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Researching Quality in Early Years Pedagogy: the case for physical education

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Background

In recent years, the term 'quality' has become ubiquitous in policy documents, particularly in relation to public services; perhaps most particularly, education. It has, according to Dahlberg et al, become the 'age of quality' (1999:4). The use of the word quality in relation to both PE and early years teaching is evident in policy documents (for example, The Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum, 2000 (EYFS); High Quality PE and School Sport, 2004; Every Child Matters, 2004) although what comprises quality in a school-based context is more difficult to ascertain and harder still to unify between documents. Whilst EYFS (2000) describes, at length, the nature of learning experiences for children from pre-school to reception class (age 5) with the aim of promoting 'high quality early education', this does not extend beyond the first year of compulsory school attendance and is largely concerned with pre-school provision. By contrast, High Quality PE and School Sport (2004) is concerned with the Physical Education provided throughout compulsory schooling with generic indicators of 'quality' based on 10 outcomes which include participation in sports, promoting young people's health, safety and well being and enabling all young people to improve and achieve in line with their age and potential. So, whilst 'quality' is consistently linked to the enhancement of learning and development in young children (Kontos & Diamond, 2002), there appears to be less consistency in the way in which the term is applied in policy documents. The essence of the matter here maybe that what is described as quality in PE does not make an easy bedfellow with considerations of quality in early years pedagogy.

Research Questions

This paper considers a study which sought to investigate how 'quality' Physical Education (PE) might be described in the early years of compulsory schooling and, in doing so, considers the nebulous concept of quality in early years teaching and the place of research in contributing to this understanding of quality. This paper sets out to interrogate the methodological approaches taken in the study which sought to locate quality in the planning and teaching of physical education in the early years of schooling.

In addition, this paper will examine the process and nature of researching quality in early years teaching and learning, using the data from the study to evaluate the success, or otherwise, of this process. Whilst it is accepted that 'quality' may not be an objective and universal reality, the possibility of developing a praxis for researching quality will be explored.

In summary, the paper will address:

- What can be described as 'quality' in early years / PE pedagogy.
- How well 'quality' pedagogy in the early years fits with 'quality' pedagogy in PE.
- The values of, and influences on, early years practitioners in their planning and teaching of PE.
- Mapping practitioners' values and influences on the framework for quality pedagogy in early years PE.

Methods

A systematic scrutiny of current policies, guidelines and documents relevant to first early years and then PE teaching and learning, reveals contemporary understandings, discourses and points of focus in these areas.

Six hypothesised dimensions of quality pedagogy in early years PE were constructed reflecting recurrent themes identified in literature and the systematic scrutiny of current policy and strategy documents.

A survey was carried out to investigate the influential and guiding factors when teachers of young children plan and teach PE. A questionnaire was sent to a range of schools in England, Wales and Scotland (n=196) and valid responses collected from teachers trained in early years teaching (3-8years; n=42), Primary and above (7 years+; n=51) and teachers from either age-range with additional PE-related training (n=38). All teachers were currently teaching in the early years. The results were analysed using SPSS in order to explore the hypothesised dimensions within the practice of each group of teachers. Each hypothesised dimension was analysed for internal reliability using Chronbach's Alpha.

Frame

The six theoretical perspectives are identified as substantial, recurrent themes in a critical examination of dominant theories of early childhood education. It is not intended to exclude any perspectives, but to categorise recognised themes and theories to provide a multidimensional framework. The influence of these theories and perspectives forms the basis of much understanding, practice and training in early years education. The six theoretical perspectives identified incorporate the cognitive aspects of learning, encouraging children to think and reason, recognising the importance of the social influence and context, the need for intrinsic motivation and the utilisation of exploration, play, perceptual and sensory skills. The framework also incorporates the maturation and physical development of young children, thus outlining the fundamental features of quality practice in early childhood teaching and learning.

A similar framework was constructed to account for the wide range of possibilities that comprise PE, drawing on the history and diverse philosophies of the subject. Juxtaposing these frameworks allowed for points of contact, shared aims and similarities between quality early years teaching and learning and practice in physical education.

The matrix developed allowed for the data derived from the survey, analysed through SPSS, to be positioned against a clear and evidenced framework of quality early years pedagogy. Through this, it is argued that quality physical education in the early years is identified.

Research findings

The paper discusses the nebulous concept of 'quality' within both early years education and PE. It is accepted from the review of literature and critical analysis of policy and strategy documents that 'quality' is neither objective nor universal. However, it is possible to construct vigorous theoretical frameworks to provide a matrix for evaluating and analysing practice. The paper provides an account of the way in which this was carried out, using mapping of various literature and a wide-scale questionnaire, in order to investigate quality planning and teaching in early years PE. In doing so, the findings offer a potential model for researching 'quality' in early years practice.