

CHAPTER SIX: A new critical pedagogy for physical education in ‘turbulent times’: what are the possibilities?

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We live in turbulent times. (Rafael Behr, *The Guardian*, 05.04.17)

The way ahead is complicated, and it is ripe with uncertainties. (Hal A Lawson, 2018)

Introduction

Few of us who read the daily news is likely to disagree with journalist Rafael Behr that we live in turbulent times. Financial crises and economic austerity, the growing gap between the ultra-rich and the rest, climate change, the renewed threat of nuclear war, populist right wing politics, terrorism, an epidemic of sexual assault, the mass displacement of whole populations through war: any one of these and other crises contribute to Behr’s turbulent times. Nor can we deny Lawson’s reasoning that futures are complicated and uncertain. Within this context, educational workers, including school teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers, particularly those committed to education for social justice and equity, are having to rethink many of our most basic assumptions about the nature of society and of human wellbeing and happiness. We can no longer continue to use stock notions of social class, for example, in the relatively straightforward way that Paul Willis could in his 1977 classic *Learning to Labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*. The changing nature of labour-market conditions is just one indicator of the turbulence wrought by neo-liberal free-market ideology over a 60 years period. Without doubt, for many of the world’s population, social and economic turbulence is contributing significantly to the uncertainty and precarity of everyday life (Standing, 2016).

What might be the purpose and, indeed, relevance, of school physical education in turbulent times? Since at least the mid-1980s, physical educators have been discussing and practising versions of critical pedagogy as a means of tackling myriad forms of social injustice and inequity. What are the possibilities for critical pedagogy now, when generations of young people are facing the prospect of, or already living in, precarity? The challenge for critical pedagogy is to address the changes that have taken place in society in the past 50 years, since the earliest appearance of this concept inspired by the work of activist scholars such as Paolo Friere among others. Recent social analyses have questioned standard conceptions of political divisions around Left and Right, traditional strategies of resistance to oppression, and critical pedagogy aspirations such as empowerment and emancipation. A particular focus of this work has been social injustice (Dorling, 2010), inequality (Atkinson, 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), ‘hard times’ and economic crises (Clark, 2014), the reshaping of concepts of social class (Savage et al., 2015) and the rise of the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2016).

This chapter takes up the challenge of a new critical pedagogy for turbulent times within a broader context of what Lawson (2018) describes as the ‘redesign’ of school physical education. The focus is how such work might be undertaken through physical education for the benefit of all young people (Standal, 2015). Without doubt, physical education teachers around the world increasingly will be teaching young people whose lives are shaped by precarity. It is important, then, that they have some understanding of the nature of the turbulence caused by membership of this emerging social class. Physical education itself has been repositioned recently in the school curriculum in many countries, most often within larger configurations of school knowledge such as ‘health and wellbeing’. This repositioning and the requirement for physical educators to work

with new subject matter beyond sports and games has created risk but also opened up new possibilities for critical pedagogy in turbulent and precarious times.

Turbulent and precarious times

A lens through which to focus on social turbulence is the concept of precarity. While this notion is relatively new to scholars in the English-speaking world, it has been part of the lexicon of social researchers in France for at least two decades. In Bourdieu's (1997) early formulation of precarity, he comments:

It is clearly apparent that precarity is everywhere today. In the private sector, but also in the public sector, which has multiplied temporary and interim positions, in industrial enterprises, but also in the institutions of production and cultural diffusion, education, journalism, media, etc., where it produces effects which are always more or less identical. These effects become particularly visible in the extreme case of the unemployed: the deconstruction of existence, deprived among other things of its temporal structures, and the degradation of the whole relation to the world, time, space, which ensues. Precarity deeply affects those who suffer it; by making the future uncertain, it forbids any rational anticipation and, in particular, that minimum of belief and hope in the future that must be had to revolt, especially collectively, against the present, even the most intolerable. (Bourdieu, 1997, my translation)

While the notion of precarity is rooted in the temporary and indeterminate nature of work and thus is closely linked to the economic conditions prevalent in society, Bourdieu highlights the psychological effects of precarious employment. It is these psychological effects, particularly in relation to mental health, that have been emphasised by scholars of precarity. For example, Swedish political scientists Näsström and Kalm (2015) argue that the effects of precarity are felt far beyond the workplace, noting that "precarious work not only affects the material side of life; it also affects the soul [...] and character [...] of workers, including one's sense of happiness, meaning and ability to develop long-term relationships" (p.563).

