

Accepting the Challenge of a new Health and Physical Education Curriculum

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“We human beings are so incredibly clever at doing all sorts of things, technology and so on, yet ...we have a tremendous amount to learn. If individuals are not prepared to accept that they have a responsibility, not only to themselves and their immediate family but to their country and to the world in general, then things will be pretty hopeless.”

(Glasgow, 1995, 95.)

These words of Hillary are relevant to, and also enhance, the philosophy of the new *Health and Physical Education* curriculum document. This essential learning area also aims to:

- Strengthen the individual's physical and mental health in developing a strong sense of self, able to make responsible decisions about choices of lifestyle;
- Develop knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop relationships and strengthen family connections;
- Understand the need for supportive friendships, whilst embracing a responsibility to others;
- Transfer these responsibilities to the life and welfare of the school, the immediate community and the global environment.

It is evident from the above that the mental and physical health needs of the individual need to be placed at the centre of future educational experience. The onus of responsibility for learning has to be transferred to the students, so they can feel empowered to make choices and take responsibility for their own healthy lifestyles.

The purpose of this article is to re-address this philosophy and empower teachers to look at the immediate working possibilities of the curriculum document. A strong philosophical base is essential before any pedagogical planning can be considered. This raises the questions of what is to be learned, what are the distinct values, and what meaning has this educational

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subject area to offer to the lives of the students (Pratt, 1994).

Each subject has its own identity and the values that are meaningful come initially from the vision of its interpretation by the teacher (Pratt, 1994). In physical education there is an additional variable factor, that of individual human experience which can and cannot be planned or prepared for. Personal meanings are so unique to each individual that self realisation, which is an important response to physical education, depends on the motivation and expectations of the student, the objectives and learning outcomes set by the teacher and the form of the lesson, whether it has 'process' or 'product' orientation.

To cope with change and challenge I would like to introduce three concepts. They are:

'Blink, Link and Think'

BLINK- the first challenge

First I want to encourage teachers to take the 'blinkers' off, to step out of their comfort zones, and to open their eyes to a new vision that addresses personal fears of change.



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Most initial teacher concerns are of inner fears of coping with change and feelings of ineptitude at not having access to some of the new knowledge that the curriculum requires. In changing school programmes, everyone has to learn to do something new. The individual role of the teacher is challenged. Each teacher has to have the opportunity to apply their own skills in supporting these measures (Locke, 1992).

The teaching complexities of this new curriculum area start to appear when the essential skills, attitudes, values and beliefs that have to be addressed are highlighted within the content knowledge. Dodds (1994) believes that teachers' expertise is grounded in a variety of dispositions, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and an understanding of behavioural perspectives. Although every attempt is being made to address gender inclusiveness and cultural sensitivity in the current document, how are teachers going to cope with the conflict in health concerns and societal issues? Policy covering these concepts and ideas will have to be discussed as a school community to find appropriate teaching approaches and methods to equip teachers with the correct ethical procedures of covering this content.

Teachers need assistance in drawing up programmes that incorporate and interrelate the dimensions of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social development. There has to be a move away from implementing

'content-based' procedures and 'user friendly packages' and teachers need to start to question things more. This is not only to meet developmental needs, but also because of their own accountability as professionals (Smith, 1993). They may have to ask themselves 'Why am I teaching this?' 'What is going to be the overall benefit of this for my students?' Is this going to help promote a healthy school environment? The policy specifications state that by addressing these issues quality teaching will emerge.

Blink and re-focus. - The physical education lesson must have more focus on the total development needs of all the children. To re-focus, teachers need to believe in their ability to face and cope with personal challenge, assisted by support from colleagues. And so a few links have to be made...

LINK- the second challenge.

I am of a firm belief that it is absolutely vital to make links to WHO you are going to teach before you decide HOW you are going to teach.

Learn to look anew, observe and reflect upon the physical and mental health of the children in your classrooms.

The open health and physical education environmental setting draws an awareness to many perspectives and issues that relate to the students' personal development and to their lives in the contexts of family, peer group, community and

society. For any teacher to cope with wide ranges of physical diversity, of body shape and body types, of differing standards of technical mastery, can be both daunting and challenging.

For the latter, the concept of 'self' pervades teenage lives particularly and in many ways makes it easier for the teacher to take a student-centred teaching approach. How often do we see the students placing themselves, their

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needs and their beliefs at the centre of every lesson? -almost all of the time. More attention has to be placed on understanding the complexities of teaching large classes of children undergoing this 'metamorphosis of youth'. It takes time and confidence to develop the experience to attune to youth views.

Teachers have to learn to become more reflective, learn to work in inter-active ways, enhancing co-operative learning to promote total well-being. The main question now is how can these bridges of understanding be built?

Teaching health and physical education is a complex process so teaching from a holistic perspective may assist the teacher to meet individual needs. Taking a holistic teaching approach enhances the health and well being of each child in addressing all aspects of the domains of learning, the physical, affective, cognitive, social and spiritual. Taking this approach enhances the global concept of this curriculum philosophy.

