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Educational action research: a means of coping with the systemic demands for continual professional development in physical education?

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Background

The framework of professional standards for teachers has applied from September 2007 (Teaching Development Agency (TDA), 2007). These standards define specific characteristics for teachers across their career stages from the award of qualified teaching status (QTS) through main scale and beyond to upper pay scale, and excellent and advanced skills teachers. The TDA outlined attributes, knowledge and understanding, and skills that scaffold a teacher's career and allow him or her to "identify their professional development needs" (TDA, 2007, P. 3). Furthermore, the framework is designed to be progressive and "to reflect the progression expected of teachers as... [they]...develop and demonstrate increasing effectiveness in their roles" (TDA, 2007, p. 4). The demands are clear yet the opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful development are scant. In March 2001 PricewaterhouseCoopers were commissioned by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to identify the main factors that determine teachers' workload. Within their executive summary was the finding that teachers without managerial responsibility work 52 hours a week on average, which is 7 hours a week more than other comparable managers and professionals (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2001). The traditional expectation of both teachers and the school (Kirk, 2009) that physical education teachers significantly contribute to the extra-curricular programme, in addition to their timetabled teaching responsibilities, adds to their already burdensome workload. Therefore, how is it possible for the physical education teacher to even contemplate, let alone address, the professional development demands of the TDA?

Research Questions

This paper draws on data from a practitioner research study that overarches seven-years of my career (Casey, 2010) in which, as a physical education teacher, I sought to complete two significant pieces of professional development - an MSc and a PhD. It focuses on the lessons that emerged from this sustained effort of practitioner research that may affect the way in which we view professional development and the obtainment of the attributes, knowledge and understanding and skills befitting a physical education teacher. More particularly, having acknowledged the demands of innovative practice which require the teacher to engage in 'work-plus-work' (Kirk, 1990; Casey, 2010) i.e. their normal and expected day's work and then more work, the paper focuses on a notion of becoming that allowed me to cope with this during my research. In this way Becoming can be seen as the continual desire to refine my practices in line with the latent and developing theories-in-practice that define my current pedagogy.

Methods

[Action research is] a deliberative process for emancipating practitioners from the often unseen constraints of assumptions, habit, precedent, coercion and ideology.

Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 192)

The vision of Carr and Kemmis (1986) of action research as a paradigm that would unfetter the practitioner from the morass of tradition and expectation subsequently struck a chord with many in education. Indeed the place of the genre in education had been noted by Kemmis (1982, p. 17) when he wrote that it was "absorbed into education almost as soon as it originated." Similarly Elliott (1980/2007) saw no coincidence in the emergence of classroom-based action research in the 1960s

and early 1970s as a response to pedagogical innovations like 'self-directed', 'discovery', and 'inquiry' learning.

This study was conducted as practitioner inquiry into the impact of long-term pedagogical and curricular change on my pupils and me, and the implications that our experiences may have for the way that pedagogical change is viewed in the wider physical education community. The juxtapositioning of my role as teacher and researcher enabled me to focus on my development through Brookfield's (1995) four lenses of evaluation:

- Our autobiographies as teachers and as learners: As learners we adopted the role of 'other' and see ourselves from the other side of the mirror becoming connected to what our students' experience.
- Our students' eyes: Seeing ourselves through our students' eyes makes us aware of our actions and assumptions, and how they are interpreted by those we hope will learn from us.
- Our colleagues' experiences: By engaging in critical conversations based upon colleagues' interpretations and observations we are able to shed new light on our practices.
- Theoretical literature: Affords us multiple interpretations of familiar, yet impenetrable, situations by naming and illuminating them in different ways.

Adapted from Brookfield (1995, pp. 29-30)

Frame

Over 40 years ago, Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) was at the forefront of advocacy of the idea of 'teacher-as-researcher', an 'extended professional' (in a phrase borrowed from Eric Hoyle), a creative and autonomous individual within a broader community of teacher-scholars working in the classroom as a living laboratory and striving for continuing development through thoughtful experimentation. These ideas may seem Utopian in today's target and inspection-driven culture, where teachers are already subjected to heavier workloads than most contemporaries, but they seem appropriate in a culture of systemic professional development.

Research findings

In this paper, I initially ask whether we should re-consider the possibilities for the notion of the teacher-as-researcher and forms of action research, in the light of growing acknowledgement that the culture of targets and external inspection has failed to deliver what it had promised. However, I also question whether the demands of 'work-plus-work' means that continuing professional development and the imperatives for thematic approaches to the curriculum and the nurturing of reflective learners are only possible if teachers are prepared to undertake an almost masochistic workload.

Finally, I wish to promote a new conversation within physical education about the nature of professionalism in teaching in light of uncertain futures (Kirk, 2009), and to ask whether the notions of the extended professional and the teacher-as-scholar could still prove to be a worthy aspiration for all forms of physical education teacher education. At the same time, I believe this conversation must be cognisant of the forces and factors that limited the impact of the action research movement of the 1970s and 1980s and in the spirit of the work of philosopher John Gray (2008) adopt a 'realist' position that is anti-Utopian.

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