

**LADY JOAN GILLIES STUDENT AWARD**

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*Physical Education is not solely about the “P in PE”*

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Physical Education (PE) is easy, non-academic, and despite its place in many curricula, has failed to update its content with the changing times and demands. These are just some of the things we hear within the PE world. Within the dictionary, ‘stereotype’ is defined as “*a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing*”. Stereotypes have oversimplified Physical Education as a subject that lacks ‘intellect’, seeing it become a breeding ground for discrimination, labelling and inequity. I will investigate further through exploring the subject's history, oppression within the classroom, and prior experiences of the subject, using personally collected observational data to understand a multitude of perspectives.

The history of Physical Education exerts its basis for location on the periphery of academic curriculum. Historically, Physical Education attracted stigma due to being assumed as non-academic and resultantly regulated in school subject hierarchies far beneath the likes of Mathematics, English, and Science. Paechter (2000) outlines, “those areas of the curriculum that involve use of the body, such as physical education, while often compulsory, are given much less status in the academically focused school.” This, sadly still being the case in many curricula, with many schools “actively reducing PE time for subjects deemed more ‘important’” (Sprake & Palmer, 2018). One perspective that frames this historical lense is ideals around *physical education and sport being inseparable*. This relationship remains complex, formulated through colonisation where there was a desire for PE to be “militarised, scientific eucentric and based on physical training.” (Swaithes, 2021). Swaithes (2021) further outlines that over the last 20-30 years, there has been distinctive shifts in the focus of PE, moving away from sport, now encompassing critical thinking and learning in, through, and about movement. Around 39% of those I interviewed stated they believed that PE and sport were inseparable, despite many attending school over 15 years ago. This suggests that despite the subject's shift away from its historical roots, many fail to understand its modern focus. This outlines the ideal that PE solely focuses on notions of playing sport belittles and misrepresents the subject. In reality, the contemporary nature of the subject encourages critical thinking into personal health, physical development, movement concepts, motor skills (biomechanics) and social issues, exploring a myriad of perspectives and attitudes. How can Physical Education be considered as non-academic, when its inclusion in the NCEA framework and its position as a widely recognised university degree negates its position as such?

Physical Education remains a subject oppressed within schools. This stems from the assumption that *physical education is an ‘easy’ subject*. 15% of those I interviewed agreed with this statement, many, however, disagreeing due to the rich biophysical content the subject presents. Fitzpatrick (2012)

suggests the subject tends to attract statistically low achievers due to the assumptions that surround it within practice, this being those of Māori and Pasifika descent in Aotearoa. However, is it really justifiable to stereotype Māori and Pasifika students due to their decision to take a subject that is open to all? What effect does this have on discourses concerning culture and educational achievement? Hokowhitu (2008) and others (Bruce, Falcous, & Thorpe, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2011), argue Māori and Pasifika peoples are positioned in both historic and contemporary discourses as physically and biologically advantaged. Fitzpatrick (2010) relays this, suggesting that Māori and Pasifika students are assumed to be ‘naturally’ physically talented, reinforcing ideals of why these groups opt into PE, and become asserted as ‘non-academic’ and at the heart of oppression within education. For many culturally diverse individuals, Physical Education is not a site of ‘easy’ study, it’s a safe, affirming and meaningful space to both learn and grow. Fitzpatrick (2011) relays that many see being physical is just who they are, valuing the place of physical education in the lived cultural practices within communities. For myself, both the subject and the teachers were always understanding, offering a space of growth and facilitating individuality. However, the subject itself was perceived as a college “dumping-ground”, with those students who didn’t have a subject pathway, or were denied from other classes being placed in PE for an “easy way out”, despite many struggling to reach deadlines due to the dense material presented to us. It’s hard to make sense of, right? The differing viewpoints affirm understanding into just why individuals take PE, exaggerating knowledge behind the systems in place and the boundaries holding many back. In fact, PE holds the potential to address inequitable outcomes in New Zealand education and connect with young people most disenfranchised in the system. The many taking the subject to assert their cultural proficiency, achievement, and use PE as a site for both growth and meaning asserts its quality as *and* beyond being just a subject, negating its position as simply *easy*.

Many underpinning beliefs around Physical Education are overshadowed by personal and prior experiences of the subject. These experiences, not reflecting the genuine and contemporary quality of the subject. Sheehy (2011) discusses how the marginalisation of PE is compounded by the effect of prior experiences of parents, other teachers, and administrators. These ideas are underpinned by the assumption that *physical education has not changed*. 85% of those I surveyed assumed PE had not changed since they’d taken it, despite some being in school over 25 years ago. Within my research, many participants had bad experiences, feeling “*anxious or under pressure*”, experiencing “low-organised games in which the athletic students dominated, while the majority of the class experienced embarrassment, humiliation, and failure.” (Sheehy, 2011). 40% of those I surveyed agreed, with the majority being over the age of 22. However, JOPERD (2013) argues that “the Physical Education our parents experienced is not the same experience that students are having today.” From the early 2000s, PE became an authentic strand in mainstream education, shifting its focus from privileging sport, fitness, and European culture, to requiring a cultural and critical shift in

thinking, valuing Te Ao Kori, and not being substituted for sport alone (Swaithes, 2021). How can physical education be seen as ‘meaningless’ and considered as simply compiled of low-organised games when contemporary physical education conceptualises learning in, through, and about movement (Arnold, 1979), not to mention, the subjects ability to connect to broader social, political, moral, economic, and cultural contexts of our times. This promotes present day physical education as a framework with an inevitable critical approach. Its key framework changes invalidates the assumption that *physical education has not changed*.

Fitzpatrick (2011) outlines Physical Education is a safe, affirming and meaningful space to both learn and grow. I found it a place of both personal and academic growth and challenge. The curriculum was never easy, providing a challenge, but one that I was more than willing to commit too. I was a high achiever in school, and despite my best grades being in Physical Education and Health, few were willing to celebrate these achievements, resulting in a myriad of emotions and questions concerning why those achieving highly in Maths and English were so often celebrated, while my achievements in PE were overlooked. Upon leaving school, and attending university in the hope of being a Physical Education and Health teacher, many of my educators, including my dean, were confused as to why I'd chosen this when I could be destined for “*so much more*”. I remember thinking, so much more? What does this even mean? Physical Education is misrepresented and mistakenly regulated in school subject hierarchies, which may be due to ideas discussed earlier. The assumptions around the subject belittles its qualities as both a critically academic subject, and as a site of growth, meaning and development for our Rangitahi. This must change. The real question being how?

Moving forwards, Health and Physical Educators must begin to enter such debates, in order to assert the academic status of the subject, and defend their place within the contemporary curriculum and assessment structures. Awareness must be spread to parents, educators, and society regarding the subject's content. I have found that many are ‘*stuck within the past*’, and within different assumptions of the subject's quality. Therefore, I believe changing the subjects name alongside educating our whanau may aid in moving forward, and contextualising the subjects genuine and contemporary quality, asserting both the P, and E within Physical Education. For example, changing to ‘Te Ao Kori’ (“The World of Movement”) may encompass the complexities behind the subject that the word “Physical Education” fails to do. A fresh start that may get many on board, reducing speculation around what occurs within its curriculum and abolishing assumptions that arise in regard to the subject. Physical Education's current orientation has created the opportunity for the subject to be revitalised as one considered both academic and critical. One working to better assist learners in understanding and critiquing movement culture, and providing them with the tools to locate themselves within it. We have the basis of a critically academic subject, and therefore the power to transform its facade. We now must take action.



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