

My experience of, and philosophy for the practice of the NZHPE Curriculum

My experience of the New Zealand (NZ) Health and Physical Education (HPE) Curriculum (2007), while not unusual, was far from optimal. Many of my foremost memories of HPE are shrouded in feelings of fear, exclusion, and dread. As a 'converted' non-participant of high school HPE I feel that HPE is an irreplaceable site of learning, offering unique and practical learnings not found in other subject areas.

Using my perspective as a non-participant, I can focus on the key factors that contributed to my participation, in particular focusing on the responses of teachers, forming my personal HPE philosophy. I feel it is key to focus on the learning environment and the ways in which teachers guide and support, rather than direct and force students into their learning, forming confident, connected, and actively involved lifelong learners. This essay will utilise the four pillars of Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1984), an underlying framework of the HPE curriculum (2007) to conceptualise my own philosophy of HPE teaching, and the ways in which HPE contributes to the overall education of the student.

Taha Tinana is the most intuitive pillar of Te Whare Tapa Whā in the HPE context, relating to the physical health of the individual, underpinning most of the teaching that occurs within HPE. The physical health benefits of HPE are often used as the rationale for HPE in schools, and indeed HPE is often a foundational time in a person's lifelong relationship with physical activity (PA). Participating in, and learning of the benefits of PA is a key site of health promotion within the education system, an underpinning concept of the HPE curriculum (2007). The HPE curriculum offers students the opportunity to engage in a variety of activities, playing and discovering new sports, but also explore their physical capabilities, and how different forms of movement makes them feel. If a student can learn to move their bodies in a joyful way, HPE

can begin to build a lifelong passion for activity (Kretchmar, 2013). However, at no point in the NZ HPE curriculum (2007) is there consideration of enjoyment, instead performance and more ‘tangible’ outcomes are prioritised. It is assumed that joy occurs naturally in and through HPE, as a “break” from learning (Stevens, 2021., Wright & Burrows, 2006). I noticed an example of this kind of thinking occurring even within the educators at Ōpoho school when a teacher mentioned that they just wanted to play games (ie take a PE lesson) on a beautiful Friday afternoon. When PE is viewed as a respite from learning, or only the more tangible mechanical learnings are taken seriously, much of the personal value, such as discovering and exploring joy in movement is lost.

Excellence is a value of the NZ curriculum, but I feel the conceptualisation of excellence within HPE is flawed. Excellence within the HPE context tends to overwhelmingly focus on competition and the physical elements, instead of considering personal excellence and development that offers personal meaning. Further, it is imperative for teachers to find a way to reward effort, and courage rather than performance within HPE contexts.

The HPE curriculum easily integrates Taha Whanau, the social wellbeing. It is clear how participating in team sports can facilitate teamwork, cohesion, negotiating skills and bond students in friendships. However, it is important to go beyond the ‘common sense’ idea that these skills are picked up automatically, and without any input from the students. When I return to my memories of high school HPE, I remember feeling excluded from many team sports, or like I was burdening the team and hindering their chances at success. While I do not doubt it is possible to gain many effective social skills in and through HPE, I feel that the current focus on performance within the HPE curriculum inhibits these learnings, and often neglects the value of inclusion throughout the NZ curriculum (2007). I noticed that when performance and

competition were emphasised the spirit of the classroom changed from one of inclusion and joy to one of exclusion and judgement, rather than accepting peers at any level of performance and recognising the diversity of skill levels. One thing I really enjoyed seeing during my experience at Ōpoho School was the “Play is the Way” program. I found that the games fostered collaborative team work and encouraged socialisation with all students and struggled to notice social divides within the students such as the ‘popular kids’. I feel this program would foster better social integration and more positive interactions which would hopefully follow the children through to secondary school HPE.

Taha Wairua, the spiritual wellbeing is largely overlooked, yet maybe the most integral aspect of health. I believe HPE can be a valuable site to begin building a healthy relationship with the body and the spirit. By moving the body in a way that feels good, we build connections between the mind and the body, as well as learn to listen to and respect our bodies. For this reason, it is key to encourage students to attach personal meanings to their achievements, rather than looking toward external approval. Yet again however, the competitive class culture of HPE often overtakes these ideas. In many ways, while Health and Physical education come as a ‘package’, the culture and pressure of the physical education environment doesn't necessarily always benefit students health holistically, instead the HPE setting often places stress upon students, with an excessive focus on the physical, neglecting mental health.

Taha Hinengaro is a growing area of focus in wider society, as well as within HPE. Focusing on the mental and emotional health of the individual is a key aspect of the HPE curriculum, but one that I feel is often overlooked. While HPE is a prime site for the learning of many mental skills such as resilience, coping under stress, or learning to accept a loss, many of these skills get lost in the competitive nature of HPE. The HPE curriculum also needs to go

beyond tokenistic recognition of mental health issues and go further in depth with students, educating students on issues such as depression and anxiety.

Further from this, educators need to not only talk the talk, but walk the walk. Educators must bear in mind the broad experiences students carry with them to school each day (Tinning, 2001). Teaching simply cannot be a “one size fits all” approach, instead educators must work to meet students where they are at and aim to optimise the experience for all. I feel that often this will mean focusing on those who are lagging slightly, as the team is only as strong as its weakest link.

By encouraging students to face challenges at their level of comfort, students learn that stress is okay, and that they can do hard things, building resilience. Lineham (2003) suggests that educators look for things in their classroom that while they don't see, non-participants don't, as well as just trying to increase the *likelihood* they will participate, rather than forcing participation. Prioritising student health doesn't always mean forcing students to participate to ensure they meet the PA guidelines. How are students to learn about their wellbeing - if decisions surrounding PA aren't even their decisions? While the teachers who pushed me to participate meant well, it just made me more resistant. It was the teachers who met me halfway, and asked me how I would like to participate that gave me a sense of autonomy and ownership of my actions increasing my willingness to participate. When I was able to get involved by refereeing, or choosing a skill to focus on I felt much more comfortable within the environment. I also noticed some of these themes in Ōpoho, where students who didn't want to participate, didn't have to. Students unhappy in the environment were able to leave, and the teacher simply asked the class to reflect on how they may have helped the student feel more comfortable in the HPE setting.

I feel the aforementioned ideas of Lineham (2003) are so integral to my philosophy of PE because Mr Lineham was in fact the teacher who worked so closely with me to make my HPE experience the best it could be. I find it fitting, and poignant that it is his work that comes back around in my final year of my PE degree to form part of my philosophy of HPE.

My experiences in the HPE curriculum have formed my philosophy of HPE, focusing on the importance of meeting students where they are at, and guiding or supporting rather than directing their learning. In this way students can attach personal meaning to their learning, develop a lifelong love of PA and ensure that their mental health remains intact in and through the process of developing resilience. All of the aforementioned learnings are simply the start of the impactful and lifelong lessons to be learned within HPE, but in my perspective some of the most important in building confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners.

References

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