

The Strategic Application and Assessment of Social Justice in PETE Programs: A Primer

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Abstract

Current demographics in the United States have made issues pertaining to social justice central to the evolution of physical education as a discipline. With this knowledge, the time to refocus efforts in respect to ensuring equity regardless of ability, race, class, gender, sexuality, or religion has arrived. This article provides information on how to assess need, design curricula, critically reflect, discourse and advance the preparation of physical education teacher education (PETE) programs for a focus on social justice.

Recent evidence suggests that the current American educational system is struggling to meet the needs of underprivileged children, children from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds and children with special needs (Children's Defense Fund, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Gay, 2000). It is postulated that over 1,000 students from foreign countries enter schools each day in the United States, with culturally and linguistically diverse students expected to comprise nearly half the demographic of public schools in the year 2020 (Brown, 2007). When considering that much of mainstream teacher preparation curriculum is reflective of Eurocentric ideology and values, (Banks & Banks, 2004; Howard, 1999; Swartz, 2003; Zeichner, 2003), social justice is a relevant topic of discourse when considering the variety of differences among students in regards to race, culture, language and learning needs. Given these trends, the aim of this article is to discuss how

social justice can be implemented into physical education teacher education programs.

Although scholars have written about the necessity of social change in teaching (Benn, 2000; Washington, 1996), curriculum implications (Chepyator-Thomson & Liu, 2003; King, 1994), and program transformation (Hayes & Stidder, 2003) the aforementioned trends in the United States as it relates to our profession require a dual lens of introspection and consideration. Thus, the prospect of bridging the gap between current students in physical education programs and the diverse learners which they will impact is an opportunity that has been cited by Burden, Hodge, O'Bryant, and Harrison (2004) as a recommendation for progressive physical education programs

So what then constitutes social justice? Put simply, Fondacaro and Weinberg (2002) along with Prilleltensky and Nelson, (1997) state that social justice promotes appreciation of equity in resources, rights, and treatment for groups of people who have been marginalized because of their immigration, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic classification, physical ability, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. Instead of addressing these issues solely as individual entities, social justice education deals with these subjects and the issues that arise within them as an interconnected group.

In the United States, social justice in physical education has been surveyed in legislation related to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, as well as sport equity in regards to gender, race and culture. When examining the standards of the National As-

sociation for Sport and Physical Education, cognitive and affective outcomes exist which align themselves with the aims of social justice. Standard five for physical education specifically outlines that a physically educated person “exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in physical activity settings” (NASPE, 2004). A related guideline exists in Standard three related to physical education teacher education as it notes that teacher education candidates should “plan and implement developmentally appropriate learning experiences aligned with local, state and national standards to address the diverse needs of all students” (NASPE, 2008). With the rationale and foundation for social justice outlined, a discussion of the processes by which this can take place for the benefit of PETE programs can ensue.

Introducing Social Justice into PETE Programs

The process of infusing concepts of social justice should be made in an effective and sequential manner. These steps include recognizing the need, designing using assessments and S.W.O.T. analyses, and implementing these changes using critical self-reflection, dialogue, and action. The next few pages will outline each of these steps in detail and explain the implication for PETE programs.

Addressing the Need

When deciding upon whether social justice themes are applicable for physical education practices, a question that must first be considered is the extent to which a change in the academic climate is needed. The University of Minnesota in 2006 decided to reposition its mission and goals to reflect the critical and central role that equity and diversity work has contributed to the university and surrounding community. This focus, termed “Transitioning the U” sought to fully embrace

the ideas of access, equity and inclusivity to reach the overarching goal of transforming their culture, which did not fully embrace the accomplishments of all (University of Minnesota, 2008). Explicitly, the university noted in the preamble:

As new technologies change nearly everything we do, as cultural and national borders become increasingly fluid, and as our communities grow ever more diverse, we undertake this transformation because we believe in it, and also because we know we have no choice. Only by making diversity integral to the University’s transformation will we ensure that all of our students, alumni, faculty, and staff are prepared to take on the challenges of this global century. (pg.4)

Further, it was noted that:

Given the magnitude of projected demographic changes in the years ahead, our project becomes all the more urgent. Minnesota’s increasing diversity will have enormous ramifications for the University, especially as more and more students of color (and fewer who self-identify as white) enter the educational pipeline. It is important that we begin planning now for this population shift so that we may address the shared challenges of serving increasingly diverse populations. (pg. 4)

To evaluate the abovementioned, The University of Minnesota revised existing mission and goal statements to set benchmarks by which to gauge its commitment to social justice. Two areas were envisioned in these mission and goal statements: 1) providing an institution where equity and diversity intertwined within the lives of every student, faculty and staff member, and 2) serving as a

model of equity for others outside the walls of the university. Thus, envisioning measurable mission and goal statements through a survey of needs was deemed appropriate. Rozycki (2004) and Meacham & Gaff (2006) cite that programs that fail to use mission and goal statements to assess need are in a perilous position to undermine present and future educational processes. Recent changes at the University of Minnesota embody what is taking place on many campuses of higher learning—principally the inclusion of initiatives and offices attentive to issues regarding social justice. While the effectiveness of these initiatives may differ from one institution to another, these acts are nevertheless an essential means for laying the foundation for equality.

