activity Area	Curriculum %	Curriculum %
Games	41	43
Gymnastics	18	14
Dance	7	4
Swimming	6	5
Outdoor Adventure Activities	5	4
Track & Field	18	22
Other	7	8

The competitive sports scenario is typified in African and Oceanic region contexts:

- **Tunisia**
 “Contents center much more on sport activities than on physical development or broad physical experiences (with) individual over team sports (favoured). The most frequently taught contents are gymnastics... track and field... and team sports...” (Zouabi, 2005, p.679)
- **Australia**
 “Most (PE classes) are oriented around sport(s). Teachers use HPE classes as practice sessions and/or selection opportunities for sporting events. In most HPE classes it is typical to see students playing volleyball, soccer, field hockey, tennis, rugby, netball, Australian Rules football and doing track and field” (Tinning, 2005, p.60).

iii) Physical Education Curriculum Relevance and Quality Issues

A third reality within the physical education domain relates to quality and relevance to the outside world of school physical education curricula, especially in a context of significant societal changes and concomitantly in values and norms over the last 40 years. The scenario of a discrepancy between what the school offers and what the pupils are looking for is not untypical in many countries. An emerging theme in recent surveys is repeated teachers' and officials' references to pupils no longer seeing the significance of physical education as a school subject: the traditional content of physical education and/or sports activity has little relevance to their life-style context. The overall situation is not only seen in content of curricula but also in extra-curricular activity structures and emphasis on school sport. In some countries, this situational orientation may be counter to, or not aligned with, the lifestyle needs and demands, trends and tendencies of young people in out-of-school settings. Collectively, the experiences acquired from unwilling engagement in competitive sport-related physical education are a 'turn-off'. It would appear that this goes beyond those who have traditionally been either put off by, or not enjoyed, physical education. In some instances, there appears to be a much deeper rejection of physical education as a legitimate school activity.

- **England**
"PE lessons are the cause of our unhappiest school day memories...Nearly a third of people claimed it was the unhappiest experience of junior and secondary school – outranking exams, bullying, teachers and school dinners" (Editorial, Cricket Foundation Survey, 2009)
- **Tunisia**
"Students seem to be decreasingly motivated to take part in SPE (Sport and Physical Education) in its current form. This is clearly expressed by the high number of students who stay away from PE lessons, and by the increasing number of dispensations" (Zouabi, 2005, p.674).

Media headlines as exemplified in the USA and the UK draw attention to questionable quality in physical education practice:

"So just how bad is your child's gym class? PE programs often poorly run, provide few health benefits". "Experts Dissatisfied With PE Classes" (The Associated Press, Jan. 17, 2005)

"Call for Scottish PE overhaul after damning report" (Ferguson, 2009)

There are many examples testifying to negative experiences and impacts, lack of commitment to teaching and pedagogical and didactical inadequacies. The failure of teachers to provide meaningful experiences is underpinned by individuals' commentaries on physical education in schools:

- **Slovenia**
"Inappropriate curriculum for PE in elementary and secondary school. Curriculum is not realistic and in many parts has nothing together with practice" (PE Teacher)
- **USA**
"Our society seems to have forgotten that PE is a daily dose of physical and emotional torture. At least it was for kids like me, anyway... When I was in school, I'd have given anything - my two front teeth, my "Dirty Dancing" cassette tape, absolutely anything - to get out of PE for a single day. Year after year I suffered through having to play the

same games, like Run the Mile Even Though it's August and You Could Die of Heat Stroke, Lay on Your Back and Kick at a Giant Canvas Ball While Everyone Can See Down Your Shorts, and, my personal favorite, Hold Out Your Thigh to be Pinched by the Body-Fat Percentage Counter” (McGaughey, 2006).

e) Research

Generally accepted is physical education’s distinctive contribution to physical development. The physical focus has shifted over time from health-related fitness rationale, through performance-related considerations, to impacts of sedentary behaviours with physical activity as a public health issue and in the political limelight with lifelong engagement in physical activity as a widely accepted goal, even though evidence of significant benefits from physical education programmes and experiences as a foundation for life-long activity is scarce, limited or not scientifically proven.

