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The concept of community and its social ecology

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Introduction

The term community is increasingly being applied to education contexts (Noddings, 1996, p.10) and linked to physical education discourses around health and wellbeing in which physically educated citizens are being called upon to contribute to the establishment of active, healthy and well communities (Jess, Collins, Dewar, Campbell, & Harris, 2002; Lambdin & Erwin, 2007; Lawson, 2005; Penney & Jess, 2004). Despite this, the term community remains ambiguous and fluid, while notions of physical education remain trapped in a discourse driven by dominant competitive games and sports that privilege particular expressions of community. Subsequent to critiquing various notions of community and its application to health and physical education, this paper presents a social ecology of movement that offers a frame upon which 'physical' experiences of children within a school community can connect in dynamic ways to broader communities, within various environments. By providing an account for how physical education can make meaningful connections, this paper opens up possibilities to be 'physically' educated in ways that meaningfully contribute to creating active, healthy communities.

Community

Community is a fluid term that according to Delanty (2003) has 'different meanings for different users' (p.11). In sociology the term community encompasses social organisations such as neighbourhoods, towns or a spatially bounded locality. Community has been applied to culturally defined groups in anthropology while political community has an emphasis on citizenship, civil society and collective identity.

Historical and philosophical studies have focused ‘more on the idea of community as an ideology or utopia’ (p.2). Delanty (2003) notes that:

Communities have been based on ethnicity, religion, class or may underlie them; they may be locally based and globally organized; affirmative or subversive in their relation to the established order; they may be traditional, modern and even postmodern; reactionary and progressive (p.1).

Labonte (2006) includes all elements of identity, geography, issue and institutional relations in community but underpinning this is the organisation of people. Derived from the Latin *communitas*, meaning “common or shared,” and the *-ty* suffix, meaning “to have the quality of”, the act of sharing, and therefore community, is not simply ‘...a demographic datum; it is the dynamic act of people being together’ (Labonte, 2006, p.84). Delanty (2003) argues that such an emphasis on a group, place or underlying sense of morality confuses the sense of belonging with particular kinds of social organisation. In shifting away from traditional views of ‘people being together’, defined by institutions or geographies, Delanty (2003) emphasises that modern communities are constructed less from congregation and more from global forms of communication. Despite acknowledging that traditional forms of community can still exist, he maintains that:

... more like a network, community today is abstract and lacks visibility and unity, and as a result is more an imagined condition than a symbolically shaped reality based on fixed reference points.
(p.188)

Community in this sense ‘...is neither a form of social integration nor one of meaning but is an open-ended system of communication about belonging’ (p.187).

Community and Health

Within the field of health the concept of community is typically viewed as a more traditional term that is either geographically defined or centred on a shared interest or identity (Liamputtong, Gardner, & Gartland, 2003; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2006). Community level interventions to promote health-enhancing behaviour across policy, environment and lifestyle levels have gained considerable momentum in recent

times. The resultant tendency highlighted by Rawson (1990, p.215) ‘to insert the term “community” as a self-justifying prefix into any new health initiative’ is a likely consequence of the enduring appeal of the idea of community. Utopian and nostalgic views of community, according to Delanty (2003, p.11), sit in the modernist assumption that ‘community has been destroyed by the modern world’ and must be recovered. The ‘loss’ of the traditional foundations of community and belonging can be linked with various crises associated with societal ill health. As an example, the loss of the physically active lifestyle has been linked with a sharp decline in walking or cycling to school, urban sprawl and a withdrawal from outside play, all of which are products of a more individualised, insecure modernity.

The term community is consequently viewed as something that can regulate a ‘return’ to more healthy lifestyles and in turn be enhanced through greater connectivity and belonging. Communities therefore have been targeted as sites to be manipulated or ‘...designed to make physical activity in them possible and even desirable’ (Frank, Engelke, & Schmid, 2003, p.8). Delanty (2003) challenges this notion by claiming community is an ‘...expression of the search for something destroyed by modernity, a quest for an irretrievable past which is irrecoverable because it may have never existed.’ (p. 188). Despite Delanty’s critique, there remains strong support for harnessing more flexible notions of community in order to promote health. Even if the modern notion of community is one of fragmentation and pluralisation, the aspiration to belong may be enough to positively oppose inequality and generate collective concern and individual responsibility to improve the health of society. According to McMurray (2007, p.14):

The accumulation of research evidence on health and wellness underlines the importance to individuals of being part of a community. As social creatures, we all need the kind of exchanges with our physical and social communities that energise and sustain our activities. This is the constant, dynamic exchange of an ecological system.