Building on this work, Standing (2016) has argued that a 'new dangerous class' has begun to emerge, becoming more visible following the global economic crisis of 2008, which he calls the precariat. The precariat is highly heterogeneous, consisting not only of those who might traditionally be associated with an underclass such as unskilled workers, undocumented migrant labourers and so on. It contains young and old, men and women, skilled and unskilled, in many countries, across a range of occupations including academe and the cultural industries. He explains:

The precariat could be described as a neologism that combines an adjective 'precarious' and a related noun 'proletariat' ... We may claim that the precariat is a *class-in-the-making*, if not yet a *class-for-itself*, in the Marxian sense of that term (Standing, 2016, p.8).

He, like Bourdieu and Näsström and Kalm, highlights the effects of insecure employment, such as ongoing temporary contracts and so-called 'zero hours' contracts, as well as chronic episodes of unemployment, on self-identity and wellbeing. He writes:

Another way of looking at the precariat is in terms of the process, the way in which people are 'precariatized'.... To be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle (Standing, 2016, p. 19).

In this respect, it is Bourdieu's final point that is of particular interest, the possibility of what Standing calls the precariat as a new social class, a class-*in-itself*, being capable of taking collective action against the ill-effects of precarity, as a class-*for-itself*. The nature of precarity makes this possibility remote, however, and less likely still when we consider the effects of digital technology:

The precariat shows itself as not yet a class-*for-itself* partly because those in it are unable to control the technological forces they face.... The precariat is defined by short-termism, which could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term. The internet, the browsing habit, text messaging, Facebook, Twitter and other social media are all operating to rewire the brain. (Standing, 2016, p. 21)

Recent research by Goodyear, Armour and Woods (2018) amplifies Standing's concerns about the potential detrimental effects of social media use on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. This work also echoes Postman's critique of the rise of television to replace print as a primary medium of communication in 1980s America. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman cites the 'Huxleyan Warning', referring to Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932). He writes:

What Huxley teaches is that in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate. In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours ... When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is re-defined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility. (Postman, 1985: 156)

A society distracted and sedated by social media trivia may be unlikely to have the resources to take political action on its own behalf. More contemporaneously, Näsström and Kalm (2015) suggest that precarity and its ill-effects are at odds with democratic forms of government, which rest on the principle of shared responsibility, and the conditions it creates corrupt democracy. This is in part why Standing describes the precariat as 'the dangerous new class'.

According to Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), there is a clear relationship between the level of inequality in a society, a key feature of precarity, and a range of social problems, including health and wellbeing. In a comparative analysis of a range of countries and social issues, they summarise their findings as follows:

Rates of mental illness are five times higher in the most unequal compared to the least unequal societies. Similarly, in more unequal societies people are five times as likely to be imprisoned, six times as likely to be clinically obese, and murder rates may be many times

higher. The reason why these differences are so big is ... because the effects of inequality are not confined to the least well-off; instead they affect the vast majority of the population. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, p.)

This conclusion highlights the pervasive and inequitable influence of social turbulence and precarity. Not everyone needs to experience precarity directly to feel its effects. Young school-age people are particularly vulnerable since precarity shapes not only their health and wellbeing but also their life chances.

Precarity, young people and health and wellbeing

In 2017 and an age of rising precarity, young people in their diversity face some similar hazards as they navigate their way to adulthood, including in addition to the usual aches and pains of growing up, obesity, depression, self-harming, body image disturbance, social media abuse, homophobic violence and cyberbullying. In this context, we have seen in the past decade increasing attention among physical education researchers to issues such as health and wellbeing (McCuaig and Quennerstedt, 2018), and related matters such as motivation (van den Berghe, 2014), resilience and coping (Lang et al., 2017), body image (Kerner et al., 2017), and perceived physical competence (Bardid et al., 2016). Each of these health-related issues has significant affective dimensions in terms of attitudes, values and emotions.

There is a growing body of recent research highlighting the many intertwined issues around young people and health and wellbeing. Some of this research has analysed data from the 2013/2014 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) data base. HBSC is a cross-national study aimed at gaining insight into young people's wellbeing, health behaviours and their social contexts. This research collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe is conducted every four years in 45 countries and regions across Europe and North America.

In one recent study, Frasquilho et al. (2017) drew on Portuguese data of the wellbeing of adolescents living with unemployed parents. They reported detrimental effects on the wellbeing of both girls and boys, though girls from lower socio-economic families reported more negative emotional wellbeing related to parental unemployment. Also using HBSC data from 40 countries, Elgar et al (2017) found a strong association between early-life income inequality and reduced health and wellbeing in adolescence, particularly among girls. Moore et al.'s (2017) study of school composition, school culture and socioeconomic inequalities in young people's health drew on HBSC data from Wales to expose an important nuance of the differential health experiences for wealthier and poorer children. Attending schools that were generally affluent, poorer children fared worse in terms of health and wellbeing than they did when they attended schools where the majority of children were also poor. The authors conclude that affluent schools are more inequitable than poorer schools across a range of health behaviours, and that attending a more affluent school lowered young people from poorer families' subjective wellbeing.

