

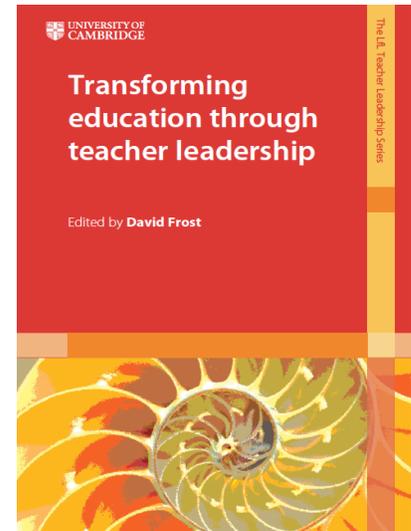
Leveling the playing field: improving the quality of Physical Education

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Editor's introduction

Helen Foy is a Lead Practitioner in Physical Education (PE). The arrival of the final draft of her chapter coincided with England's poor performance in the World Cup and the furore in the press following a recent Ofsted report about the quality of provision for Physical Education (2014). In it, the Chief Inspector called upon schools to improve the quality of competitive sport and close the gap between the achievements of state schools and those in the independent sector. Commentators such as David Conn (2014) argued that this gap can be attributed to the resources that private schools have in abundance whilst state schools are making do with the bare minimum. The Chief Inspector's key message to headteachers and teachers in state schools is to make the best of what they have. Helen's account is an excellent illustration of just that. She puts forward the view, like the Ofsted report does, that sport can help to foster an ethos of achievement and provide students with opportunities to experience success, which in turn raises the level of self-efficacy beliefs. Helen is of course painfully aware of the hypocrisy of policies which undermine schools' attempts to do the very things they are expected to do, but she is a teacher so she chooses to do what she can to address this shocking inequality through her own creativity and determination.



Key lessons about teacher leadership

- Teachers' leadership is effective when it mobilises the effort and creativity of colleagues through managed collaboration.
- In working to ameliorate inequalities through the leadership of development work, teachers become advocates for policies that are fair and just.

I am a PE teacher at The Nobel School, a mixed comprehensive school in Stevenage, and until the present government axed the Sports Partnerships programme, I was School Sports Coordinator (SSCo) working with other schools, including secondary, primary and special schools to improve the quality of PE across the town. I have learnt the value of collaboration and sharing good practice. I know that teachers have much to gain from sharing and learning from each other, which leads to improved teaching and learning.

Within my role as SSSCo I worked with colleagues from forty-four different schools in the town of Stevenage. It was evident from my own observation and from professional dialogue with colleagues that there was inconsistency in the quality of teaching and learning in PE lessons both within and across the schools in the town, a view reinforced in school inspection reports. In previous years there have been strategies to support the teaching of PE, to increase the participation rate of young people in physical activity and to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the subject. My coordinator role had come into being when the government's PE and School Sport for Young People (PESSYP) strategy established School Sports Partnerships (Flintoff, Foster and Wysawnoha, 2011). Trained PE practitioners like myself and sports coaches were placed in coordinating, consultancy and leadership roles with the aim of improving primary PE and school sport.

High quality teaching and learning in PE is important for a multitude of reasons (Bailey *et al.*, 2009). It can be a useful tool in raising the attainment and aspiration levels of students (Stead and Neville 2010). Our town has struggled with an evident low level of aspiration. Parents who have had negative school experiences are less able to provide the necessary support for their children which leads in turn to their children having low aspirations. However, this cycle of deprivation can be overcome by enabling young people to develop positive dispositions through sport and physical activity.

PE teachers face particular challenges because the subject involves risks arising from hazardous equipment and 'uncontained environments' (Katene and Edmonson, 2004). Such circumstances being out of the usual 'classroom comfort zone' can be daunting. This challenge requires colleagues to develop their knowledge and competence in PE, which can only be accomplished through adequate support, guidance and opportunities for continuing professional development.

For me and my colleagues, the national PESSYP strategy was a real breakthrough. We were able to share the rich variety of expertise across the town and support non-specialists as well as those trained as PE teachers. It was clear to us that levels of participation in sport were improving and we believed that we were making a significant difference to the aspiration levels of young people. However, there was a change of government, and a spending review in October 2010 resulted in

the Schools Sports Partnerships being axed (Campbell, 2012). This put severe limitations on my capacity to contribute to the development of practice across the town.

