

Making a Difference? Education and 'Ability' in Physical Education

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Abstract

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This paper brings a speculative, sociological perspective to the nature of 'ability' in Physical Education (PE) and asks why this aspect of embodiment, with notable exceptions, has received so little critical attention in the professional discourse of PE and associated research in recent years. It is suggested that thinking about 'ability' has become a taken for granted absent presence in the discursive practices of PE in the UK, yet it variously helps configure attitudes towards the body, a sense of status, value, distinction, inclusion/exclusion and embodied self. Drawing on ideas from the theoretical work of Bernstein and Bourdieu the paper raises a number of issues about the ways in which 'ability' is constructed within the disciplines that feed the various sub-cultures of the PE profession, influencing teaching in schools and teacher education. The paper suggests that unless greater attention is given to 'physical education' rather than the interests of sport and health, the profession is unlikely to make an impact either on the 'abilities' or other cultural differences that children and young people bring to schools.

Making a Difference? Education and ‘Ability’ in Physical Education

Introduction

In this discussion I take up a theme articulated but left rather under-developed in a recent venture with Brian Davies and Jan Wright (2003) *Body Knowledge and Control. Studies in the Sociology of Physical Education and Health*. In that text we were concerned primarily to explore how consciousness is embodied through the practices and rituals of Physical Education and Health (PEH) in schools. However, we were equally eager to emphasise that, if we are interested in improving the lot of more children in schools in the interest of social democratic ideals, then we needed to be as concerned with issues of ‘ability’ - how it is recognised, conceptualised, socially configured, nurtured and embodied in and through the practices of PE – as with those of sport and health. We begin then, by asking whether in the current political culture we are moving any closer or further away from engaging these ideals.

In what has been an extraordinary displacement of professional interest over the last 20 years, Physical Education (and I use this term inclusively to signify both its subject matter and the people, researchers, teacher educators, teachers, who trade in it), has increasingly centred attention on and justified its existence discursively and pedagogically in terms of just about everything other than that which is distinctive and special about itself and its subject matter. Specifically, the disciplines capacity and pedagogical responsibility, to work on, effect changes in, develop and ameliorate ‘the body’s’ intelligent capacities for movement and expression in physical culture (1), in all its varied forms, has been displaced. In essence, Physical Education has become strangely disembodied. It has either ceased to talk about the nature of ‘physical education’, ‘educability’, ‘educe’ (the process of bringing out or developing latent or potential existence) and ‘ability’ as processes and goals altogether, or reduced it to a dribble of unproblematic assumptions either about motivation and health related behaviour, or ‘fitness’ or ‘talent’ for ‘performance’ in the interests respectively of health and/or participation in organised sport. Its dominant discourse is a poor substitute for consideration of the nature of ‘physical’ education or the multitude of capacities and desires that find expression in physical culture though not always within school PE.

This ought to strike us as very odd indeed. We would be hard pressed to find, for example, Maths or English teachers justifying their existence principally in terms of what they can do, not for a child’s literacy or numeracy, but their mental health, self esteem, or social welfare in and out of school. Though both subjects may have better grounds for making such claims than PE. If you think lack of exercise is bad for your health, try long bouts of innumeracy and illiteracy instead and see how you feel. Yet this has happened in PE and not just in the UK. Many will be familiar with claims made in the USA, for example, that sport education programmes or ‘the application of structured physical fitness programmes’ can meet the needs of ‘at risk’ youth; putatively, variously increasing their self esteem, well being, acquisition of life-skills like goal setting and planning and values development, while lowering depression and anxiety, amongst other things (Collingwood, 1997). In the UK a raft of policy rhetoric is now emerging from central government and its agencies on the grounds that,

‘Sport can contribute to neighbourhood renewal by improving communities’ performance on four key indicators - health, crime, employment and education’ (Policy Action Group 10, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999)

and

Evidence is beginning to show that schools which have a strong sporting ethos have fewer truants, fewer exclusions and better academic results (BBC News, Friday 16th May, 2003)