This brief overview of recent research is intended to provide a glimpse of the nature of the challenge facing educational workers, where the health and wellbeing of young people is interwoven with poverty, deprivation and precarity in turbulent times.

The flight from critical pedagogy in physical education?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a backlash against critical pedagogy. In a widely cited paper, Ellsworth (1989) asked ‘why doesn’t this feel empowering?’ and claimed critical pedagogy had taken a “highly abstract and utopian line which does not necessarily sustain the daily workings of the education its supporters advocate’ (p. 297). In *The Struggle for Pedagogies*, Gore (1993) argued that critical pedagogy was both gender and race blind, and its advocates failed to locate themselves reflexively within their analyses. In physical education, the backlash began with a paper by O’Sullivan, Siedentop and Locke (1992) who argued that critical pedagogy inappropriately took the moral high ground, that it lacked evidence for its claims, was overzealous, and that it was long on criticism but short of practical solutions to physical education’s many shortcomings.

The backlash has continued, with Tinning’s (2002) call for a ‘modest pedagogy’ and more recently Enright et al.’s (2014) advocacy for Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Tinning repeats many of the claims of the earlier critics, and recants his own enthusiasm for critical pedagogy in the 1980s and 1990s. He appears convinced by Biesta’s (1998) argument that critical pedagogy has become a grand narrative and its very possibility in practice is doubtful. It has, he claims, been too susceptible to appropriation and mis-use by neo-liberals who use the language of critical pedagogy (eg. empowerment, emancipation) as a cover for exploitation. Enright et al. take a different tack, claiming that critical pedagogy has been obsessed with what is ‘broken’ in physical education, in the process failing to see the good things that go on in physical education’s name. Critical pedagogy is guilty in their view of ‘deficit theories’, deficit scholarship’, ‘grievance narratives’ and ‘deficit thinking’.

The earlier critiques of critical pedagogy made some telling points about a movement that was in its infancy. There was excitement and energy about critical pedagogy, and some polemic and intentional provocation too (eg. McKay, Gore and Kirk, 1990). Some physical education scholars in the 1980s and 1990s without doubt felt threatened by what they saw as a confrontational approach. Asking hard questions about received wisdom was interpreted as disloyal and as sowing disunity. This said, I do not recognise the accounts of critical pedagogy provided by either Tinning, who has gone on to repeat many of his 2002 argument in his book *Pedagogy and Human Movement* (2010), or Enright et al. Neither provides any substantive critique of actual critical pedagogy in practice.

One of the earliest advocacies for critical pedagogy in the physical education literature was my paper ‘A critical pedagogy for teacher education: toward an inquiry-oriented approach’ which appeared in the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* in 1986. I noted that much of the literature on teacher education focused on teaching as a technical process, where the overriding concern was for ‘effectiveness’. This approach, I claimed, underplayed or ignored the political and moral aspects of education. I was writing against a backdrop of an emerging action research movement (eg. Carr and Kemmis, 1983; Stenhouse, 1975) and socially critical curriculum theorizing (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Young, 1971). This work formed a basis for a critical pedagogy that understands the school curriculum to be socially constructed and teachers to be potential agents for change. I argued that:

Teacher education should be concerned with producing teachers who are critically aware of the complexities of the educational process, of their contribution to this process, and of the potential for change. This need for awareness necessarily involves politicizing the notion of

schooling within teacher education courses, not because schooling ought to be subject to political influence but precisely because we need to guard against the use of schooling as an agency of social control and as a representative and perpetrator of vested interests. (Kirk, 1986, p.242)

Some other contributors to the physical education literature around this time were, like critical pedagogues, seeking to question received opinion and taken-for-granted assumptions about physical education as a school subject and physical education teaching, even though they were not necessarily using this specific term (eg. Lawson, 1984; Tinning, 1985). Macdonald and Brooker (1995), Fernandez-Balboa (1997), Evans (1988) and others further developed the theorizing around critical pedagogy and social critique more broadly.

