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Transformative pedagogy in physical education and the challenges of young people with migration backgrounds

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Global migration continues to impact societies and their education systems in the 2010s. Schools in many countries are becoming more culturally diverse, a process that is having implications for school managers, teachers, students, and their families. Physical educators have been greatly affected by this trend. In the last ten years, scholarship dealing with the implications of burgeoning cultural diversity has increased substantially. In this chapter, we chart the main developments in this research. We have identified two main threads. The first relates to Muslim girls and PE, the second to teachers’ cultural competence in contexts of growing diversity. In addition, we will also consider a smaller set of disconnected studies that, while not constituting threads in terms of on-going discussions, make useful contributions to our understanding of cultural difference in PE.

Before beginning in earnest we would like to make several preliminary comments. First, we want to draw attention to the ‘local’ nature of the research reviewed in this chapter. Globally, many physical educators are experiencing pluralism. However, because nations have different socio-political histories when it comes to ethnicity and migration, specific emphases of discussions can vary significantly. Second and related, while we aim to be comprehensive in a chapter such as this, we cannot claim to be exhaustive. With an almost exclusive reliance on research published in English, the chapter could be charged with extending the ethnocentrism that some of our colleagues below condemn (Benn, Dągkas, & Jawad, 2011). In this respect, the chapter should be read as a synthesizing contribution but not as an all-embracing summary. Finally, this discussion can be read against a backdrop of transformative pedagogies and the idea that education should help students to “examine critically their beliefs, values and knowledge with the goal of developing … an appreciation of multiple perspectives, and a sense of critical consciousness” (Ukpokodu, 2009, p. 43). While this might sound like an appropriate framework to employ given the topic, only some of the scholarship below makes explicit claim to being transformative in Ukpokodu’s sense. Our intention is not to evaluate the research against a standard
by which some of its authors never agreed to be judged. Instead, we are concerned to discuss how transformative thinking might open up future research enterprises in the area.

**Historical overview**

Ethnicity has been a topic of interest for general education theorists and sport scholars for many years. Carrington and Williams’ (1988) chapter, ‘Patriarchy and ethnicity: The link between school physical education and community leisure activities’ identified a range of contributing factors associated with ethnicity. From survey work in Northern England, Carrington and Williams surmised that ethnicity accentuated high participation rates of males and low participation rates of females in extra-curricular sports. The authors proposed that ethnic minority girls’ lack of confidence in their physical capabilities was particularly pertinent to physical educators: “This [lack of confidence] suggested that questions could be raised about the quality and effectiveness of Physical Education and in particular about the adequacy of institutional responses to cultural diversity in this area of the curriculum” (Carrington & Williams, 1988, p. 84). In attempting to assess PE quality, the authors interviewed teachers in PE and other school subjects. The main themes emerging from their empirical work – parental concern, institutional constraints on staff, the low status of PE in some cultures, and problems encountered in mixed-sex swimming lessons – have become recurring themes in later investigations.

The idea that the PE field was not responding effectively to increased pluralism was taken up by Carroll and Hollinshead (1993) in their widely cited investigation published in the *British Educational Research Journal*. These researchers set about exploring minority students’ experiences in PE lessons, providing detailed insights into how students of mainly Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent perceived PE in the early 1990s. Empirical work led the authors to suggest that despite schools abandoning assimilationist and integrationist policies in favour of multicultural ones, assimilationist ideas continued to inform practice. Significantly, the paper was sharply critiqued by Siraj-Blatchford (1993) in the same journal issue, largely in relation to the notion of ‘culture clash’. Siraj-Blatchford claimed that Carroll and Hollinshead had not managed to escape their Eurocentric worldview and had failed to perceive ‘participation in PE’ from the Muslim community’s position.

Not long after the appearance of Carroll and Hollinshead’s paper, a text that has become widely cited in the North American context appeared in *Quest*. DeSensi (1995) introduced the ideas of intercultural sensitivity and multiculturalism, which for educational purposes involved helping students learn about individuals with different backgrounds but centrally, helping students come to know themselves. DeSensi (1995) asserted that multicultural education involves helping students move from a state of ethnocentrism, where they may deny cultural difference and/or make negative evaluations of other cultures, to a state of ethnorelativism, which involves recognizing and appreciating cultural difference. The paper inspired interest in culturally relevant, culturally sensitive, and ethno-relative pedagogies in the United States. Scholars have developed and empirically investigated these approaches in later research (see, for example, Burden, Columna, Hodge, & Martínez de la Vega Mansilla, 2013; Hastie, Martin, & Buchanan, 2006, discussed in more detail below).

In the same year that DeSensi’s piece appeared, several practically oriented papers were published in physical education journals. Strategies included a text titled, ‘How to stop stereotyping students’ (Lyster-Mickelberg, 1995). The *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* ran a feature called, ‘Women of color: Perspectives within the profession’. The line of discussion followed in the feature was grounded in the question of professional preparedness: “Given the cultural diversity that exists in the United States, just how well-prepared are today’s teachers to
meet the needs of minority students? Will HPERD professionals be able to meet the needs of a more linguistically and culturally diverse student population?” (Corbett, 1995, p. 26). Butt and Pahnos (1995) also called for a multicultural focus in the same journal. And it is perhaps not coincidental that Don Hellison’s (1995) hugely influential book, *Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Activity* with a focus on inner-city youth was published in the same year.  

In short, the mid-1990s saw a modest groundswell in interest in ethnic diversity from physical educators. American scholars drew on tenets of multicultural education, a trend that continues today. British theorists tended to be more eclectic in their theoretical positioning but in general, tended to shy away from multiculturalist perspectives. This historical note is important when considering the following sections as it goes some way in explaining the ‘national bias’ to the research threads in the review. In saying this, the notion that PE was (or is) unprepared for changing societies has continued to be a common theme for research across national borders.