Leaving aside the issue of whether such relationships have anything to do with sport or the range of factors (e.g., catchment areas, social class intakes, levels of resourcing, quality of teaching and facilities) rarely mentioned in such reports, we should none the less ask ‘what is PE for, education or social control? My point here, however, is not that PE has no part to play in social processes such as these. It is simply that thinking of this kind, especially when adopted by central Governments and sanitised of any radical social and economic agenda or intent, while not *determining* the development of PE in the UK and elsewhere, has so *dominated* the discourses of the profession and constrained its agendas that it is now almost impossible to debate the nature of ‘ability’ and what is educationally worthwhile in the practices of PE.

It is no accident that talk of physically educating ‘the body’, or of ‘educate’, has almost disappeared from the discourse of PE in schools and Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) or Initial Teacher Education Physical Education (ITEPE) as it is called in the UK. In part, we no longer discuss what constitutes ‘physical’ education or ‘educability’ because those people whose trade it was to talk of such matters, such as philosophers of education, have largely disappeared from the scene; an endangered if not extinct species in a political culture where talk about the nature of ‘knowledge’ and ‘being’ is neither fashionable nor feasible. With ‘valued knowledge’ increasingly being determined by politicians, government or its agencies, learning for learning’s sake, or discussing ‘learning for learning’s sake, have become truly unfashionable ideals. Indeed, in the UK there is lineage between Kenneth Clarke’s (Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s Secretary of State for Education in the 1980’s.) ruthless dicta that ‘having any ideas about how children learn, or develop, or feel, should be seen as subversive activity’ and that ‘Teacher Educators who have peddled their subversions should be hunted down and hanged from the entrails of every sociologist’ (Stones, 1992: 111) and New Labour’s current Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke’s recent rant about ‘useless history’ (TES, May 8, 2003) taught in University and schools. It has been philosophers who have, more than others, prompted us to think about ‘body matters’ relating, for example, to the nature of ‘practical knowledge’ (Polanyi, 1958; Smith, 1988) ‘physical literacy’ (Whitehead, 2001), ‘kinaesthetic intelligence’ (Best, 1978; Arnold, 1979) or ‘puissance’, Brian Pronger’s (2001) recent brilliant evocation of Marxism, phenomenology and Buddhism to reinstate ‘desire’ and the visceral embodiment of emotion, into our pedagogical thinking and ideals. In the brutal culture of individualism and materialism that characterises contemporary politics, voices such as these, positioned on the margins, inevitably struggle to be heard. And having driven talk of ‘education’ and ‘educability’, from the language of PE, it has been all too easy, given the factionalised nature of the profession’, for powerful commercial forces to step in and fill this lacunae with the instrumental, self serving interests of the ‘health’ and sport industries. Once positioned as having either nothing or little to say about how PE may impact a child’s ‘physical education’, the profession has become easy pickings for those charged with costing it to suggest that if it isn’t ‘education’ that the profession is trading in, then it has no legitimate business being in schools at all. We can note Stephen Jefferies (Jefferies, 2003) recent lament that in the USA school administrators are increasingly looking to cut costs by removing PE from the school curriculum.

Again I emphasise that this is not to suggest that PE in schools should not benefit children and young people socially or in health terms, though there are no convincing arguments that PE has any special right or responsibility to be directly involved in its provision. Rather, it is to underscore how physical education's relations with the interests of sport and health, may have displaced talk of education from the discursive terrain. In so doing altering understandings of how 'ability', 'educability' and 'educate' are recognised, conceptualised, cultivated and materialised in the actions of teachers in PE in schools and ITPE. Recent research (see Evans, Davies, Wright, 2003) in the UK, USA, New Zealand and elsewhere has illustrated that how PE relates to the interests of health and sport has a bearing on the way in which 'ability' is recognised and configured in its practises. The powerful discursive forces of health and sport have altered fundamentally, perhaps irreversibly, thinking on these matters, in ways that detract from discussion of what educational work on 'the body' in the pursuit of educational ideals should be in PE.