Developing practice through collaboration

In this new policy climate driven by austerity it was important for me to be able to use my professional judgement and expertise in finding a way forward. The Sports Coordinator role provided me with invaluable experience in which I learned about the power of collaboration for knowledge building and as a means to cultivate teachers' moral purpose. I was determined to apply these lessons within my own school. I planned a project based on the principles of teacher-led development work (Frost and Durrant, 2003). The project would enable colleagues to work collaboratively to share good practice and learn from each other. My aim was to ensure that all students would benefit from extensive and appropriate provision in PE that would inspire them to raise their aspirations. I planned to engage my colleagues in a process of development in which we would plan and refine our curriculum and teaching and learning practices to meet the needs of all of our students.

Research supported my conviction that collaboration was the key to effective professional development (Cordingley *et al.*, 2005). Collaboration helps to build a professional culture in which there are shared values, beliefs and norms of practice. In such a culture, individuals are more likely to pull in the same direction and contribute to school improvement, professional growth and student achievement (Stoll, 1999). Collaboration enables us to pursue our professional learning by sharing good practice.

Teachers learn just as students do: by studying, doing and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see (Darling-Hammond, 1999: 18).

My aim was to develop an approach to professional learning that would enable teachers to improve the teaching of PE. I wanted to build teamwork where individuals develop by learning from each other. Perhaps this would lead to a culture in which colleagues were prepared to listen to each other.

Creating shared objectives

I was concerned about the quality and consistency of practice in PE lessons and so I thought it essential that we should clarify our priorities and objectives. We needed a joint vision

incorporating colleagues' personal priorities, individual department's priorities and individual school's priorities (Senge, 1990). I arranged a meeting with colleagues who had specific responsibility for teaching and learning. The aim of these meetings was to explore the current level of effectiveness in the PE department in relation to school targets. It was clear that, if all students were to have a positive experience of PE, we would need to have a joint commitment and approach from all colleagues involved in the subject. My priority therefore was to establish shared objectives through a process of consultation and inquiry. I would need to ensure that colleagues' opinions were heard and valued.

From a school management point of view, outcomes indicated by attainment data were a priority, but amongst departmental colleagues it was important to achieve 'non-measurables' (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001) such as enjoyment and participation. To ensure all parties felt part of the project it was important to target a balance of these objectives. I found this process challenging at times. I had to include a number of different points of view, some of which I agreed with and some of which I did not. I had to include departmental and relevant senior leadership team colleagues' views whilst exercising my own sense of agency and professional judgement. Although in principle I agree with the need for external measures and accountability, I also knew that students' achievement would be much higher if we could improve the quality of the PE experience. This would build students' self-confidence, aspiration and commitment to lifelong physical activity (MacNamara *et al.*, 2011).

My next step was to carry out a process of consultation with PE colleagues. I wanted to share the intentions of my development project. I needed to know from all of them what they felt were barriers and keys to success for the department. I wanted to find out how they felt we could improve the quality of provision in PE in my school. I created a visual tool to enable colleagues to record their thoughts easily. I believed that they trusted me and would be honest which seemed evident from their responses. In this exercise many comments re-occurred: for example, enhancing the opportunities students had for out of school hours learning (OSHL), work life balance for staff and learning from each other to ensure we could provide equal opportunities for students. This process was extremely enlightening. Some aspects were practical such as the accessibility of equipment and others were more to do with organisational structures such as timetabling and the length of lessons.

Investigating practice in other schools

I knew I could identify quality practice in my own school, but I also wanted to explore alternative methods in other schools in the local community. The links that I and others in my department had forged during the days of the Schools Partnerships helped me to identify the most appropriate

schools to visit. My department's key objectives gave me a framework for inquiry when visiting schools. I was able to gather some useful resources and make some very valuable observations of working practices not necessarily taking place at my school.

In my visits to other schools it was evident that they were using the School Games initiative as a vehicle to empower their staff and students. School Games is a national structure for competition which encourages schools to organise competitive sport in their own schools, leading to district, county and national competitions. Schools were designing extracurricular programmes to match the competition timetable of the School Games. PE teachers are often driven by their competitive nature and a desire to create the best possible opportunities for the students in their care. School Games provided opportunities in a range of different sports. It was made up of activities that did not necessarily exist in the current competition process. This potentially provided new, exciting experiences for both students and staff.

I took a proposal to get involved in the School Games programme back to my department. My aim was to improve practice to ensure every child had the best possible experience of PE and to raise students' aspirations through PE. It seemed to me that this could be achieved through this kind of initiative. I produced a document outlining the structure of the School Games for discussion with colleagues who responded with unexpected enthusiasm. They wanted to include new activities that would excite our students and ensure that our school was entered into every single School Games competition. Since then our school has become one of the most successful in this programme.

