TEACHER RESPONSIBILITIES AND IDENTITY IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Angela O’Connor
Department of Human Movement Studies
PhD

Department of Human Movement Studies
University of Queensland
Brisbane Queensland 4072

(W) (07) 3365 6240
(H) (07) 3848 6202

angela@hms.uq.edu.au
25th November 1997

This study addresses how the dual responsibilities of teaching and coaching in the school context shape physical education teachers identities. Interview, field observation and document analyses data shows how the shift in emphasis from the concept of role to identity theory highlights active efforts of teachers in making sense of their position as teacher/coach and in preserving their sense of self in a postmodern age. This research contributes to the theoretical framework used to understand teacher’s work. At a time when the status of teachers as professionals, their public recognition, competence, and commitment is under scrutiny as evidenced in the Senate Inquiry into the Status of Teachers, this project will assist in the identification of support structures needed to address the demands of teaching AND coaching in the physical education profession.
Introduction

At a time when the status of teachers as professionals, their commitment and competence is under scrutiny by the community, the relationship between teacher's identity and their work is a significant one. For those with extracurricular demands added to their normal teaching loads, time and energy conflicts may invariably impact on perceptions of who they are while working in different contexts. Physical education teachers ‘dual’ responsibility of teaching physical education and coaching school sporting teams may be understood through analysing the discourses which construct and represent teachers work. These discourses, shaped by the practices associated with physical education and sport, may be informed by identity theory. A number of themes emerge from teacher interviews which provide an insight into identity theory, highlighting the active efforts of Australian physical education teachers in preserving their sense of self between different work contexts.

In Australia, coaching activities, often considered ‘extracurricular’, have been traditionally perceived as an integral, albeit unpaid, aspect of the physical education teacher’s job and often performed at a time when other teachers have no assigned duties, for example, in lunch breaks and after school. In non-government schools however supervision and coaching of after hours school sport can often be a condition of employment for physical education teachers particularly where competitive sport is usually more of an integral part of the total school curriculum and a source of prestige for such schools. However, there is no clear policy about work responsibilities for physical education teachers regarding teaching and coaching in Australian schools. This may be because the ‘dual’ responsibility of teaching physical education and coaching school sporting teams seems to be a natural one involving similar physical activities and similar facilities with the conceptual confusion over what is physical education and what is sport contributing to a blurring of boundaries between teaching and coaching in our high schools.

In the North American literature, one of the reported reasons for teachers leaving the profession has been ‘role conflict (Chu, 1981; Edwards, 1973; Massengale & Locke, 1976; Rupert & Buschner, 1989). Here, schools are the focal point around which sport is organised and consequently, the coaching demands placed upon the physical education teacher are more substantial than in other contexts. Despite this difference, role conflict is a useful starting point for investigating the relationship between teacher identity and physical education teacher’s work.

Review of literature

Role conflict

Role conflict theory draws on early socialisation theory which emphasises the need for teachers to be able to accommodate to a new social setting (Taft, 1962). An Australian study describes teacher socialisation as:

a move from membership in one social structure to another accompanied by a need to cope and adapt to a new social environment resulting in changes in skills and attitudes (Coulter & Taft, 1973, p. 681).

Similarly, early role theory highlights that individuals are assigned roles or socially expected behaviour patterns by others and act in response to their perceptions of the expectations that others, especially significant others, hold for them (Biddle & Thomas, 1966). For teachers then, others expect certain behaviour from them and reward and punish them (even if only symbolically) as they conform or fail to conform to those expectations. A fundamental premise of role theory is that people act in such a way as to maintain an excess
of rewards over punishments. Since rewards are subjectively defined and prioritised according to values of the actor, an effort must be made to understand his or her value structure. Actions which appear illogical from the perspective of the observer may be completely logical and consistent within the value system of the actor and the inputs of his or her social system. Unfortunately, the various expectations an actor perceives for behavior in a particular role are not always consistent with one another. The reaction to this is referred to in the literature as role conflict and has been applied to the role of the teacher in different contexts (Getzels & Guba, 1954; Grace, 1972; Westwood, 1967). In physical education, Edwards (1973) indicates that time and energy conflicts were of most relevance in the teaching-coaching role in the United States. After teaching five physical education classes and a two hour coaching session (a normal load in many high schools), there is not much time or energy to prepare for the next day. In one report in the United States, Chu (1981) reports that male teacher-coaches spend thirty six hours per week in preparing to coach and two hours for teacher preparation even when not coaching. Role conflict theory then tends to frame the teacher with multiple responsibilities as a victim of role conflict and tends to conceive teacher identity as relatively stable and generalisable between the two contexts.