PE Cannot Compensate for Society

This, then, is not just a rail against sport and health issues *per se* but a comment on the extent to which the interests of both now define the realities of PE as forms of *compensatory education*. In this perspective it is implied that something is lacking in the family (their culture, class or community,) and thus in the child and, that the school has to compensate for that which is missing. The family and children are thus looked at as deficit systems. The danger in this perspective, of course, is that teachers then develop low expectations of children that they will undoubtedly fulfil. As a result, children are unable to benefit from schools. If children are labelled as 'culturally deprived' (they don't eat the right food, or do the right amounts or type of exercise), 'then it follows that the parents are inadequate; the spontaneous realizations of their culture, its images and symbolic representations, are of reduced value and significance' (Bernstein, 1971:62). We are already seeing some evidence of this in the teaching of health education within PE in schools (Evans, et al, 2003). PE cannot compensate for society's ills, either in its own right, or trading as sport and health. Indeed I am reminded here of Bernstein's (1971) angry interjection many years ago, directed then at versions of compensatory education (CE) emerging in the USA and UK,

'I do not understand how we can talk about offering compensatory education to children who in the first place have not as yet, been offered an education environment' (Bernstein, 1971:60)

Few would argue that we had achieved a decent PE in the UK by the 1980's (in terms of time table time, human and physical resource and curriculum content) capable of making an impact on the 'ability' differences that children bring to schools, before succumbing, willingly it seems, to the interests of health and sport. With what effect? As Bernstein argued, the concept of CE serves to direct attention away from the internal organisation and the quality of the educational context of the school and to focus attention instead on the deficits of families and children. It has certainly constrained discussion of the quality, form, content and function of physical education as currently practised in schools and ITPE, and especially its capacity to make a difference to children's 'ability' not only to relate to but access physical culture.

One expression of compensatory ideology expressed in PE is the notion that teachers can help compensate for the poor health of children by enhancing their interest and enjoyment in and motivation for involvement in physical activity and sport. Indeed, a whole industry of psychological research has grown up around issues of 'motivation', orientated towards helping practitioners understand how their programmes can better be attuned to the interests and needs of children and young people in schools. However, in this paradigm neither 'education' nor 'ability' is treated as a problematic concept. The latter, for example, tends to be characterised as a one-dimensional, static entity; as one amongst many fixed or incremental 'attributions' (the others being effort, task difficulty, luck), (Weiner 1995;

Dweck & Legett, 1998). While this has usefully centred attention on the nature of individual decision making in health and sport, it has little to say about the nature of 'ability' as a dynamic, socio cultural construct *and* process. Or the way in which education and 'educability' are defined in relationships to the values, ideals and mores that prevail in schools and other social fields. Its discourse is a poor substitute for consideration of the ways in which 'abilities' are configured, recognised and rejected in the physical cultures of communities, societies and schools.

Perhaps more dangerously, the reductionism inherent in the literature on attribution and ability lends itself perfectly to those willing converts of recent 'human genome' theory, who may wish to reduce 'ability' to something akin to 'physical intelligence'. A kind of a God given, homogenous, immutable entity programmed (or not as the case might be) for (top level) sport. In the UK researchers have recently documented that 'ability' is increasingly understood by policy makers, politicians and teachers as 'proxy for common sense notions of 'intelligence'' (Demain, 2001: 2). Thinking of this kind is underscoring a multiple of complex selections (for example, through grouping and tracking practices) that separate out the 'able' and the 'less able' within schools. It has provided the opportunity for teachers and senior managers 'to identify the winners and losers at the earliest possible stages, allowing continual checks to ensure that those predicted success 'fulfil' their potential' (Gillborn and Youdell 2001: 97). Increasingly, it seems, stratification is operating at an institutional level, through ability grouping policies and at an interpersonal level within classes in terms of the time and attention given to different types of students (see, Lynch and Lodge, 2001). The significance of these developments for the social reproduction of achievement, underachievement, educational aspirations, 'ability' and identity in contexts of PE has yet to be fully explored. We simply do not have the data to confirm whether such attitudes prevail in PE. Though some evidence is emerging to suggest that stratification and ability grouping along with the labelling and segregation of the 'gifted and talented' and 'low attainers' is increasingly featuring in PE departments in some 'specialist' secondary schools in the UK (Penney and Houlihan, 2003). The sciences that feed ITPE may do little to interrupt this state of affairs.