It is claimed that a value of physical education lies in acquisition of personal, social and socio-moral skills to produce a form of ‘social capital’ to enable young people to function successfully (and acceptably) in a broad range of social situations (Bailey, 2005). The claim is grounded in a belief that physical education is a suitable vehicle for personal and social responsibility and pro-social skills. But research evidence is inconclusive and impacts come heavily qualified; and longitudinal studies and evaluations are thin on the ground. There is a need for greater understanding of mechanisms that lead to improved social behaviour, i.e. of the process of change.

With specific reference to socialisation, research concerned with attitudes and their relation to behaviour in a range of sport-related contexts has proven inconclusive and the challenge remains to determine why people do not engage in sporting activities, even though its health and general well being enhancement effects are widely accepted. Whilst there are many protagonists who have provided supportive evidence for the benefits to be derived from engagement in physical activity and socialising effects on positive behavioural outcomes, there are also antagonists, whose research points to dis-benefits and negative outcomes (Hardman, 1997). Many of the underlying assumptions on the influence of sporting activity (and by implication, physical education) as a socialising agency, facilitating social accomplishments, promoting social status and mobility, transmitting dominant modes of behaviour and developing positive character traits have been challenged (Ogilvie & Tutko; Bailey, 1975) and have remained unsubstantiated and unproven. Some evidence (Lambert, 1973; Krotee and Benson, 1986) suggests that sport is divisive and can militate against integrative values.

The affective domain comprises emotions, preference, choice and feeling, beliefs, aspirations, attitudes and appreciations, i.e. psychological well-being including self-esteem (there is strong evidence for this), self-perception, and personality development but again empirical evidence is scarce and other variables may be contributory factors. The individual’s experience in physical education/sport determines whether participation is viewed as positive or negative: “joyless experiences” (McNab, 1999) may be one significant causal factor in high teen-age drop-out rates from sporting activity. Intrinsic factors

(excitement of physical activity, personal accomplishment and 'doing skills') are more important than extrinsic factors (winning, rewards and pleasing others) (Wankel & Kreisel, 1985); personal achievement and task mastery are more important than competition in determining positive perceptions. "Where participants experience excessive pressure to win, have low perceived ability and feel unattached to teams, low self-esteem may follow" (Wankel & Kreisel, 1985; Martens, 1993), which in turn could lead to an increase in disaffection and truancy" (Kirk et. al., 2000). Physical education curricula need to link learning more closely to the social, cultural and gender structure of society in which children live (Garrett, 2004). Physical activity can be associated with affective development but again mechanisms are unclear as is the relationship between them – is it causal or casual?! Also what is not clear is whether different forms of physical activity are more beneficial than others.

A number of claims, often unsubstantiated, have been made on the broad educational impact of physical education upon young people. There is a prevailing belief that engagement in physical education is, somehow a 'good thing'. Robust evidence to test the claims of physical education benefits is needed but accumulation of evidence suggests physical education can have some/many benefits for some/many young people given the right social, contextual and pedagogical circumstances. Research (different/better) is needed to focus on contexts and processes that are most likely to exploit the potential, if any, of the physical education learning environment for young people's educational benefit.

3. Sustainable Future Directions

A fundamental question is what should be done to secure a sustainable future for school physical education and sport? One answer is to accept the situation for what it is and suffer the consequences; the other is to confront the situation and address available options to help resolve some of the problems. Whatever the direction for resolution, there is little point in 'fiddling' whilst physical education in particular 'burns'.

The importance of physical education for the development of life-long physical activity habits and health promotion and the importance of participation in physical education in the development of social skills needed by our society, as well as the importance of physical education in the development of cognitive function have not been well researched or understood or articulated beyond the community of physical educators. The attention devoted to increasing levels of obesity and the association with physical inactivity might appear to bode well for physical education but this association may prove to be a mixed blessing because arguably there is a risk of ignoring many of the most beneficial outcomes of quality physical education if the subject matter is reduced to simply being a means to countering the obesity problem. It is tempting for physical educators to see their subject matter as the solution to children's obesity. After all, if children do nothing else, most of them do at least experience some physical activity during some 10-12 years of required school physical education. Unfortunately, while some physical activity is certainly better than none, the physical

education profession alone cannot solve the obesity crisis. This is not to suggest that physical educators should not try to stimulate young people's activity engagement, and help them to understand the value of physical activity and healthy eating. Inactive lifestyles and unhealthy diets ignored by families, communities, media, and some kind of legislation, mean that the best efforts of the physical education profession to turn the tide of obesity will not succeed.