Despite the majority of the literature indicating dissatisfactions associated with the ‘dual’ teacher/coach role, there is evidence to suggest that one of the reasons for taking on the role as a coach was to overcome the routine nature of physical education teachers work and the widely reported lowly status of physical education in the school curriculum (Lortie, 1975). In Australia, there is a general tendency for physical education teachers to prefer to teach the academic or senior ‘Board’ courses to overcome a reported lack of intellectual challenge (Macdonald, 1995). Positioning teacher’s identity in such a framework recognises that teachers constantly adjust between contexts and as such becomes a useful lens through which an understanding of teacher’s work may be understood.

Identity theory

Identity has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate in the 1990s: from Giddens (1991) discussion of modernity and self-identity, to postmodernism’s emphasis upon ‘difference’; from feminism’s attempt to deconstruct gendered social discourses to collective identities with nationalism and ethnicity as significant political forces. Change in identities is also dominant theme: emergence of new identities, resurgence of old ones and transformation of existing ones. This sudden upsurge in the interest in identity seems to reflect the uncertainty produced by rapid change through communications technology, changes in the global economy (Menter et al., 1995) and the commodification of culture which together dismantle traditional patterns of social life and herald a new consciousness (Alexander & Sztopmka, 1990; Casey, 1995; Gergen, 1991). With this new consciousness identity is a process of defining and redefining, not only ourselves but others throughout life and in the context of social relations, this implies a degree of reflexivity across shifting contexts (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Hewitt, 1989; Jenkins, 1996; Lash and Friedman, 1992). Identity then is characterised by fluidity and continuous change as social interactions progresses. Whereas role can be assigned, the taking up of an identity is a ‘constant social negotiation that can never be permanently settled or fixed, occurring as it necessarily does within the irreconcilable contradictions of situational and historical constraints’ (Britzman, 1992, p. 42).

Linked with identity is the concept of self. Self has been defined as individual’s reflexive sense of his or her own identity constituted by others (Jenkins, 1996). The literature concludes that identity without self is implausible and that core features of self in the
literature parallel those of identity with features of reflexivity and process common to both. However, Jenkins (1996), drawing on the work of Goffman (1959) and Ball (1972) claims that individual identity is generated in the relationship between personal self and public self. As early as 1959, Goffman emphasized that multiple selves are constructed according to the social context. He claims that Ôsituated or social identities may involve multiple selves that we learn to present to others depending upon the situation. In contrast, substantial identities consist of a person s most valued views of and attitudes to self, which are constantly defended and highly resistant to change. If there is a wide divergence between the two, a great deal of negotiative work may be required by both actor and audience to salvage the substantial identity.

Applying this to teaching and teachers, Nias (1984) suggests that many primary school teachers had entered teaching with a strong substantial identity, a firm commitment to personal values. Few had, however, identified as Ôteachers ; the majority saw themselves as Ôpersons-in-teaching and adopted strategies to defend their substantial self. Indeed they adopted various strategies to protect themselves from situational influences. That is, once they felt technically competent, they changed schools or moved from one sector of education to another in search of a reference group which may simultaneously promote and impede the development of the profession and of individuals in it. After 2 to 5 years of searching, some teachers decided that they could not preserve their substantial selves as teachers and moved to other occupations particularly parenthood. Thus, substantial identities and reference groups by which these are strengthened and protected contribute to the partial nature of professional socialisation among primary teachers. Woods (1984, 1993) also distinguishes the substantial from the situational self. He maintains that teachers act to preserve the values and ideals which form the core of their selves. Yet these inner selves are seen as being dependent upon the existence of external referents. Attempts to innovate can destroy or severely disturb this congruence, and under such conditions, teachers will act to defend their substantial self. It is interesting to note, however, that research into teacher identity and the impact of working in changing contexts, such as teaching and coaching settings, has not been addressed.

Method

Six case studies of male and female secondary physical education teachers in different types of settings were undertaken to gain an insight into how these teachers make sense of their multiple responsibilities across teaching and coaching settings in their school context. Physical education teachers are a particularly interesting group because they are usually required, either officially or unofficially, to coach school sporting teams and often, teaching and coaching settings can be quite divergent in organisation and management of students.

The key methods of data collection were interviews, field note observations, some document analysis of teacher s timetables and school policies. Supplementary interview with family members and students were also conducted where relevant. Key questions focus on providing information about teaching and coaching backgrounds, motivations for and attractions to teaching and coaching, perceived benefits in teaching and coaching and their perceptions about the extent to which teaching, coaching and work commitments interfere with other commitments such as those to the family. To investigate the strength of the substantial self, questions related to current teaching and coaching practices and values in their current contexts were asked in addition to how these may remain similar or may change in other contexts.