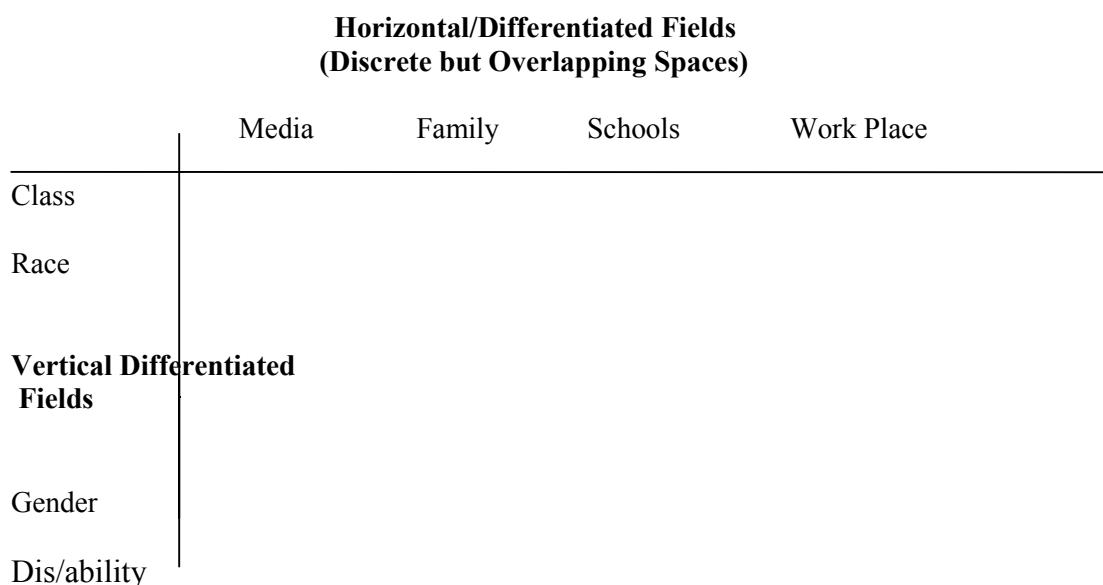
To acknowledge these inherent difficulties and dangers is not at the same time to prohibit discussion of the nature of education and 'ability' in PE. Far from it. I would suggest it is just what is needed. But how can we instate concepts of 'ability' into the discourse and practice of PE, in a way that does not view it simply as an attribution or entity' or as 'physical intelligence'; a homogenous, immutable, manifestation of a culture free gene?

Towards a Sociology of 'Ability'

Bourdieu's (1992) development of the concept of 'habitus' offers some steer on how this may be achieved. In Bourdieu's view an agent's habitus is an 'active residue or sediment of their past experiences which function within the present, shaping their perception, thought, action and social practice in a regular way (Crossley, 2001: 93). 'It consists of dispositions, schemas, forms of know-how and competency, all of which function below the threshold of consciousness, shaping it in particular ways'. (p.93). Critically, these dispositions, schemas and competencies are acquired in social contexts structured by social class, whose patterns and underlying principles they incorporate as both an inclination and a *modus operandi*. It is hardly surprising, says Crossley, that a child brought up in a football loving household for example, is far more likely statistically to develop their own love of football and will acquire the 'know how', the dispositions to 'true' appreciation and criticism. In this respect habitus is not just sets of learned dispositions. It is acquired by children in environments that are classed and 'cultured' and are subject to variation. Moreover, these are not simply cognitive structures but 'dispositions of the body', deep seated