Community and Education

As is the case in the health literature, Noddings (1996) describes a longing for community within education writing in which the term ‘...is put forward again and again as a redemptive solution...’ and in which belonging has become the imperative moral value (p.246). As ‘educators speak and write with enthusiasm... about communities of learners, professional communities, schools as communities, and

community partnerships' there is a strong assumption that community is unequivocally '...an important social good' (p.246). This romanticised call for community needs critical consideration, without which the perpetuated myth of the total community can give rise to conformity, parochialism, exclusion, distrust of outsiders and assimilation (Delanty, 2003; Labonte, 2006; Noddings, 1996). Indeed notions of community developed around competitive sporting clubs have been critiqued for perpetuating these very things (Fitzclarence, 2001; Light & Kirk, 2000). McMurray (2007, p.13) in contrast points out that sustainability, a key concept of community, occurs by valuing diversity through celebrating "...the different contributions that comprise the kaleidoscope of opinions, ideas and networks of the community."

The use of the term community remains problematic in educational contexts. Providing the limitations of seeking a united, overly idealistic form of community are acknowledged, the notion of community can be used in working with dynamic, multi-layered socially or environmentally connected sub-groups. Given the complexity of the term, it is important then to consider the role of community beyond a catch phrase to be attached to education. This can be achieved by acknowledging its multiple forms for belonging beyond proximity and congregation. There is no denying a difference in community between an old private school with its strong community of memory and a newly built school in the suburbs (Noddings, 1996).

Extending more traditionally defined forms of school community based upon geography and social connectedness, I wish to push towards an ecological view of school community that considers the "...dynamic entities that pulsate with the actions and interactions of people, the spaces they inhabit and the resources they use" (McMurray, 2007, p.10). To do so, I locate the school community as being nested within broader communities connected in meaningful ways through communication. Importantly, there needs to be acknowledgement of sub-groups within the school community that come from larger and in some cases more important communities of memory which sit beyond the school fence and this difference remains important to the sustainability of communities (Noddings, 1996, p.267). Finally, I suggest school communities can and should extend themselves beyond geographically defined boundaries and more broadly engage in the ecology of their shared micro and macro communities that occupy various home, sport, park, neighbourhood and electronic environments.

Social ecology of physical education and community

As a curriculum, physical education provides substantive opportunities to engage in creating real or imagined community. Because of its experiential and mobile nature, physical education can be removed from the constraints of the indoors, or indeed the school gate and through 'doing' move toward more ecologically defined notions of school community. Physical education outcomes have evolved over time to encompass not just individual concepts of individual physicality but those that impact others and community. Former New Zealand Secretary for Education, Howard Faney (1999), outlined the role of the physical education curriculum as:

Through learning in the curriculum, students will gain knowledge, skills attitudes, and values to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and contribute actively to the well-being of other people and the well-being of their communities. Students will take increasing responsibility for their own health and will learn movement skills in a wide range of contexts. They will develop the skills that will enable them to enhance their relationships with other people, and they will participate in creating healthy communities by taking responsible and critical action. (p.5)

Physical education, albeit slowly, appears to be responding to the argument for an environmental or community based approach to promoting physical activity (Pate et al., 2000; Riddoch & McKenna, 2005; Sallis et al., 2006). Lambdin and Erwin (2007) note that the physical educator is 'now encouraged to maximize physical activity time during class, provide additional physical activity opportunities before and after school, and promote physical activity at home and in the community' (p.29). Penney and Jess (Penney & Jess, 2004) discuss a curriculum in which '...the creation and maintenance of supportive, inclusive 'active learning environments' necessarily becomes a collective and community concern, for all 'prospective educators' (family, friends, sports coaches, leaders ...) in reconfigured and expanded learning networks and communities.' Finally, Cale and Harris (2005) advocate a whole of school approach to developing structured and non-structured physical activity opportunities in which physical education curriculum is a component of broader social and physical environmental change at school and in the local community.

