

Physical Education Teachers as Allies to Aboriginal Students:

Dimensions of Social Consciousness

by

Louise Desmarais Champagne

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment

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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree
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ABSTRACT

This study explores dimensions of social consciousness in relation to the ability of physical educators to be effective allies to Aboriginal young people. A theoretical framework is developed for a “community solidarity” approach and then applied to, and enriched by, interviews with physical education teachers who have worked with Aboriginal students. The framework incorporates aspects of critical pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, and anti-racist education. Using a qualitative research methodology, eight physical educators were interviewed as a means of encouraging their reflections pertaining to their teaching practices, philosophies, experiences and relationships with Aboriginal students. The research findings identify how unprepared teachers felt in response to the complexities of working with Aboriginal youth and their families. The research highlights the need for physical education teachers to develop a critical social consciousness that includes an understanding of Aboriginal economic history and colonial relations. In order for physical educators to become effective allies of Aboriginal young people, teacher-training programs need to provide students with a theoretical framework for understanding inequality and oppression.

DEDICATION

To Julian Kelly-Champagne,
to Aboriginal students in general, and
to the teachers who are working hard
to be good allies to young people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have benefited greatly from the generosity of family, friends and colleagues. I am particularly indebted to my soul mate and partner, Russ Rothney, for his loving support, intellectual companionship, and editing skills; to Joannie Halas for her enthusiastic encouragement, inspiration and vigilance; and to my brother Lionel Desmarais who opened doors. A special thank you also goes to Susan White for getting the bibliography in shape.

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Preface: Bad omen...*

In the summer of 1620 an incredible turn of events occurred at what is now Churchill, Manitoba. Some residents of the region were making a seasonal rendezvous with the Hudson Bay coast. They discovered a store of foreign provisions, an eight-pounder brass cannon, and a mass of European corpses:

They were much astonished to see so many dead bodies, the more so as they had never seen men of that kind before. Terror stricken, at first they ran away, not knowing what to make of such a sight. Then when fear had given way to curiosity, they went back thinking they would secure the richest spoils that had ever been obtained (Jeremie, 1720).

But then there was a dreadful explosion "with the result that they were all killed, and the house and everything in it were burnt up" (Jeremie, 1720).

This story, presumably based on oral tradition, comes to us from the pen of the French trade commander, Jeremie. He was employed by the fur merchants of the Compagnie du Nord, of New France, at the mouth of the Hayes River, southeast of Churchill, Manitoba for most of the years from 1694 to 1714.

In September 1619, two Danish naval vessels manned by a combined crew of 65, headed by Jens Munk, had reached the mouth of the Churchill River. There they were unable to cope with winter conditions and were overcome by scurvy. Many died. Only Munk and two others survived to return to Europe the following summer. After their

* This section is largely extracted from Rothney, 1983.

departure, gunpowder in their abandoned store of goods apparently was ignited unwittingly by people who had never seen the like before.

As an initial contact with Europeans, the incident of 1620 must have been regarded by people of the region as an inauspicious omen indeed. A visionary gaze at the future conditions of dependency, health problems and social crisis facing their Aboriginal descendants might have confirmed their worst fears.

Can the crisis be reversed? Where do Physical Education teachers of Aboriginal students fit in?

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Purpose of the study

In this dissertation, I propose that having a critical social consciousness is a major factor in determining the ability of physical education teachers to be effective allies to Aboriginal¹ young people.² To demonstrate this, I examine the relationship between social consciousness and pedagogical practice. I do this by forming my thesis with a theoretical framework based on critical social consciousness. Accordingly, the thesis draws on the contributions of some key exponents of critical pedagogy. For example, I incorporate Freire (1970), Giroux (1998), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Sleeter (1993) as well as my own experience, knowledge and insights. After setting out the case for the importance of critical social consciousness, I proceed to present my understanding of some key aspects of the historical context of Aboriginal communities in northern North America. I do this to emphasize the connection between history and social consciousness. This is followed by an application of my theoretical framework to some experiences and perceptions of physical education teachers who were interviewed as part of my research.