For socialisation into physical activity engagement, the school physical education curriculum and its delivery need to be conceptually and contextually re-appraised. The widespread practice in physical education curricula to provide experiences, which merely serve to reinforce achievement-orientated competition performance sport, is a narrow and unjustifiable conception of the role of physical education. In this context, it is unsurprising that pupil interest in physical education declines throughout the school years and youngsters become less active in later school years. For many boys and girls, such programmes do not provide personally meaningful and socially relevant experiences and they limit participatory options rather than expand horizons and thus, are contrary to trends and tendencies in out-of-school settings amongst young people. If physical education is to play a valued useful role in the promotion of active lifestyles, it must move beyond interpretations of activity based upon performance criteria: its current frame of reference should be widened. In some countries, its content has little relevance to young people's life-style context and there are considerable discrepancies between what occurs in physical education lessons and what is going on outside and beyond the school. The preservation of physical education in its old state is not the way to proceed; it is time to move into the 21st century! Engagement needs to be relevant and meaningful to sustain regular and habitual participation in, and out of and beyond school. In the light of available scientific evidence, individual needs and societal trends, inactivity levels and sedentary lifestyles patterns and circumstantially associated rising levels of obesity, consideration of the re-conceptualisation and reconstruction of physical education is essential.

Over the years, there has been an apparent steady shift in physical education to a broader, more balanced approach. Physical education curricula need to be based on the vision that the knowledge, skills and understanding acquired should benefit students throughout their lives and help them thrive in an ever-changing world by enabling them to acquire physical and health literacy, and to develop the comprehension, capacity and commitment needed to lead healthy, active lives and to promote the benefits of healthy active living. Physical literacy (the ability to move with competence in a variety of physical activities) and health literacy (the skills needed to obtain, understand and use the information to make good decisions for health) are key in curriculum development: the curriculum is about helping students develop the necessary skills to make healthy choices!

One example of innovation in physical education curriculum development is a recent initiative in Ontario, Canada. The *Ontario Health and Physical Education Model* (Ontario Government, 2010) is made up of three distinct but related strands: *Healthy Living*, *Active Living*, and *Movement Competence: Skills, Concepts and Strategies*. A further set of expectations related to *Living Skills* (personal, inter-personal and critical and creative thinking skills) are included at the beginning of each year grade and are taught and evaluated in conjunction with the learning in the three strands. The approach to *Healthy Living* focuses on helping students to use their understanding of health concepts to make healthy choices and to understand the connection between their personal health and well-being and that of others and of the world around them. The *Movement Competence* strand focuses on developing movement skills, concepts and strategies that prepare students to participate in lifelong physical activity. The *Active Living* strand focuses on teaching students about the joy of physical activity while developing personal fitness and responsibility for safe participation in physical activity. A strong emphasis is placed on teaching the *Living Skills* across all strands.

The shifts in approach are reflected in the five fundamental principles on which the curriculum is based:

- Health and Physical Education programmes are most effective when students' learning, values and healthy habits are shared and supported by school staff, families and communities. They should be characterised by (i) high quality teaching and relevant programmes' content; (ii) a healthy physical environment; (iii) a supportive social environment; and (iv) community partnerships.
- Physical activity is the key vehicle for student learning, a principle that students should learn about healthy activities by doing them. In this way, not only will they discover the joy of movement but they will develop skills that will lead to a lifetime of healthy active living. They will also come to understand how to apply the skills and principles they have learned to other things. The idea of teaching transferable skills and strategies is important to accommodate the growing number and range of activities available and accessible and where and when appropriate preserve traditional/cultural activities.
- Physical and emotional safety is a pre-condition for effective learning in Physical Education and, therefore, there is a need for a supportive social environment. It recognizes that children may take part in activities that involve inherent risk and that they are doing so in a space where their peers can see them explore, succeed and make mistakes. For this reason, a focus on safety and inclusivity is essential and the programme aims to accommodate the strengths, needs and interests of all students.
- The physical and emotional development of students varies widely. Hence, the curriculum needs to shift from a content-focused approach to a more skill-based approach, which allows

for differentiation of teaching methods/approaches with modification of lessons according to a student's readiness, interest and learning preference, ultimately, helping them to reach their full potential, i.e. learning should be student-centred and skill-based. This shift is intended to help students acquire and practise the skills needed to develop physical and health literacy, and to lead healthy active lives.