structures of embodied dispositions, many of which become ‘doxis’, ‘unquestioned beliefs embodied in actions and feelings but seldom formulated in words’ (Crossley, 2001:99). They are reflected, for example, in how we eat, walk, ‘carry’ and communicate with our bodies in everyday interaction. Such competencies carry a cultural value that have an exchange value in certain fields and, as a consequence, can function as ‘capital’ (Shilling, 1993). Insofar as they acquire a value within specific fields, these bodily attributes become desirable to social agents’ (Crossley, p.107); in effect they may be perceived as ‘abilities’. In this view then, ‘ability’, is an embodied social construct, meaningful only in its display and is always and inevitably defined relationally with reference to values, attitudes and mores prevailing within a discursive field (2).

Figure 1



The concept of ‘field’ is Bourdieu’s way of conceptualising horizontally differentiated social spaces, as they are intersected by vertical differentiation. Figure 1 highlights that social spaces are never constituted independently of the vertical axis of class, gender, ‘race’ and disability differentiation. ‘Horizontal differentiation is diffracted through vertical differentiation and vice versa’ (Crossley, 2001:100). Behaviour displayed in different forms of physical culture horizontally across fields, thus, is never constituted independently of the vertical axis of gender, class, disability and ethnicity. We, therefore, can not ‘read’ or interpret ‘ability’, valued aspects of behaviour, without reference to a person’s gender, age, ethnicity, disability and the values prevailing within and across particular fields. For example, in contemporary health education classrooms, the emphasis placed on body improvement and perfection, may configure ‘ability’ as a willingness to continually work on and engineer the body (through proper diet, more exercise) towards slender ideals. Children, by virtue of their social class or cultural background may be more or less ‘able’ and willing to achieve this. Some, perhaps children of the new middle class may find it be relatively easy to achieve. For others, such manifest attention to the body may make little sense at all and may have no currency as ‘ability’. This may be the case, for example, in the homes of Muslim children for whom a body centred focus may run counter to religious beliefs and may neither be a priority

nor proper concern. Given that individuals are bound to each of these social fields (the school and the family) by a strong, affective grip, introducing new possibilities through education and asking individuals 'to change', will be equally emotionally charged.

Making a Difference?

How does this bear on our discussion of education and 'ability' in PE? Well, the emphasis given to sport, health, social goals, has been at the expense of talk about the nature of physical education. This, along with the feeder disciplines' tendencies to endorse a rather limited conception of 'ability', has displaced meaningful discussion of whether and how PE can make an impact on the 'cognitive embodied differences', 'the abilities' that children bring to school. In remaining relatively silent on these matters PE inevitably remains a conservative force, building on and reproducing rather than challenging and changing, where appropriate, the 'ability' deficits and differences that children develop outside school. Class, like gender and 'race' is not enacted straightforwardly in schools and classrooms, the middle classes don't any longer claim resources, reward and privilege because they speak with received 'BBC' pronunciations but because of what they have achieved by virtue of their 'ability' displayed at University and school. Men don't claim superiority over women for example, in sport participation management because they have an extra six inches of gristle between their legs, but because they claim to have 'abilities' that women do not. For this reason, of course, the middle classes and men invest heavily and strategically in the cultivation of the physical capital of their offspring from a very early age. And my point here is that 'embodying' doesn't just mean inculcating the right attitudes, values, motivations, predispositions, representations but the right physical capital; skills, techniques and understandings as well. In the absence of discussion of education and ability we have little idea of how the latter is to be achieved.