My analysis starts with the beginning of a “community solidarity” approach, which grew from my own experiences and thinking. This community solidarity lens informs my interactions with critical pedagogy and with other perspectives that add to the community solidarity framework in Chapter 3. It also guides my exposé of the historical tension between community and commercial values in Chapter 4. Subsequently, the

¹ ‘Aboriginal’ refers to First Nations (‘Indian’), Inuit, and Métis people.

² ‘Young people’ refers to people under the age of twenty-one.

community solidarity perspective continues to evolve through my interaction with my interview material in Chapter 6 and 7. In these chapters I apply the framework, as it emerges both from my preceding “dialogue” with critical pedagogues and from my reflections on historical processes, to my study-participant teachers. Accordingly, Chapter 6 and 7 serves as an example of how my community solidarity lens functions as a guide to analyzing the ability of teachers to be effective allies to Aboriginal students, while also drawing on the teachers’ perceptions to enrich the lens. As a whole, these chapters produce a pedagogical framework and analysis aimed at assisting physical education teachers to become strong and effective allies to Aboriginal young people. In short, my thesis focuses on the capacity of teachers to deliver physical education programs that complement the need of Aboriginal students to succeed, and to develop confidence and pride around who they are in relation to their current and ancestral communities.

Paulo Freire (1970, 1974) wrote of a pedagogy of the oppressed and of education for critical consciousness. His left-wing Jesuit counterparts were known for their liberation theology. Jurgen Habermas³ speaks of an emancipatory knowledge interest in research (Kvale, 1996). The common central link, shared by critical pedagogues generally, is the notion that knowledge informed by critical social consciousness can unleash human energy and creativity and lead to a better, more equitable world. Applied to education, this interest in social transformation is very different than interest in

³ Habermas is identified by Kvale (1996) as a “critical hermeneutical” scholar with roots in the “Frankfurt School”. Hermeneutics refers to the understanding of interpretation of texts, notably in regard to literature and history.

technical knowledge and control (Kvale, 1996). For teachers of most Aboriginal students, it can mean the difference between seeing teaching as solely a process of passing on technical information and skills, or seeing teaching as being an ally to young people who struggle to cope with social inequity and deprivation.

My research methodology is conditioned by my interests in “liberation” pedagogy, “transformative” pedagogy, or “emancipatory” pedagogy. In other words, the subject matter, questions, approach, structure and interpretation reflect my desire to see social relationships transformed in a way that frees up creative capacity and humanity and that fosters a more equitable distribution of wealth and power. In particular, I am interested in knowledge that can help physical education teachers to be good allies to Aboriginal young people who desperately need to reverse inter-generational patterns of destructive influences upon Aboriginal communities.

Research Questions

In order to investigate the impact of social consciousness in applied pedagogy, I began my inquiry by asking: How do physical education teachers interpret the effect of their own teaching practices on the performance of students? What knowledge do teachers have about the historical social and economic backgrounds of their students, and how does this information impact on their relationships with Aboriginal students? What is involved in critical social consciousness applied to teaching? How is critical social consciousness important to being an effective ally to Aboriginal students?

Social Benefits of Schools

Heather-jane Robertson (2005) recognizes the significance of multi-dimensional community interactions in promoting responsible behaviour among young people and in

teaching “foundational values that make living together possible” (p.108). Recognizing the different types of opportunity for learning that schools offer in social development, Robertson makes the distinction between the role of family and the role of schools:

Public education is a remarkable experiment in learning to live together. Families enjoy, or at least expect to enjoy, the privileges of intimacy, love, empathy, common experiences and common expectations. Families are where people who are much like each other, except for age, work out how to be with each other - or not. But schools can teach what most families can't, which is how to work things out within a public space. Schools can teach the values that apply to getting along with people whom you don't know well, who are different in every way except age. True, they do this imperfectly, but better than any other institution we have created (p.108).