- Learning in this Physical Education and Health curriculum is balanced (addresses physical, cognitive and psycho-social needs), integrated (connections between all strands of the curriculum, Healthy Living, Active Living and Movement Competence: Skills, Concepts and Strategies, and between the content of the strands and the Living Skills are made whenever possible), and connected to real life (topics covered are meant to reflect the situations students face and the choices they have to make in today's world).

Concluding Comments

Collectively, early 21st century and advocacy developments have been demonstrative of broad-spread political will and indicative of an international consensus that issues surrounding physical education in schools deserve serious consideration in problem resolution. There is evidence to suggest that national and, where relevant, regional governments have committed themselves through legislation to making provision for physical education but some have been either slow or reticent in translating this into action through actual implementation and assurance of quality of delivery. Generally, recent Worldwide and regional surveys' 'reality checks' reveal several areas of continuing concern:

- continuing deficiencies in curriculum time allocation and actual implementation as well as a failure to strictly apply legislation on school physical education provision, subject status, material, human and financial resources
- considerable widespread inadequacies in facility and equipment supply, especially in economically developing (though not exclusively so) countries; a related issue in the facility-equipment concern is insufficient funding
- disquiet about teacher supply and quality embracing insufficiency in numbers and inadequacy of appropriately qualified physical education/sport teachers
- relevance and quality of the physical education curriculum, especially in countries where there is a sustained pre-disposition towards sports competition and performance-related activities dominated by Games, Gymnastics and Athletics
- whilst some improvements in inclusion (related to gender and disability) policy and practice can be identified since the Berlin Physical Education Summit, barriers to equal provision and access opportunities for all still remain
- falling fitness standards of young people and high youth drop-out rates from physical/sporting activity engagement, exacerbated in some countries by insufficient and/or inadequate school-community co-ordination physical activity participation pathway links.

These concerns are succinctly summed up in a central European physical education academic's statement:

“PE in (recent years) has gone through intensive development and many changes. In spite of attempts by PE professionals, PE teachers, pupils and parents still struggle, sometimes more, sometimes less successfully with a range of problems. Some of these are presented here: decreasing amount of compulsory PE; often decreasing quality of education; large PE class sizes and increasing pupils' behavioural problems; growing

numbers of non-participating and 'excused' pupils from PE lessons; stagnating physical fitness and performance of youth; care of pupils with disability; inadequacies in provision and lack of PE facilities; increase in PE teachers' average age and low interest of young graduates to work in the field of PE; inadequate social and financial reward of PE teachers, low work ethic of PE teachers that results from insufficient evaluation of their work; low representation of PE teachers in schools' management positions; absence of monitoring of PE teaching – there is a limited number of inspectors; monitoring by school directors is non-existent; weak organisation (professional associations) of PE teachers; shortages in pre-graduate teachers' preparation; unfinished system of lifelong PE teachers' education; lack of financial resources for science (research) in the field of physical education and sport”.

Positive developments and policy rhetoric are juxtaposed with adverse practice shortcomings and continuing threats to physical education, as portrayed in a recent UK magazine headline: “Future of PE is at risk, claims afPE” (Cordell, 2009). In essence, the situation especially in economically under-developed and developing regions has changed little since the 1999 Berlin Physical Education World Summit. The overall scenario is one of ‘mixed messages’. As Maude de Boer-Buqiccio (2002) (the then Council of Europe Deputy Secretary General) observed at the *Informal Meeting of Ministers with responsibility for Sport* in Warsaw, “the crux of the issue is that there is too much of a gap between the promise and the reality” (p.2); policy and practice do not always add up!