Sociological researchers in PE have been very good at documenting the way in which 'the body' has been inscribed with social value and meaning. As a result, quite properly, pedagogues have set about challenging and changing the attitudes and values that are nurtured discursively across different fields. But a concern to address and alter the discursive elements of habitus and to change people's **attitudes** towards each other in relation to physical culture may have been at the expense of giving equal regard to the physical resources (capital) individuals then require to cross discursive boundaries once reconfigured and changed. In short, have we become so concerned to make children feel healthy, happy and good about their own and others' bodies that we have overlooked that we are also there to 'make a difference' by eroding the embodied physical differences that are the product of the class and cultures of the family and the home?

We know that academically middle class children have benefited much more than working class counterparts from the expansion of school and university over the past 20 years in the UK. New research has found, for example, the chance of a boy of high ability from a high-income family becoming a graduate was 76 percent among those born in 1970, up 17 percentage points on 1958. By contrast, 43 per cent of high ability boys born into working class backgrounds in 1970 gained a degree, an increase of just eight points. The researchers found the prospects of bright middle class girls born in 1970 were also much better than those of girls born in 1958, with the proportion who graduated rising 17 points to 77 percent. Over the same period, the proportion of poorer girls who became graduates declined by nine points from 38 to 29 per cent. (TES, April 11, 2003: 1). Can we make anything like the same analysis of progress and decline in PE in terms of altering not just the distribution of cultural but physical capital through its processes? Well, yes and no. No, we can not talk authoritatively of having made progress in developing pupils' physical abilities in PE over their 12 years or so of schooling because we have not been overly concerned to identify, nurture and measure such 'ability', let alone make a difference by eroding the disparity between the haves and have-nots. Yes, we can if we fall back on 'levels of participation' as proxy for discussion of our capacity to develop 'ability', contest difference and ensure a more

even distribution of physical capital, accepting that some measure of 'progress' is reflected in levels of participation in sport and physical activity in and outside school. In this respect, there is still compelling evidence for the salience of social class in structuring, if not determining, a person's choice, preferences and opportunities in sport in the UK and elsewhere (Kew, 1997; De Knop and Elling 2001; Nagel and Nagel 2001; Van Der Meulen et al 2001; Collins, 2003). As suggested above, these are inequalities compounded by other social characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, dis/ability, age, geography and sexuality that define people's lives. The point here, however, is that class doesn't just determine choice and preference in sport. It also determines a person's physical capacity, 'their ability', to realise those choices and preferences let alone extend them.

Conclusion.

If we accept the notion of habitus as a set of learned cognitive embodied dispositions then we have, as Nash (2003) maintains, to at least consider 'that durable embodied cognitive schemes, acquired by children in classed and 'cultured' (gender and ethnicity) environments, are at least an important, if not the principal cause of observed variation in educational performance', including that expressed in Physical Education. In effect, the 'physical capital', that children acquire outside schools is fundamentally involved in the reproduction of the differences that provide the basis for inequality in education, leisure and health. Thus we have to consider that the primary effects of socialisation, what goes on in the family (see Kay, 2000) and the early years of schooling, 'may be more important than the secondary effects that many sociologists and policy makers have taken as their proper area of concern' (Nash, 2003).