Emerging Themes
Minimal teaching and coaching role conflict

Teaching and coaching role conflict may be observed in cases where the teacher reports time and energy conflicts in activities related to coaching opposed to teaching related activities. Observation and interview data indicate that this was not the case. Role conflict, as articulated in the literature, did not appear to be as significant an issue in the lives of Australian physical education teachers as compared to documented studies in the United States. This may be due to the situation in some schools such as Jenny’s regional government school in which the difference between coaching and teaching is very small, reflecting the conceptual blurring of boundaries between physical education and sport. She states:

I take a coaching session after school or at lunch time or whenever it is or whatever sport I’m doing is really not that different from when I am teaching it in a class situation anyway. We came to the realisation and because our standard isn’t that high at this school that we really don’t coach really anyway. We teach all the time.

Glen also views teaching and coaching as causing minimal role conflict because he admits that ‘you are able to almost blend them a little more’. However, he also states that there are differences in terms of what is acceptable in each of the contexts:

The thing I like about coaching is I go into the gym and players come in and I basically treat them as if this is my home. They come here and they do as I say or there’s the door. I’m as strict as. I’ve thrown kids out. I’ve given them 100 pushups. There’s things there that in a general classroom situation they can refuse to do but here no. This is something that is not a right of theirs. It’s something that they may have put their hand up and said I’d like to try this but in the long run, it really is up to me.

One of the perceived benefits of the ‘dual’ responsibility of teaching and coaching for all teachers was the establishment of a stronger rapport with students than if these teachers were solely the students’ Op.e. teacher. Teachers in this study actually acknowledged that the ‘dual’ responsibilities of teaching and coaching complemented each other and in fact, teaching and coaching students in a ‘dual’ capacity was an enormous advantage. Dave, an experienced physical education teacher and respected coach in a private school states:

Teaching and coaching rounds out your whole job. If you are a good coach, the word gets around about you, the kids look forward to having you and the classes work harder for you. It’s not one or the other any more.

As teachers constantly adjust between teaching and coaching contexts, role conflict appears to be less significant than the American literature suggests. As the teachers have reported, reasons for this may include a blurring of boundaries between teaching and coaching and the facilitation of a more congenial and learner friendly environment.

Maintenance of identity and a strong substantial self

In the shift in teacher’s work across different contexts, that is, between the classroom and the oval and between teaching and coaching, there appears to be a shift in teacher’s identity across different contexts. As Dave teaches his Year 8 health and physical education lesson, there is a heavy emphasis on student participation and less on fostering individual student skill development. However, while coaching his Year 8 rugby union team, Dave places more significance on acquiring a high degree of skill because outcome is paramount in a Saturday morning inter school rugby match. School administrators, students and parents all play a part in forming Dave’s identity in different contexts, exemplifying the reflexive nature of Dave’s identity. Despite the fluid nature of identity in the teaching and coaching contexts, Dave s
personal values about the importance of physical activity and the acceptable ways in which his students behave are maintained across contexts. For example, Dave devotes training sessions to practising sportsmanlike behaviour with his Yr 8 rugby team which he feels is ‘an important component of school sport traditionally overlooked in the quest for successful outcomes’. Similarly Lisa, who teaches in a non government single sex school, coaches a very competitive school touch team, her philosophy of ‘physical activity for all’ which she attests to as matching the school’s sporting philosophy, was observed during her teaching and coaching duties including those on Wednesday afternoon which were interschool sport afternoons. Her practices of rotating all the players on and off the field to give each player a chance in different positions reflected her philosophy in light of an intense competitive atmosphere that prevailed at the playing fields. Here, in Dave and Lisa’s teaching and coaching contexts, is where the distinction between Goffman’s (1959) substantial and situated self becomes significant. As substantial identities consist of a person’s most valued views, evidence from both observations and interviews suggest that all teachers act to preserve the values and ideals about how physical activity should be conveyed to students despite the type of setting and the pressures to conform to expectations from students, parents and the school.

Conclusion

For physical education teachers with teaching and coaching responsibilities, the notion of role conflict appears less significant as they constantly adjustment between teaching and coaching contexts. Identity theory better informs our understanding of teacher’s work particularly of those who work across different contexts, actively struggling to preserve their most valued views, particularly in terms of the significance of physical activity in the school curriculum.

To address the significance in the contribution of others to teacher’s identity, perceptions of their students, colleagues and family members need to be addressed. Furthermore, as the study progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that the relationship between physical education teacher’s work and identity across different contexts is always changing as a result of interaction with others (Gergen 1991; Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 1996).

Perhaps now is the time that support structures for physical education teachers with multiple responsibilities be put into place to address the demands of teaching and coaching and particularly in the preservation of values that strengthen the place of physical activity under any form in the Australian school curriculum.
REFERENCES