With a commitment made by the academic institution to social justice, physical education programs can proceed with the implementation of a needs assessment and S.W.O.T. analysis. The creation of a needs assessment outlines a systematic exploration of current practices and a model of what the final result of modifying these practices may resemble (Altschuld & Witkin, 2000). S.W.O.T. analyses indicate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, serving as a viable and proven method by which to embark on bringing programmatic concerns to the forefront (Conway, Mackay & Yorke, 1994). Analyses such as these are detailed and draw attention to noticeable deficiencies of a program (e.g. the lack of diverse practicum) and not so evident aspects (e.g. the lack of written objectives pertaining to equality on course syllabi). When done effectively, needs assessments and S.W.O.T. analyses take into account unique characteristics of a program and help to define areas of improvement based on the defined mission and goals of the institution.

Design

After the need for social justice is addressed explicitly, the design process sets the

tone for the introduction of social justice issues into physical education departments and programs. This process is of particular significance, as it validates information garnered from the needs assessment and S.W.O.T. analyses and thus demands commitment to a course of action. Design, then, is not only an exercise in discoursing possible philosophical changes, but is an active measure by which change can transpire. Once deficiencies in a program are uncovered, the onus to change arises, and if nothing is done, the design process is essentially rendered ineffective.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the design process is on curriculum and its resulting outcomes. Curriculum dictates what is taught, why it is taught and ultimately what information will be disseminated to the learner (Klein, 1991). Simply stated, the process of design is the “genesis” of curriculum, which systematically impacts policies, procedures and subsequent outcomes. Culp, Chepyator-Thomson and Hsu (2009), discussed the addition of a multicultural service practicum into the PETE curriculum at the University of Georgia which sought to assist pre-service teachers in meeting the needs of diverse learners in their classes. As a requirement for junior level students to complete before they participated in student teaching, prospective educators were required to spend 20 hours of service in the community of Athens, Georgia. The course also involved reflection and assessment of the experience through the use of student journals, including thoughts on pedagogy.

Pre-service teachers after initially being skeptical of the process, became more immersed in conceptualizing their teaching strategies and recognizing strengths and weaknesses found in their practicum assignments. These individuals also encountered unique situations related to language and communication barriers, affinity grouping, and insider-outsider perspectives. In keeping with the thoughts of Grant and Gomez (2001), the introduction of the multicultural service

practicum in this instance aided in “helping students to become fully functioning and socially responsible citizens in a world that is increasingly ethnically, socially, racially and culturally pluralistic” (p.44).

With the practicum still in mind, McDonald (2005) submitted that three questions pertaining to curriculum should be asked when considering modifications: (1) Will this curriculum change be represented in a series of courses, practicum experiences or infused throughout the program of study? (2) Is the program already participating in work conducive to this approach? (3) Do current resources exist that are available at the institution or in the community to assist in the development of this curriculum? In the latter instance, a community service learning practicum was also added to the curriculum, as well as the modification of existing courses so that concepts related to social justice could be later infused throughout the program. These courses are taught by tenured faculty with expertise in culturally responsive pedagogy, urban education and community engagement and are supported by the Department of Kinesiology, College of Education, and the university.

It should be noted that the infusion of social justice in the PETE program at the University of Georgia was initially met with some apprehension, particularly because questions related to when courses would be taught, if current courses already had appropriate coverage of these topics, and if existing courses would need to be replaced had not been answered. These concerns would be answered as part of a larger departmental review to determine how to effectively meet the needs of a new generation of students coming into the program. A salient point regarding the process of design is made by Poplin and Rivera (2007), who emphasize that designing curriculum to include concepts of equality is not a means by which a program should be overhauled, but rather a method to add to what is already established.

Implementation

Projecting changes that need to be made in order to make the most beneficial impact in a program is a question that describes the process of implementation. Regardless of the rationale, curriculum changes that ensue on a whim could be problematical and unnecessary. Further, the context of the change can create apprehension, particularly given the likely lack of precedent for such a transition. Optimally, teaching about social justice should be introduced at the outset of teacher education programs and discussed consistently. Young and Laible (2000) espouse that teaching about social justice should be infused throughout the curriculum, citing the consistent exposure to these concepts as central to fostering an appreciation for differences over the lifespan of the teacher preparation program.