If children are to be moved from ‘play stations’ to play-grounds’ (Balkenende, 2005), any re-conceptualisation of physical education, which contributes to the creation of the ‘physically educated’ or ‘physically literate’ person, does need to be accompanied by improvements to raise the quality of teaching and learning processes as well as that of associated teacher educational preparation or training. Recent pedagogical and didactical developments have consequences for physical education teacher education both at initial and in-service training levels. Wherever appropriate, physical education delivery will benefit from re-orientation towards placing more responsibility on students for their learning with the managerial responsibility of the teacher progressively transferred to pupils and so enhance pupil involvement. Reflective practitioners will translate into reflective students! Re-conceptualisation needs to be seen in the context of life-long participation in physical activity and should include inter-related strategies to embrace the formulation of quality programmes, which provide meaningful experiences and, which attract young people to the joy and pleasure of physical activity and so foster an 'active life-style' philosophy with a focus on relevance and understanding. Initial and in-service training/further professional development should properly address pedagogical and didactical developments and social and cultural shifts and so help to enhance the physical education experience of children. This is particularly important in primary/elementary schools, preparation for which is often ‘generalist’ rather than specialist. Any reshaping, however, may well need to recognise local and cultural diversities, traditions as well as different social and economic conditions.

The nature and quality of delivery of the school physical education curriculum is fundamental to the future not only of the subject in schools but also to the future of active life-styles over the full life-span for the two are inextricably entwined. Advocates have to ensure that physical education can justifiably claim a higher status, be worthy of improved time allocations and appropriate personnel, financial and material resources. If physical educators want to make an impact on enhancing activity levels in order to improve health, then some current practices should be abandoned because they do not appear to work for many children. Instead, if physical educators are serious about physical activity for health promotion, then nutrition and physical literacy should be central strategies and they should work closely with families, wider school, education and health, (sport) communities. Additionally, radical changes to pedagogy would be required, especially when trying to meet challenges embedded in the rhetoric of meeting the individual needs of each child but all “need to acquire knowledge, understanding and behavioural skills to ensure physical activity becomes a regular part of their daily life” (Fairclough & Stratton, 2005). The challenges should not ignore relevant scholarly research, which, in recent years has made significant progress in unravelling some of the 'mysteries' of learning and socialisation processes in different and various cultural and cross-cultural contexts.

If policy-makers, decision-takers, administrators and practitioners are to be persuaded or continue to be persuaded of an essential presence of physical education in schools' curricula, commitment to reconceptualisation, reconstruction and delivery of a relevant quality curriculum by appropriately qualified teaching personnel will in themselves be insufficient. Sustained application of political skills and argument of the case at local, through national, to international levels are required. The value of communication to ALL components of society, teachers, parents, and government officials cannot be over-estimated. The growing body of medical and other scientific research evidence and positive statements support a potentially compelling case for physical education in providing life-long benefits directly related to preventing disease and to maintaining an enhanced quality of life. As an aside, however, research into the relationship between physical education and cognitive benefits has actually produced mixed messages: from beneficial through not disadvantageous to no relationship or a trivial one. Further research is required. The available evidence does suggest that increased levels of physical education do not interfere with achievement in other subjects and in some sub-groups may be associated with improved academic performance. From the United States, there is more positive evidence, which relates to the relationship between physical activity and cognitive functioning, especially when sustained over a long period of time. These research findings on cognitive function are interesting because with the increase in the importance of literacy and numeracy as indicators of 'academic achievement', the role of physical activity in the enhancement of these, plus academic function, becomes significantly important. The existing accumulated evidence needs to be presented clearly and concisely and in a language that can be understood to convince all 'enterprise' partners and significant others that physical education is, indeed, an authentic and indispensable sphere of activity. To this end, as both

inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations have recognised, goals will be better served by effective partnerships with shared responsibilities of all vested interested agencies and institutions involved in policies and their implementation. The principle of partnerships embracing multi-sectoral policies is an essential feature of the World Health Organisation's (2004) *Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health* policy framework as well as the European Parliament's 2007 *Resolution*.