Amongst other things, this means that that we have to be as concerned in policy and pedagogy in PE to address the embodied *physical resources* children acquire in the family and bring to school as we are with their symbolic/discursive cultural resources. Addressing racism, sexism, motor elitism, or a child's health and social well being, is not enough. We have to be equally concerned to alter and impact the physical capital (differences and deficits) brought to school, through culturally relevant pedagogies and curriculum (see, Ennis, 1999). If professional understandings of physical 'ability' have become a synonym for an essentialist view of 'physical intelligence', then we need to at least consider whether this discourse supports school practices that generate observed distributions of attainment in PE, or merely 'fails to eliminate variance due to the operations of the cognitive embodied habitus' (Nash, 2003:6). I share Nash's view that to write and think of embodied cognitive habitus is not 'to encode IQ theory in a radical discourse', an unfriendly act indeed. It is to draw attention, 'in the legitimate tradition of Bernstein, and Vygotsky (1994) to the relationships between classed environments and schemes of language, thought and modes of specialised cognition' (p.16). It is also to suggest 'that contexts in which embodied cognitive habitus is developed are central to the construction of sound theories of inequality and difference and that the reflex dismissal of all accounts as 'deficit theory' is an error' (Nash, 2003:16). This is not a way of saying that PE should be judged only on its capacity to induct all pupils 'equally' into conventional forms of knowledge, skill and discipline in PE. Parents have a right to know whether their children have been given not just 'equal opportunity' to physical culture in all its varied forms but also the physical capital thereafter to engage with it. It is, above all else, to suggest that we re-direct attention away from the interests of sport and health towards discussion of what in policy and pedagogical terms needs to be done in PE if an education that enhances children's 'ability' is to be achieved.

We should routinely ask not just how is 'ability' configured within the practices that define PE but how is thinking about 'ability' as teachers and teacher educators influenced by the knowledge/s that define our fields. How it is encoded by the interests of sport, health and science; and how physical capital is reflected, reproduced and perhaps reconfigured and challenged in schools. We should also investigate how physical capital is distributed and allocated in the family, the school and across other fields. What 'abilities' are recognised,

valued and nurtured, some accepted, others rejected and by whom, where and why in schools; whether PE can and does make a difference to the form, content and distribution of physical capital. Above all else, we need agendas and discussions of physical ‘ability’, educe, and educability in PE which go beyond those given the profession by the interests of capital, health and sport.

None of this attributes ontological priority to any given ‘body’, or privileges a particular form of movement, or defines in advance what is to constitute ‘ability’, ‘educability’ or ‘physical intelligence’ in PE. It is intended only to open up the range of thinking on these matters and to at least consider that there are forms of education, ‘ability’ and educability, beyond those that currently prevail.

I had a dream in which I was a strange dealer: a dealer in looks or appearances. I collected and distributed them. In the dream I had just discovered a secret! I discovered it on my own, without any help or advice.

The secret was to get inside whatever I was looking at – a bucket of water, a cow, a city (like Toledo) seen from above, an oak tree, (*a child*) and once inside, to arrange its appearances for the better. *Better* did not mean making the thing seem more beautiful or more harmonious; nor did it mean making it more typical, so that the oak tree might represent all oak trees; it simply meant making it more itself so that the cow or the city or the bucket of water (*or the child*) became more evidently unique! The doing of this gave me great pleasure and I had the impression that the small changes I made from inside gave pleasure to others.

The secret of how to get inside the object so as to rearrange how it looked was as simple as opening the door of a wardrobe. Perhaps it was merely a question of being there when the door swung open on its own. Yet when I woke up, I couldn’t remember how it was done and I no longer knew how to get inside things (John Berger, 2001: 13/14) (my italics)

We would be hard pressed indeed to find a better definition of ‘educe’ than this, or one further removed from the interests of capital, sport and health. How do we achieve it? Well, I am sociologist not a pedagogue, I can only speculate on these things. Perhaps the real issue is whether we any longer have the opportunity, or the desire, given the current political culture, to even debate such things.

Notes

1. I use the term physical culture to refer to the variety of play, sport, adventure, dance and other leisure physical activities that help define the social fabric of local and national communities.
2. A field is a distinct social space consisting of interrelated and vertically differentiated positions, a 'network, or configuration of objective relations between positions' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97, quoted in Crossley, 2001:100). 'These positions may be occupied by either agents or institutions but what 'positions' them, as such, is their concentration or possession of specific 'species' of capital and power. They are positions in a specific distribution of capital and power' (Crossley, p.100), signalling, it seems to me, the efficacy in the last instance of social class.

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