In adopting community based approaches to physical activity and health the socio-ecological frame, with its multilayered conceptualization of community and environment, can be used to explore what Penney

and Jess (2004) refer to as an ‘all encompassing’ approach to physical activity in people’s lives (both in and beyond the classroom). Within ecological contexts the ‘community consists of interdependent social units that... as a social group...’ function with behavioural norms and organization of resources to regulate both environment and behaviour (Green & Ottoson, 1994, p.42). McMurray (2007) supports suggestions that community is a socio-ecological concept that is both multi-layered and dynamic when she states communities are:

...systems of dynamic, interactive relationships between people and their physical, geographic, personal and social networks. Communities are ecological in that the relationships within the community not only connect people to the community, but give back to the community what it needs to sustain itself...(p.13)

A social ecology of movement (see figure 1) provides a sophisticated theoretical frame from which the multiple level influences on physical activity across different living domains and their communities interrelate (Sallis et al., 2006). Such a theoretical frame is complete in its wholeness with potential to influence immediate and longer term physical activity patterns of school children.

The socio-ecological approach acknowledges that behaviour can be shaped by multiple levels of intra-personal, social, cultural, policy and environmental influence (Stokols, Allen, & Bellingham, 1996; Wattchow & O'Connor, 2003) that better reflect notions of a physically active community (McMurray, 2007; Sallis et al., 2006). Much of this activity sits below the surface as embodied, routinized practice played out in the everyday (Wattchow & O'Connor, 2003). Within this reader, Brown and Payne (2008) call “...for a ‘spatiality of movement’ and ‘geography of physical activity’ as more primordial/primitive elements that require revitalization in the physical education/sport discourses, where an instrumental, competitive, performative discourse is unquestionably privileged” (p.6). Penney and Jess (2004) also noted the importance of the mundane when identifying sitting posture or lifting techniques as absent from the current curriculum. The application of this reaches far beyond scheduled physical education class as school communities reach outwards into their extended communities to impact neighbourhoods, community sport and local environments such as parks and pedestrian routes. This spill over into other active living domains reinforces the ecological, multilayered and multidimensional aspects of the initiative (Sallis et al., 2006).

Socio-ecological approaches to health (Stokols, 1996; Stokols et al., 1996; Stokols, Grzywacz, McMahan, & Phillips, 2003) and physical activity (Foster & Hillsdon, 2004; Sallis, Bauman, & Pratt, 1998; Sallis J. et al., 2006; Spence & Lee, 2003; Timperio, Salmon, & Ball, 2004) are not new. Nor is the application of this model to the health and wellbeing of schools (Cale, 1997; Lorraine Cale & Jo Harris, 2005; Colquhoun, Goltz, & Sheehan, 1997; Jones, Brener, & McManus, 2003; Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007; Sallis, 2001; StLeger et al., 1996; Wechsler, 2000). What is problematic when considering the role of future 'physically educated' citizens living within their communities, is that physical education is consistently positioned as a bit-part player within these frameworks. As an autonomous domain within such models, physical education is reduced to physical participation in which activity is accumulated without great thought for meaning. When education for activity is considered, it often lies within the performative domains of play, games and sports and therefore remains self-limiting.

Despite social-ecology approaches appearing as models for various curriculum documents, the possibilities this brings remain hidden beneath Games Sense, Sport Education and Fundamental Motor Skill priorities. In order to realise its potential, physical education needs to become more than a piece of the physically active [healthy] school puzzle (see Cale, 1997). The repositioning of physical education from provider of physical activity to active driver of a socio-ecological physical education curriculum across all domains (with a particular focus on the connected school community) prompts a serious shift in the way we might conceive physical education within schools (see Figure 1.). Physical education becomes more aligned with health through the adoption of a common framework but remains differentiated on the basis that ecological models are not limited by the need to remediate a crisis and can in fact exist in their own right with multiple payoffs.