Building confidence through the 'typicality folder'

Where there are low levels of aspiration, PE can provide an opportunity for students to develop alternative skills and qualities (Whitehead, 2004). For some students PE is perhaps one of the few areas of the curriculum in which where they can excel because it may allow them to demonstrate practical ability and leadership skills. It provides a basis to build confidence provided that appropriate methods are in place to acknowledge the progress made. This requires effective assessment, tracking and monitoring procedures.

A way to improve consistency in assessment, tracking and monitoring procedures was being used by one of my colleagues, a Technology teacher who had picked up the idea at a HertsCam Network event. The strategy was referred to as a 'typicality folder', which contains a range of documentation for each class. This seemed to be particularly suitable for PE where the use of the more traditional approaches such as writing in exercise books might slow down the flow of activity. The folder is used to keep resources, students' work and devices for recording and

tracking progress. There were tools for students to record their reflections about their attainment and what they should do to improve. My colleague explained that students were able to set personal targets for the future which she thought was a motivating factor. If students are going to make the desired level of progress in PE lessons, they need to be aware of what they have achieved and be able to identify the next steps guided by targets linked to specific assessment criteria. Colleagues were more likely to be able to make this work if there was a prepared structure for the assessment, tracking and monitoring of students' progress. I was able to relieve some of my colleague's workload by doing this preparation.

I carried out a series of discussions with my colleagues about introducing the concept of typicality folders as a solution for concerns over assessment, tracking and monitoring. I borrowed examples of typicality folders from other departments to share. Colleagues were able to suggest additional elements that may be useful and so agreed to pilot a typicality folder approach using agreed tracking and monitoring devices. Throughout the academic year there were refinements and additions to the original pilot typicality folder. It was evident from this process that some colleagues were beginning to work in a much more collaborative way, sharing ideas to refine and improve practice.

Sharing good practice throughout the local PE community

For PE teachers, relationships with other schools are vital because we need to create opportunities for the productive rivalry that goes with sports competitions. These relationships enable us to create opportunities for professional learning not only with other schools but also with community partners such as National Governing Body (NGB) representatives and community sports coaches. By collaborating and networking beyond the school we were able to create opportunities for students across Stevenage to participate and excel in a range of different activities. These links have provided a platform for professional learning. Colleagues have learnt from partners to develop their own practice. I needed to create opportunities for colleagues to collaborate and share good practice. I organised a 'sharing good practice' afternoon for PE colleagues from the district community. This would include colleagues from many different types of school and with a range of specialist knowledge. To improve working practices I had to provide opportunities for colleagues to find alternative methods of teaching. By observing unfamiliar practices in action, colleagues were able to develop the confidence to extend their own repertoires.

I based the sharing good practice event on the model of the HertsCam Network Events (see Chapter 17) with opportunities for individuals to present their work and engage in professional dialogue. I had to refine the model to accommodate the needs of the subject, for example,

ensuring practical spaces were available. There would be opportunities to engage in teacher-led workshops and talk with student ambassadors and teaching assistants. Colleagues from across Stevenage were extremely supportive of the event and I truly valued their input. I felt a sense of collaboration with colleagues from beyond my own school. To build on this success became a new priority for me.

Opportunities for celebrating success were developed from my project. A concern was that we did not always recognise or celebrate students' success in PE in my own school. Many other schools in Stevenage had an annual presentation evening. We gained knowledge and practical know-how from other schools and then worked together as a department to embed this idea in our own practice. We wanted to involve parents and local sports clubs in processes that recognise your people's achievement.

Conclusion

My development project reminded me again of why I go to work every day. It emphasised to me and to others the importance of PE as part of the curriculum. There has been evidence for this in recent government policy with dedicated funding to support PE practice in every primary school from September 2013. PE can be such a powerful tool within a school community. Students can experience success, achievement and pride through the work of an effective PE department. This is not simply through having the most successful school teams. By having a balance between participation and competition all students can have access to a multitude of opportunities. I am proud of the achievements of the students and staff at my school and feel compelled to improve PE and school sport in my community in the future.

I feel we have begun to change the culture towards professional development in PE. We have worked towards rebuilding a truly collaborative culture following the demise of the Schools Sports Partnerships programme. This is evident from the increased levels of engagement that individuals have demonstrated through establishing shared objectives, engaging in professional dialogue, sharing good practice, working with community partners and other schools and most importantly developing and embedding common working practices.

I hope that my development project has created a legacy and will inspire others in the future. I want my work to continue to impact across the school community to ensure students gain the best possible life chances from a range of different subject areas. I hope that other subject areas will learn from our development and seek to improve by trialing and embedding some of the methods we have adopted.

My development project impacted on both colleagues and students; it also helped to shape practice within the town. It has been a thoroughly worthwhile experience. I am now determined and committed to ensure that this development journey does not finish at this point. For me, this is just the start of the journey.

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