I agree with ‘critical education theorists’,⁴ such as Peter McLaren (1998) and Henry Giroux (1998), who acknowledge the role that schools have in reinforcing and reproducing social and economic inequalities. I believe that schools sustain and legitimize the status quo social order (McLaren, 1998). However, like Robertson and the critical theorists, I believe it is important to recognize the positive social benefits that schools can offer. As community institutions that bring young people together, schools can be great places for young people to learn about themselves and others, to learn how to develop social relationships outside of family, to develop skills that will allow them to be less vulnerable to social inequity, and perhaps to gain understanding that would allow

⁴ Critical educators (Grant and Ladson-Billings, 1997) maintain that “schools can become institutions where forms of knowledge and values are taught for the purpose of educating young people for democratic empowerment rather than conformity and subjugation” (p. 52).

them to avoid some of the effects of 'race',⁵ gender and class bias. Some students find refuge in schools that can be - "a safe haven in a confusing and sometimes violent world" (Weissglass, 1998, p.3) and there are many adults in school settings who care about young people and learning. Within a school context, physical educators are advantageously situated to provide leadership in transforming schools into community institutions that focus heavily on building respectful connections among people involved in the school environment.

Physical educators have a special opportunity in the school system in the sense that their interactions with students are less centred on written academic work. They have the opportunity to observe students' interactions and presentations of themselves outside of the physical confines of a classroom. This observation is not meant to discredit the social relations in the classroom, which can be as intricate and complex as the social relations in the gym. The point is that physical educators have a different opportunity to create space for supervised interactions among students that can cultivate respect and caring values. They can create a variety of opportunities to engage students in ways that are inclusive and positive. Conversely, physical education can be exclusionary and promote negative experiences (Graham, 1992).

Helping people to develop positive feelings about themselves is an important principle of teaching. However, this can be very challenging in an inner-city school or in

⁵ The word 'race' is used in quotations because it represents a construct that identifies humans on the basis of genetic classification. The concept is based in colonial ideologies that rationalize exploitation. I believe that eventually we need to stop using the term 'race' because using it gives creditability to the false notion that there are basic physiological traits that are unique to particular population groups. On the other hand, 'racism', understood as attitudes, actions and social divisions related to skin colour or other surface appearance, is all too real. It is extremely important not to disregard the terrible hurts inflicted by racism; i.e., inflicted by thinking and actions tied to the false belief that 'racial' differences are real and related to genetic and cultural superiority. Racism hurts people and needs to be routinely challenged and stopped.

an impoverished community where poverty and generations of colonial subjugation weigh heavily. In this context, critical social consciousness can serve as an essential part of the framework for community building and people building.

Social Benefits of Physical Education

The value of physical education is based on the widely accepted notion that there are many physical, social, and emotional benefits from participation in physical activity (Sallis & Owen, 1999). Increased levels of physical activity can result in “higher levels of personal fitness, a life-long participation in health-enhancing activity, social inclusion, and an overall sense of belonging” (Fishburne & Hickson, 2005, p. 24). Fishburne and Hickson make a distinction between physical education and physical activity. According to them, in physical education, activity should be used as a medium for teaching in ways that make learning fun. It can be “an essential component of a quality Physical Education program” and a vehicle for becoming “physically educated”. They define physically educated people as having performance skills, participatory skills and physical literacy skills. Even more significantly, from my perspective, they maintain that a good physical education program includes social relationship skills that support self-expression, opportunity for interaction with others, displays of responsible behaviour and an understanding of and a respect for all people during physical activity.

The immediacy of the social learning experiences within physical activity and the potential for social development within the instructional settings of physical activity makes physical education an extremely important element of the schooling experience for young people. The physical activity environments “are very emotional, interactive, and

for some kids, attractive” (Hellison, 1995). Beyond the mechanics and techniques of performance, these environments are exceptional for social learning and teaching interactions. As Hellison (1995, p.1) states, “Life in the gym provides seemingly unlimited opportunities for intervention and for the demonstration of personal and social qualities, not only in games but in exercises, drills, discussions, and informal student actions (which may include inaction).” Young people “show more of themselves” in physical activity settings, and in the gym or on the playing field.