There is a need to celebrate some of the recognised personal attributes

and personality characteristics, interpersonal skills and professional skills that health and physical educators have. From my own experience I recognise some of these attributes as, enthusiasm and sense of humour; empathy and sensitivity to others; adaptability and flexibility in thinking; communication skills and co-operative attitude; imagination and initiative; good organisational skills; ability to develop confidence in others; self motivation and personal 'presence'; good use of voice; capable of self analysis; commitment and leadership qualities; to name but a few!!

Teachers need to draw from these attributes to develop many flexible teaching approaches, needed for the varying content areas in the new curriculum. My research over the last two years has suggested the following values of using flexible teaching approaches.

First, a more child-centred teaching approach needs to be developed to encourage the children to become more independent, and learn to look after themselves. They have to learn to give and take, and to be more decisive, so that they can contribute to the well-being of others, and of society as a whole. This child-centred teaching approach can be implemented within any lesson, and when aligned with other teaching styles as part of a set unit of work, offers greater opportunity for children to take personal meaning from the classes.

The lead-in for this work may come from taking a problem - solving approach to an activity. Activities such as gymnastics, adventure-based learning, dance, or in sports education offer this option. The children can be given a task to explore and through collaboration, or experimentation and freedom learn to find their own answers, and in the process, gain more personal understanding. The teaching skills involved, when teaching from a child-centred perspective, are to set clear guidelines of expectations, but time must be allowed for experimentation.

The teacher takes on a new role

of facilitator encouraging the children to think for themselves to obtain understanding from the focus that is meaningful to them. The teacher may have answers to the tasks but must refrain from involvement, allowing the children to discover their own meaning, also remaining responsive and open to new ideas.

Second, by utilising flexible teaching styles and strategies, diversity of thinking is encouraged, which allows the children freedom to interpret personal strengths and understanding from their personal endeavour. Teaching approaches need to be in constant change as children learn in different ways and like to work at their own pace. For example, there will be times when a more teacher-directed approach is needed, especially if the content is of a highly skilled knowledge base.

Third, you may see a need to change to 'question and answer techniques', to clarify understanding of the content before stimulating further challenge as a result of these evaluations.

The children can also be encouraged to teach each other, assisting each to learn. Social interaction may be enhanced by changing the social groupings or expanding into creative game play.

Children learn by watching, listening, and following direction. When they take ownership of the work this transfers to each other, and they then learn more by watching each other, listening to

each other and doing things with each other.

This collective collaboration can in turn strengthen their own sense of self. Children will only take out of any classwork content what is personally meaningful, knowledge that meets their needs and purpose. Placing an emphasis on the children's needs takes great courage from the teacher as it is often difficult to allow freedom from control, often resulting, initially, in total chaos. However, for the children to find their ability level it demands a lot more time for reflection and observation from the teacher, so time has to be allowed for this.

"This demands an essential core of collaboration, integration and solidarity from close colleagues ..."

Taking a child-centred teaching approach lets the children see that the teacher cares and respects their intent, and allows time to reflect on strengths and weaknesses. Taking this approach also gives the teacher respect from the children as they see that the teacher values what they have to give. Above all it allows the teacher to get inside the student's head and see their learning perspective of understanding.



“Teachers need to be active learners too.”

Links to other colleagues

It is reassuring to know that, particularly in respect to teaching the health education perspectives of the new curriculum, it is the responsibility of the whole school environment and community to support each other, to collaborate together to implement these. This demands an essential core of collaboration, integration and solidarity from close colleagues to implement any changes and reforms. There is no place for segregation and polarity.

The opportunity must be taken to recognise the effective use of other teachers' ideas and experiences. Together, challenge the learning and teaching of new techniques and strategies in a collaborative forum will assist each to build a new sense of self confidence, professional expertise and competence.

Collaboration supports the value of teachers as learners within a total school environment, and encourages the teachers' capacities to understand the specific needs of the students in their own school communities (Bell & Gilbert, 1994)

THINK - the third challenge

Observation, reflection and evaluation are the essential ingredients here.

How does quality thinking emerge from this process?

Teachers have to be really sharp on their observation and reflection skills to keep up with action and analysis. Using these strategies demands greater thinking for the teacher in the way of instructional methods and setting broader open visioned outcomes and expectations, allowing interaction as well as independent learning and thinking.

Questions need to be asked, such as ' Why am I teaching this ?' 'What is going to be the overall benefit of this for my students?' 'Is this going to help promote a healthy school environment ?'

Through adapting and re-aligning teaching approaches to meet children's demands, both teachers and students are in the active pursuit of learning. Both 'bounce off' each other as they link both experiential learning with content knowledge. Active learning links to active thinking about what is actually learned. Teachers need to be active learners too. Unless teachers become sensitised to the struggle for personal and intellectual growth they cannot teach with understanding and cannot become effective teachers. Teaching in this style is not easy. Knowing when to move in on the 'teachable moment' to re-focus the content and task only comes with experience and practice.



Conclusion

Blink, link and think.....a catchy phrase for both teacher and learner, a chain reaction to learning for both child and teacher. The aim of the current curriculum is to encourage children to become agents of their own learning. There is value to be gained in the sharing of the power of learning, accepting challenge, enriching the thinking experiences with combined energies and knowledge of both teacher and learner. Bear these links and thoughts in mind.

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