Cale (2000) noted that while PE teachers generally had positive views with regards to physical activity promotion, many appeared to have a limited understanding and a narrow insight as to how community based approaches could be applied in their school. Yet in the same way socio-ecological models are being applied to whole communities within the health sector, they can equally be overlaid on the school as a community nested within broader society. The model enables the physical educator to facilitate exploration of a range of agenda's and draw resources from across the curricula. Structured activities like sport education or teaching games for understanding remain in place, however the physical education

curriculum is now open to explore unstructured physical activity, active transport, independent mobility, natural play spaces and community sport, constructed through the everyday lives of what it means to be part of that community.

Because community in this sense is a fluid term, education is dispersed from the school and into neighbouring communities acknowledging the contribution from local sporting coaches, older siblings, parents as well as environmental settings in nature or built environments as ‘teachers’ and facilitators of movement. The argument that this change in focus would result in a loss of time to ‘do’ physical activity becomes redundant. The net result of the education process should result in increased activity opportunities outside of scheduled class time and transfer across the lifespan. An argument this simply adds more work in an already constrained curriculum is countered by the ability to use cross curricular approaches to make informed change and draw upon multiple communities as resources (community sporting programs generally do a good job of teaching children about sport)(Michael et al., 2007).

As the child ages, Penney and Jess (2004) acknowledge that “...physical education curriculum as it has traditionally been conceptualised and organised is destined to have partial and short-lived relevance for many”. As students develop and transfer their focus for structured activities into the well catered for community environments, this frees up the space within physical education curriculum to explore more holistically other factors that influence physical activity across the lifespan. Instead of replicating community sport (Sport Education) we should seek to provide stronger links between physical education, school sport and the provisions for sport that already exist within the community. This creates more room to explore wider physical activity experiences beyond the bounds of organised or structured activities.

In accommodating demands for more natural play settings (both at school and in the surrounding school environments) it may also free up opportunities for spontaneous, self directed play. Through dealing with their own school as a connected community, physical education can extend into the lived experiences of participants homes and reach into the broader social and natural spaces of their lives beyond scheduled PE times and beyond the school boundaries. As Penney and Jess (2004) state:

“We can readily recognise that learning and involvement in physical activity and sport happens in many places and various times—in schools but also in communities, in families, amongst friends, in workplaces and in our connections with digital and ‘virtual’ worlds.” (p.272)

As an example, a HPE curriculum that delves into the environmental, physical and social benefits of active transport, with particular reference to the lived transport experience of its students, can lead to the development of a comprehensive active transport plan. This in turn impacts the entire school and covers policy, ethos, education and behaviour change levels whilst requiring cross-curricular expertise (literacy, numeracy, environmental studies, health, and geography).