A school's role extends to encouraging young people to continue participation in physical activity, through the provision of links and co-ordinated opportunities for all young people at all levels and by developing partnerships with the wider community to extend and improve the opportunities available for them to remain physically active. Hence, there is a need for wider community-based partnerships. With less than two hours per week time allocation (in many countries, it is frequently less), physical education cannot itself satisfy physical activity needs of young people or address activity shortfalls let alone achieve other significant outcomes. Bridges do need to be built, especially to stimulate young people to participate in physical activity during their leisure time. Many children are not made aware of, and how to negotiate, the multifarious pathways to out-of-school and beyond school opportunities. As one French teacher put it there is "not enough co-operation between schools and sport organisations", an observation underlined by almost two-thirds of European countries indicating lack of links between school physical education and the wider community.

Physical Education Teacher Education programmes should address these facilitation and intermediary roles of the physical education teacher. Thus, at the very least, their professional preparation should embrace familiarisation with pathways for participation in wider community multi-sector provision and the achievement of personal excellence. Support is fundamental to the realisation of such ideals. It can be achieved through the collaborative, co-operative partnership approach involving other professionals and committed, dedicated and properly mentored volunteer individual and group enthusiasts. Personnel functioning in partner institutions should have appropriate skills and competences, which might be acquired through some special training.

Contrary to earlier references to dis-benefits and negative outcomes, and mixed research findings messages, it is widely acknowledged that physical activity can positively influence physical and psycho-social health and hence, is important at all stages in the life-cycle from childhood to old age. Therefore, it seems logical to suggest that socialisation into, and through physical activity, should occur from 'womb' to 'tomb' i.e. a physical education over the full life span. If physical education is to sustain its presence both in formal and informal educational and socio-cultural settings, and continue to have a positive role as an instrument of socialisation, then issues have to be confronted. Education in general, and physical education in particular, should respond to the needs of optimally developing individuals' capabilities and provide opportunities for personal fulfilment and social interactions, essential in human co-existence. With the knowledge that educational experiences have a propensity

to facilitate and help enhancement of life-span welfare and well-being, physical education should be focally involved with the process of personal fulfilment in the future. It is worth remembering, however, that it is not the activity, but the reason for taking part that sustains participation. I would add that its role embraces the often overlooked intrinsic value of the ‘sheer joy of participation in physical/sporting activity’.

The European Parliament’s 2007 *Resolution* represents a significant political step forward in policy guidance in the domain of physical education. Noteworthy is its call on Member States to consider, and implement changes in the orientation of physical education as a subject, taking into account children's health and social needs and expectations, to make physical education compulsory in primary and secondary schools with a guaranteed principle of at least three physical education lessons per week, a principle, which is widely advocated including regional professional organisations such as EUPEA (Europe) and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) in the USA, and intergovernmental agencies such as the Council of Europe. It is an agenda, which UNESCO is also actively pursuing as it attempts to formulate quality physical education policy principles, which can be suitably adapted by Member States to ‘local’ circumstances and conditions. With such inter-governmental commitments to policy principles and action advocacy, a secure and sustainable future for physical education appears to be realisable (Hardman & Marshall, 2008). Nevertheless, maintenance of monitoring of developments in physical education across the world is an imperative. The Council of Europe’s 2003 *Recommendations*, the UNESCO ‘Round Table’ *Communiqué* and the WHO *Global Strategy* have advocated regular reviews of the situation of physical education in each country. The Council of Europe referred to the introduction of provision for a pan-European survey on physical education policies and practices every five years as a priority! (Bureau of the Committee for the Development of Sport, 2002a; 2002b; Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, 2003). A ‘watching brief’ mechanism is essential to gauge whether “promises” are being converted into “reality” and so contribute to countering potential threats and securing a safe future for physical education in schools. Otherwise with the Council of Europe Deputy Secretary General’s intimation of a gap between “promise” and “reality”, there is a real danger that intergovernmental agencies’ *Recommendations* and *Resolutions* will remain more “promise” than “reality” in too many countries across the world and compliance with international and national Charters will continue to remain compromised (Hardman & Marshall, 2005) just as responses to the various *Declaration* and *Commitment Statements* will remain as conceptual ideals (Hardman & Marshall, 2008).

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