We cannot assume that positive outcomes automatically emanate from involvement in physical activity, as young people are complex beings who bring with them feelings, attitudes, values, and behaviours. Rather, positive changes “are more likely to occur if they are planned for and exemplified by someone whose presence reflects the desired qualities” (Hellison, 1995, p.2). Physical educators are important role models and need the social skills and confidence to provide respectful and safe learning environments. Along with content knowledge, physical educators need highly developed ‘people’ skills that include sensitivity to how young people feel about themselves and how these feelings can be projected onto others in ways that may not be helpful. Graham (1992) speaks to the significance of these people skills in physical educators:

Physical activity has a powerful influence on how children feel about themselves. Consequently, it is imperative that physical education teachers do everything they can to be sensitive to how children feel and help them build positive feelings about their involvement in physical activity. Teachers who help children build positive attitudes are constantly aware of children’s feelings and consciously modify and select activities that are considerate of both the highly and the poorly

skilled, the enthusiastic and the reluctant, and the physically fit and the unfit children. They understand that competition may cause some children to 'turn off' to physical activity and find ways to provide alternatives to games that emphasize winning and score keeping... (p. 146).

As with other school programs, poor teaching practices in physical education classes can have long-term consequences. Young people can be 'turned off' physical activity. The widespread '*I hate Phys. Ed*' mantra of many disengaged students cannot be attributed to student attitudes alone. Patterns of inactivity can be reinforced by humiliating experiences in physical education classes as well as by long periods of sitting still in a classroom context. Lack of student participation, and even some program cuts, happen not because physical education and activity are not valued but rather because physical education has not been delivered effectively (Collingwood, 1997).

Evidence in the physical education literature suggests that participation in a quality physical education program can provide many holistic outcomes, including improved academic performance and a willingness to attend school for some (Halas, 2001; Halas & Hanson, 2001; Orchard, Stark & Halas, in press). In one case study that investigated the experience of physical education and activity for troubled youth, the majority of whom were Aboriginal, it was shown that relevant and meaningful physical activity programs can create the space for students to experience important social and emotional benefits (Halas 2002; 2001). While showing worthwhile results for these students who were from very troubled social backgrounds, Halas' analysis and illustrations indicate that participation in physical education experience alone does not ensure sustainable outcomes.

Quality daily physical education has potential to engage, attract, and foster long-term benefits for Aboriginal young people. Physical education programs can help motivate young people to pursue active lives and contribute to building a more inclusive school environment. Halas and Watkinson (1999) identify some of the benefits of physical education for youth: it helps burn off energy, it can be fun, it can feel good, and it can relieve boredom. Physical education can be a 'hook' for students to stay in school, motivate them to stay on task, decrease personal tensions, enhance cooperation and improve teacher-student relationships (Halas, 2001). Quality physical education programs can contribute to the overall school climate (Janzen et al., 2002). Poor teaching practices in physical education can contribute to an alienating climate at school and a sense of irrelevancy for the student (Ennis, 1999; Halas, 2002). Poor teaching practice in physical education is poor schooling for Aboriginal young people.

The high rates of suicides, school dropouts, incarcerations, addictions, diabetes and obesity, etc., that are affecting Aboriginal young people all point to a "social crisis" that cannot be solely laid at the doorstep of schools (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2000; Long & Dickason, 2000; Silver, Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002). Nevertheless, teachers of Aboriginal students can make a difference in the lives of these young people. My impression in undertaking this study is that many teachers have only superficial understandings of their engagement with Aboriginal students and that many teachers work in isolation without recourse to timely supports needed to be more effective. In Manitoba, Aboriginal communities have experienced varying degrees of social crisis for generations. In turn, this has had a very strong impact on the attitudes and challenges of teachers of Aboriginal students, whether they choose to acknowledge it or not.

While there is limited research investigating the experience of Aboriginal students in physical education, there are emerging studies that show how physical education programs can be beneficial for some Aboriginal youth (Halas, 2004; van Ingen & Halas, 2003). In particular, it has been shown that programs designed to be meaningful and relevant for students can positively affect student desire to participate in school (Halas, 2001; Halas & Hanson, 2001). There is also evidence that physical education teachers are failing to connect with Aboriginal youth. Constraining factors that have been identified include students' discomfort about changing for gym class, students forced to participate in seemingly irrelevant activities, and students not being seen by their teachers as athletic (Champagne & Halas, 2003).

In my current study I attempt to go further by exploring the social and historical roots of the alienation of Aboriginal students through my construction of a critical pedagogical framework that speaks to my own experience and perceptions. I also draw upon the experiences and perceptions of some physical education teachers who have had some success in engaging Aboriginal youth in their programs.