By the late 1980s, critical pedagogy was a central pillar of my practice as a teacher educator as much as it was a topic for academic debate and theorizing. My chapter in 2000 on a ‘Task-based approach to critical pedagogy’ is an example of this work, where I was concerned to assist students to see beyond surface appearances and to resist simplistic and quick-fix solutions to complex problems (Kirk, 2000). The pathfinding work of Don Hellison (1978) and Kim Oliver (eg. Oliver and Lalik, 2004) I regard as forms of critical pedagogical praxis *par excellence*, involving theoretically informed practice, working with alienated youth and African-American girls respectively. Both programmes of work are concerned with the oppression of young people in different contexts, and both display high levels of critical self-awareness and reflexivity.

More recently, aspects of critical pedagogy have found their way into the school curriculum, most notably in Australia (McCuaig et al., 2016) and New Zealand (Culpan and Bruce, 2007), and continue to challenge teacher educators (eg. Philpott, 2015; McIntyre et al., 2016; Backman and Larsson, 2016) and teachers (eg. Fitzpatrick, 2013). Social critique has also been underway in relation to the influence of neoliberalism in physical education (eg. Macdonald, 2014; Evans and Daves, 2014) and outsourcing of services (Williams and Macdonald, 2015).

It is difficult to see how any of this valuable and necessary work could be described as ‘deficit scholarship’. Far from requiring a ‘modest pedagogy’, instead we require a re-energised and sharper edged critical pedagogy fit for purpose in turbulent times. The terrain has shifted since the emergence of critical physical education scholarship in the 1980s, and critical pedagogy must also shift to meet new challenges.

Possibilities for a new critical pedagogy for turbulent times

At least three priorities exist for re-energising and taking forward a new critical pedagogy for physical education that I will sketch briefly here. These are a focus on ‘pedagogies of affect’, specialised professional learning for teachers, and the development of inclusive networked learning communities.

A first priority in formulating a new critical pedagogy for physical education is to sharpen its focus on pedagogy, that is, the interdependent and interacting components of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment. The increasing shift to a health-based rationale for physical education in precarious times requires us to recognise the importance of mental health issues. The challenge here is to promote and support the health and wellbeing of young people by treating learning aspirations in the affective domain as of central pedagogical concern rather than desirable by-

products. We can no longer suppose that by merely engaging in sports and games young people will automatically gain benefits to their health and wellbeing.

When we begin to focus on such issues, in particular on attitudes, perspectives and values, we can put into context the increasingly pervasive notion that ‘exercise-is-medicine’ (Jette and Vertinsky, 2011) and a high level of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) is a gold standard for physical education teaching (eg. McKenzie and Lounsbury, 2009). In a recent pilot project based in Glasgow that sought to develop an Activist pedagogical model for working with adolescent girls, Kim Oliver and I (Oliver and Kirk, 2015) adopted as the main idea for the model Siedentop’s (1996) notion, that teachers and researchers should support young people to learn to value the physically active life. While participation in MVPA will be part of a process of young people coming to value the physically active life, the pedagogical requirements of facilitating the latter process are light years away from achieving the former. Getting young people to engage in ‘sufficient’ levels of MVPA in school physical education may be challenging enough, as McKenzie and Lounsbury attest, but the teacher strategies and subject matter for doing this are well known to physical educators. We are in new territory entirely when we come to consider the pedagogical implications for assisting young people to value physical activity to the extent that they will be disposed to engage in physical activity even when there are attractive alternatives.

The Glasgow pilot project, built on 20 years of Kim Oliver’s pathfinding work, shows in stark relief the unsuitability of traditional pedagogy for working in the affective domain. A critical element of the Activist pedagogical model developed in this project was student-centredness. Listening to girls’ voices was crucial, as was responding to them constructively. We sought, in Cook-Sather’s (2002) terms, to ‘authorise student voice’, which involved a shift in the power dynamic between teachers and students towards the students. Our findings show positive and enthusiastic responses from girls as this approach worked explicitly with the students to create learning environments in which they felt safe and comfortable to engage in physical education (Kirk et al., in press). In many respects, the focus of this work is the girls *being well* (Cassidy, 2018), in the moment of their engagement in physical education (Standal, 2015). Building on the work of Wright and Burrows (2006), Standal has advocated for phenomenology-inspired critical movement literacy, which engages individuals without losing sight of broader social contexts. Similarly, in another project, Oliver and I have worked with colleagues to develop a pedagogical model for working with socially vulnerable youth in Brazil (Luguetti et al., 2017)

A second priority for a new critical pedagogy is forms of professional learning that equip teachers with the specialised skills this kind of work requires. This is particularly important given young people’s increasing uses of social media as sources of health-related information (Goodyear, Armour and Woods, 2018). Stenhouse (1975) was in the vanguard of a movement that recognised initial teacher education was only a starting point for the professional learning of teachers. His concept of teacher-as-researcher was rooted in the idea that learning would continue throughout teachers’ careers as they became ‘extended professionals’. This idea is now widely accepted within the teacher education community (see eg. Leiberman and Miller, 2001), and increasingly the consensus is that lifelong teacher professional learning (TPL) should be school-based. The location of TPL in the context in which teachers work has the obvious benefit of strong ecological validity. It is a natural extension of the notion of practitioner inquiry resting on the concept of teacher-as-researcher.