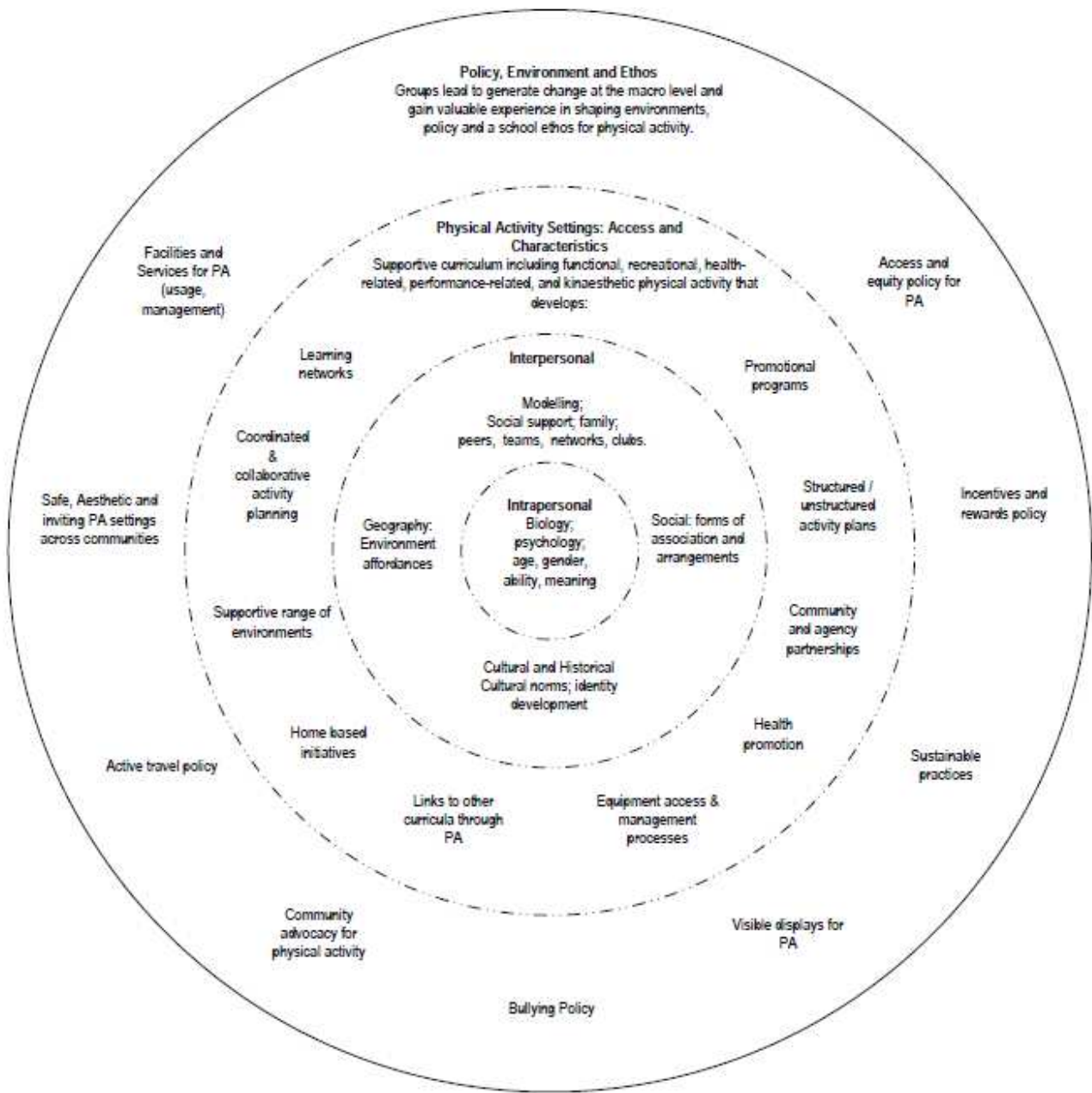
Alternatively students can be involved in collecting evidence and preparing a submission for funding to drought proof their field or they may engage council in addressing various activity spaces in their community. As part of HPE, students can enlist the help of the art curriculum to make a community walking route more aesthetic (Burke, 2006), the maths curriculum to quantify the health and environmental impact of a student run community physical activity initiative (Michael et al., 2007), or the science curriculum to develop a community garden or park (Cutter McKenzie, 2008). While not all aspects of this work are physically active at the time, by operating across all levels of the socio-ecological frame, these HPE projects have potential to impact the total daily physical activity of the individual and many others within their communities. More importantly they engage students in a critical, experientially based pedagogy that develops more completely the notion of what it means to be ‘physically educated’. These students become future advocates for movement not as sporting participants but as planners, builders, politicians, volunteers, teachers, plumbers, parents, principals, engineers, health providers and public servants. Under this model, play, games and sport exist but lose their privileged status to become part of a more comprehensive socio-ecological approach that better represents the scope of what it means to be physically educated within the context of community.

Conclusion

The use of the term community within HPE is gaining popularity, often without clear definition or consideration for its implications. Additionally we are seeing calls to shift the focus from individual notions of motor skill, games sense and fitness towards more sustainable or every day notions of physical activity

with greater relevance at both the individual (intrapersonal), social (interpersonal) and community (environmental) levels. Socio-ecological frameworks provide physical educators with a reference from which they can begin to understand the complexities involved in meeting these aims. If we are to develop physically educated citizens who are capable of participating in the creation of healthy communities through responsible and critical action, then we need to look beyond play, games and sport towards a social ecology of HPE.

Figure 1: A Socio-ecological framework for Physical Education



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