Concerned Engagement

Julie Ellis (1998) defines "concerned engagement" as a process for arriving at a research topic. It involves asking oneself questions about what preoccupies you in relation to the research. Specifically, Ellis guides the researcher to ask, 'what do you care about and what matters to you?' The idea is to explore these questions as a means of arriving at a topic that interests you or a topic that you have a passion for and that will sustain you throughout the research process itself. Ellis suggests that placing a personal story at the beginning of the research report will assist readers with a more informed

perspective about the meaning of the work. As a researcher, I situate myself within the Aboriginal feminist community and choose the language of liberation and healing to introduce and argue for the development of critical social consciousness among physical education teachers.

Some time ago I worked in a life skills/employment program with Aboriginal youth who were growing up poor, had dropped out of school, and had difficult lives. In my work with these young people, I increasingly recognized my own struggles as a young person growing up 'poor'. From personal observation and experience, it seems to me that many young people who have difficult lives tend to give up play. It appears to be one of the first things given up in the context of hopelessness.

Halas (2001) made similar observations in her work with troubled youth at a treatment centre school where she taught physical education. She recognized that creating opportunities for interactive play can help make schools more relevant and attractive for some. Despite these benefits of play, Halas concludes that, "we are constantly reminded that play and playfulness as a remedy, however healing, is highly contextual, and for the most part, sadly unsustainable" (p.11).

In large part, my dissertation is a search for more sustainable benefits from physical education. I contend that critical social consciousness can help to open the door toward the development of a more transformative pedagogy that incorporates play as an important tool for community healing and personal enrichment. For play to become a sustainable remedy, physical educators and education leaders need to recognize it as an important physical education outcome. Physical education programs can become culturally appropriate and relevant through the incorporation of play as a tool for building

alliances between teachers and students and among students. My hope is that this study may help physical educators take leadership in creating and offering pedagogy that incorporates play into a community building approach.

I believe that sensitive physical education teachers with critical social consciousness who are able to fully engage students in physical play can make a real difference in the quality of life in schools. Teachers with critical social consciousness who work as allies to young people need to be respected as professionals and have the time for reflection and learning. At the same time, the thinking and opinions of young people and their parents need to be respected by teachers. Being an ally to a young person is a way of influencing future change and is important work. As a parent, a grandparent and an educational change advocate, I recognize that young people need allies and that adults need to be well supported to be effective allies.

I have noticed that schooling can be a torturous experience for some young people. It should not be that way. It seems, as Peter McLaren (1998) writes, that we are preparing young people for whatever jobs are generated in the pursuit of commercial profits, without discussing the relationship between jobs and human needs. In other words, there is a disconnect between community and personal values on the one hand, and the roles that young people are being prepared for within schools. Those who succeed in formal schooling generally land the 'cleaner' jobs, the managers and the administrators. The others, as McLaren notes, are prepared, through their failure, for "the factory."

My own deep interest in how teachers can be effective allies to young people is closely related to my experience as a parent and grandparent. Most recently, I have been

acutely aware that, like so many others, year after year my grandson has had a lot of difficulty relating to his school environment, especially stationary classroom and homework routines. He loves physical education and activity but this passion is confined because physical education is only offered every second day (Champagne, 2001).

Insider Perspective

In this section, I present a brief profile of myself to shed some light on 'who I am' as an interpreter and to build on an understanding and appreciation of the insider perspective that I bring to the analysis. My self-identification is consistent with the "hermeneutical" emphasis on the importance of being transparent about "presuppositions" and on the importance of being clear about "knowledge interest" drivers behind a research undertaking (Kvale, 1996). I fully agree that the reasons for a person's interests in acquiring knowledge are highly significant in shaping research questions, methodology and outcomes.

Although much time has passed since I was a young person in an inner-city school and many actors have changed, some things have not. Presently, there are many more children living in poverty (one in five in Manitoba)⁶ and schools can still be alienating experiences for 'raised-poor' and working-class Aboriginal youth.

I grew up in the context of poverty and I believe that the context in which one is raised is a salient feature throughout one's life. I grew up as an inner-city, raised-poor working-class, Métis school girl. After completing grade nine I left school because that is what most poor kids did. I got married and gave birth to two children. Later, I completed high school as a young adult and then enrolled in university. Throughout the

⁶ Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, press release, April 2006.