Acknowledging the realities of work in schools, school-based TPL is invariably a risky business for teachers. This is because even the most experienced teachers must be prepared to become novices again, at least for a period of time, as they learn to practice new ways of teaching physical education. In Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms, they must experience the anxieties and uncertainties of legitimate peripherality as they undertake a learning journey from beginner (in the context of learning new practices) to eventual expertise. Our study of TPL among five teachers in four Glasgow schools (Kirk et al., 2017) showed that the teachers had to unravel years of successful professional socialisation into teaching the dominant multi-activity sports-technique based curriculum as they learned to implement an Activist approach with girls. This unravelling had consequences for their professional identities and wellbeing, something that we must account for in any pedagogical intervention in schools.

A third priority is the inclusion of a range of stakeholders in the critical pedagogy project with clear delineation of what each brings to the mix. While teachers have a degree of agency to take forward innovative pedagogical projects in their schools (Priestly, Biesta, and Robinson, 2015), they cannot do this work alone. Day and Townsend (2009) have advocated for the development of networked learning communities that include teachers and pupils, parents, and other educational workers. Stenhouse's (1975) vision of teacher-as-researcher was of teachers working within what he called a 'scientific community'. Collaboration, then, is of the utmost importance in taking forward this vision. Each member of this community brings complementary skills and expertise to the critical testing of new ideas. Kirk and Macdonald (2001) argued that the specific insights teachers bring to this process are as experts in the local context of implementation. Teachers know their pupils, classrooms, and school-communities in ways that policy-makers and researchers cannot. Similarly, young people can bring their own views, needs and insights to test new ideas (Oliver and Kirk, 2015).

Practice-referenced research in this context means that the main emphasis of the work is on issues, problems and challenges that exist in the 'real world' of schools, but is not limited to it (Kirk and Haerens, 2014). Practice-referenced research is centred in interventions that take forward good ideas. Such interventions, as Stenhouse put it, are 'provisional specification(s) claiming no more than to be worth putting to the test of practice'. Our focus here needs to be pragmatically on what works and what doesn't, and what is possible (Oliver and Kirk, 2015).

Conclusion

My purpose in this chapter has been to explore the possibilities for a new critical pedagogy for physical education that is fit for purpose in turbulent times. I argued after Standing (2016) that the rapid emergence of precarity and a 'new dangerous social class', the precariat, is of major importance to physical educators, for several reasons. More and more of their pupils are going to be living in precarious situations as these children's parents are among the working poor, experiencing multiple-deprivation as inequity grows. I sought to show that there is a strong link between precarity and issues of mental health and wellbeing. It may be no coincidence, then, that the rationale for physical education's existence in the core curriculum of schools is shifting increasingly from a sport and leisure focus to a health focus. The evidence has yet to be generated that physical education can make a valuable contribution to young people's health and wellbeing (see eg. Hastie, 2017) but, nevertheless, governments have shown faith in physical education through the investment of considerable sums of public money in preparing and employing teachers in many public schools around the world.

I noted the need for a new critical pedagogy, for a number of reasons. One has been an ongoing backlash to critical pedagogy. While recent commentaries have, I think, failed to engage in a persuasive critique of actual critical pedagogical practice, nevertheless the changed and changing conditions that exist today compared to the 1980s when the notion of critical pedagogy first appeared in the physical education literature warrants a reconsideration of possibilities. I suggested as a priority the need to focus in particular on pedagogies of affect and to engage in forms of activist pedagogy, critical movement literacy and pedagogies to tackle social vulnerability. I also proposed teacher professional learning to develop specialised skills for working with young people living in precarity, and for the development of inclusive networked learning communities to support teacher learning and agency.

Whether we continue to need the terminology of ‘critical pedagogy’ is for me an open question as we seek to develop fit for purpose forms of physical education in turbulent and precarious times. It may be sufficient to develop pedagogies that take social justice and inequity and the health and wellbeing of young people as their central concern without labels that appear to provoke concern and criticism from some physical education scholars. To address the detrimental effects of social turbulence and precarity we have little choice, however, but to face the brutal facts of life and to ask hard questions about received wisdom. If we can do this then there may be some continuing educational relevance for school physical education in turbulent times.

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