Students, when introduced to concepts related to social justice in a logically arranged sequence, have the opportunity to see a progression of elements as they mature as future practitioners. The correct structuring of these elements impresses upon the student the idea that social justice is not merely a method which is applied by choice and circumstance, but a method which is a part of teaching. For example, introductory courses in physical education at the sophomore level could include initial discussions of the perspective of diverse learners in the classroom and a review of sample case studies. As students move to supervised lab teaching courses during their transitional year to junior status, observations, journaling and reflection could be of focus. When students are juniors transitioning to senior-level status, problem-based learning and the construction of culturally responsive lesson plans could then be added to their practica experiences to prepare them for student teaching and ultimately their future profession.

While many institutions incorporate educational “blocks” by which senior-level students are introduced to concepts of social jus-

tice and equity, the timeliness of the teaching in these classes may render itself ineffective. Students who are exposed to these issues at a late stage in their teacher preparation may fail to see the relevance of it to their experiences and be at a disadvantage. Of equal concern are the teachers of pre-service educators in these blocks, who may not have the expertise to apply these concepts to the unique routines and procedures of the physical education environment. The challenges that pre-service teachers often have with managing students, communicating, planning and creating protocols can be exasperated if there is a demand to apply social justice towards the end of a preparation program. Failed application can cause resentment and a collapse in the psyche of the pre-service teacher. Learning about equality, then, is viewed as a “task” to complete for certification instead of a transformative pedagogy that has merit for their career.

Paulo Freire, (1921-1997), the Brazilian educator and influential educational theorist believed that effective social justice education incorporated the idea of informed action, or praxis. This praxis places emphasis on critical self-reflection, dialogue and action. Students in this process are not empty vessels waiting for teachers to deposit information, but active participants in a symbiotic process which makes the teacher and students co-learners (Landreman, Edwards, Balón & Anderson, 2008). The goal for the educator then, is to build a bridge from students’ current experience to a new one with adequate support (Kegan, 1994).

Praxis as critical reflection

Praxis, in the form of critical reflection, is a method that is helpful for students in examining the prevalence of issues relating to social justice in physical education. However, teachers of these students must first be willing to reflect upon their practices and gauge their own comfort level in dealing with these issues. Put simply, teachers in PETE programs

must be willing to examine their current lesson plans, syllabi and experiential opportunities to determine whether perspectives involving equality are considered. Also, teachers in these courses must ask themselves what is of most importance for students to learn. Critical reflection on social justice issues place students in a quandary where they for the first time must acknowledge their individual biases and privileges while recognizing their own group affiliation.

Despite the difficulties often associated with critical reflection, it is vital. Students in teacher preparation programs have a unique opportunity to examine their assumptions through four lenses that are distinct but interconnected: (1) autobiographical reflection, (2) the lenses provided from the perspectives of others, (3) the lenses provided from the perspectives of friends, peers and mentors, and (4) view of established practices through the lens of literature, such as books and audio and visual media (Brookfield, 1995). Reflection of a critical nature requires a conscious commitment to identifying personal biases along with knowledge of the environments they are immersed in and will encounter. Critical reflective thinkers acknowledge that life has complexities that have problems that do not have simple solutions, such as why many urban high school districts fail to adequately prepare students of color for college (Smith, 2007). Journaling is often mistakenly seen as the only method by which reflection can take place, without consideration of alternate methods such as critiques of case studies, field observations, and the designing of lesson outcomes.

Praxis as dialogue

Parameswaran (2007) has noted that dialogue allows for avenues by which pre-service teachers can develop an appreciation for issues related to inequities in society and their impact on learning environments. Used often in teacher education classroom contexts,

public discourse of social justice topics brings the experiences of individuals to the forefront in the hopes of creating an atmosphere for further conversation. Often, these discourses are used in response to predetermined topics brought up in class by the teacher or in the assessment of field experiences. Topics related to inequality discussed in the context of physical education typically revolve around race, gender and sexuality, but other concerns such as access to resources for physical activity, and structuring lessons which favor highly skilled-participants are of equal importance and worthy of discourse.

While these conversations are invaluable in aiding development of an awareness of inequality among prospective teachers, the public nature of verbal discourses can be challenging. Debates and think-pair-share or circle types of communication methods are common methods by which discussions are structured in classes and need to be monitored. According to the view of Goodman (1995) and studies done by Miller and Harris (2005), Schmidt (1998) and Tatum, (1997), students in teacher preparation programs may demonstrate resistance talking about social justice related topics, largely due to fear that they may be judged on their opinions. As these topics are structured in a class, teachers should create a supportive classroom environment where students are free to express their opinions, successes and frustrations without the fear of censorship (Smith, 2007).

Praxis as action

A final step involves evaluating the impact of the infusion of social justice issues on the existing physical education program, classes and other applicable experiences. Assessing issues in an active manner such as these demands a systematic ongoing process (Apple, 1999). While there are no established rules for evaluating methods used in infusing social justice into the practices of PETE programs, there are some considerations of note:

-Personal journals used as a means of gauging pre-service teachers' awareness and perceptions of social justice issues in classes should be reviewed periodically. Uline, Wilson and Cordry (2004) suggest that reviewing in this manner aids instructors in better assessing the impact of issues raised in class, observations or field experiences. In addition, both the instructor and student can compare responses from the outset of the course to its end.

-Observation assignments are more beneficial if structured and planned (Zeichner, 1996). While there are many ways to structure observations, practitioners in classes where social justice concepts are being focused on should first determine the purpose of and method of observation. Instructors of pre-service teachers must be aware of the cognitive level of their students in respect to recognizing issues pertaining to inequity and be proactive in guiding students on what to look for before embarking on observations.

-Readings assigned in class for which reflection is required need to hold relevance for the social justice construct being focused upon. For instance, Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) is an appropriate book to use in discussing disparities among school physical education programs specific to race and class, but not on issues related to gender, religion and sexuality. Reinforcement of these concepts can be facilitated by creating critical thinking exercises for use in class or on tests as appropriate.

-Professionals at sites by which PETE field experiences occur should have an active role in helping to design, implement and give feedback on these processes. Often, these professionals are called on to observe, and if they given the opportunity should be trained to re-

cord information on student progress through written notation or by filming instructional episodes. These individuals should model equitable practices in their pedagogy and have familiarity of the goals and objectives of the field experience (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Utilizing these professionals in this manner can be an invaluable in providing demographical information and substantial knowledge that can assist in the preparation of prospective teachers.

–Exit surveys in PETE programs should encourage feedback from students finishing the program. Some of the basic questions that should be asked of students are (1) To what extent they feel comfortable in recognizing and addressing issues related to inequality that may arise in their classes?, (2) Did they learn anything from social justice principles being presented in their coursework and if so, what?, and (3) Are there any suggestions for improvement of the program? Surveys of this nature help to assess the extent to which physical education programs are meeting predetermined goals and objectives related to social justice, the needs of pre-service teachers, and other individuals who these teachers will impact.

–Consultants outside the institution, faculty members within the institution or other capable individuals in the community, should be enlisted when reviewing PETE programs for social justice (Chase, Mutter, & Randolph 1999; Shields, 1992). It is important that a network of individuals such as these are available to help with providing perspective regarding the community, its people and issues which could be relevant to a focus on equality. Regardless of who is chosen, these

persons need to demonstrate aptitude, a commitment to social justice and zeal in improving teacher education.

An Area of Focus for the Future

Committing to social justice as part of our practices helps to ensure that individuals regardless of ability, race, social class, religion, gender, or sexuality have an equal opportunity to benefit. While the rationale for practices in physical education in these areas is apparent, there is still content worthy of discussion. Some areas in which further inquiry is needed pertain to the distribution of resources in physical education programs, the effect of culturally responsive curriculum content in physical education classes, language acquisition and the effect on skill development in physical education and the role religion plays in physical activity participation. These topics that pertain to social justice are a sampling of many which hold implication for the academy in the future.

It should be understood that issues related to social justice cannot be left solely for prospective educators to uncover. Administrators, practitioners, and teachers need to be proactive in introducing these concepts into existing PETE programs. Concepts in social justice should not be taught solely as separate entities, but rather as a group of issues placed underneath the same umbrella. Beneath this umbrella of social justice, issues related to equality maintain their distinctiveness, have equal standing with one another, and are presented responsibly with the hopes of ensuring a more equitable society.

Unfortunately, there will still be apprehension in regards to the presentation of issues pertaining to social justice. There is an inherent risk of discussing these matters along with the acknowledgement that answers will be uncovered which may be unsightly and uncompromising. Administrators and educators who plan and teach for social justice along

with students in these programs, will need to critically and internally examine themselves and policies and processes of the world around them. This should not be looked at as a negative process, but an essential action which will forge better physical educators.

Introducing social justice into PETE teacher preparation will not change all mindsets, nor will it eliminate each current and future problem related to inequality in physical education. It can however, create an awareness of potential areas of concern in our programs and practices and help in the navigation of complex situations as they arise. If the goal of PETE programs is to create competent and literate educators, then social justice must not only be included, but be promoted as a viable means of helping prepare future educators in our profession.

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