### Current trends and issues

The following section is divided into three subsections. The first deals with Muslim girls and PE, while the second is concerned with the PE field’s capacity to handle increasing cultural heterogeneity in classrooms. The third comprises a small collection of loosely related investigations that focus on students and their experiences and perceptions within PE contexts.

#### Muslim girls and physical education

By far the most researched topic concerning cultural diversity and PE in recent times is the participation of Muslim girls. Reasons for this focus are manifold and include but are certainly not limited to the growing victimization of Muslims, Islamophobia, and an enduring assumption that religious beliefs prevent Muslim girls from participating in PE and sport (Stride, 2014; Walseth, 2015). Many scholars have adopted case study or qualitative research methods working within an interpretive perspective. As a result, it has provided substantial insights into how different parties, including teachers, parents, and of course, the girls themselves, make sense of ‘Muslim females’ participation in PE lessons’. Many of these researchers have conducted studies in the United Kingdom where many Muslims identify as British Asians and have Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi ancestry (Benn, Jawad, & Al-Sinani, 2013; Dagkas, Benn, & Jawad, 2011). Although international scholars also have contributed comparative work on this topic (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dagkas & Benn, 2006), due to the preponderance of British literature, we know more about this context than others.

It seems clear from this work that there are four situations that limit many Muslim girls’ PE participation. Existing research suggests that: (i) dress codes that require girls to expose parts of their bodies; (ii) dance lessons that contain movements which could be seen as sexually provocative; (iii) swimming lessons where males are present; and (iv) religious festivals that require girls to participate in vigorous physical activity while they are fasting, can all prevent Muslim girls from taking part in PE lessons or be met with disapproval from girls’ families (Benn & Pfister, 2013; Dagkas et al., 2011). Most commentators point out, though, that many Muslim girls have positive attitudes towards PE, enjoy participating, and can articulate health and educational benefits of the school subject (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). Indeed, variability and heterogeneity are consistent themes in the literature and Muslim girls’ inclusion in PE lessons is contingent on an abundance of factors. Both Stride (2014) and Knez, Macdonald and Abbott (2012) stress for example, that Muslim families expect girls to embody Islamic discourses associated with honour and modesty but that these expectations nonetheless vary
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substantially with interpretations of the Qur’an. For some parents, PE practices are largely supported by Islam and participation is seen as consistent with notions of care of the body. For others these same practices are seen as highly problematic (Knez et al., 2012). Muslims’ value conflict can be intensified with parental fears of Westernization, loss of ethnic identities, and the abandonment of tradition and culture (Benn & Pfister, 2013). In these situations, forms of compromise between families and schools become necessary but more difficult to achieve.

Unsurprisingly, variation exists regarding the way schools and teachers respond to Muslim girls. Scholars have found evidence of inclusive school practices such as allowing girls to wear tracksuits, change and shower privately, and be excused from intense physical activities during Ramadan (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). Many schools have clear policies on school expectations and provide teachers with senior management support (Dagkas et al., 2011). Researchers also have found that such practices are implemented inconsistently. Schools that serve predominantly one minority group appear to be more successful in meeting the needs of their students. Conversely, schools that serve diverse local communities with high levels of religiosity, are under-resourced, and/or have teachers who are unsure of boundaries between Islamic and cultural practices typically have greater difficulties meeting the needs of their students. Teachers across — and even within — schools diverge greatly in terms of both their preparedness to meet students’ needs and their knowledge of cultural and religious requirements (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). In cross-cultural comparative work in this area, Dagkas and colleagues (2011) suggest that it is not just teachers’ attitudes and the school environment that affect teachers’ work but also broader socio-historical factors found within a national culture. They point out that differing views on cultural relations within societies such as Greece and Britain, for example, result in Greek teachers reporting fewer problems and feeling less anxious about working with Muslim students than do their British peers (Dagkas & Benn, 2006).

As well as intra-religious variation, several scholars have pointed to inter-cultural similarity, notably that Muslim girls often experience exclusive practices in PE in similar ways to non-Muslim girls (Knez et al., 2012). Similarities have led scholars to consider multiple layers of identity (Dagkas et al., 2011) and while there has long been an acknowledgement that class and gender combine with ethnicity to affect people’s subjectivities, intersectional theories have only slowly entered discussions related to cultural diversity in PE (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Flintoff, Fitzgerald, & Scraton, 2008). Noting that ‘single issue’ research sometimes fails to capture the complexity of experiences, Flintoff and colleagues (2008) provide a discussion of what they see as imperatives when working with intersectional theory. Flintoff reiterated this perspective in her work with Webb, emphasizing the methodological challenges of researching minority students’ experiences of PETE (Flintoff & Webb, 2012).

Scholars explore the broad problem of girls’ non-participation in this research thread. While many caution against simple, one-size-fits-all solutions, commentators have collectively made recommendations for change. Dagkas et al. (2011) propose that to increase participation, decisions around dress codes and gender organization need to be based on understanding difference, reiterating “flexibility is key to success in developing inclusive policy and practice” (p. 237). Working in a Norwegian context, Walseth (2015) suggests that a focus on testing physical skills is particularly demotivating for Muslim girls and that teachers should do this sparingly. Walseth further proposes that teachers need to be more sensitive to Muslim girls’ embodied faith and ensure that boys do not dominate lessons. Azzarito (2009) provides a more general recommendation, claiming that physical educators should provide girls with a space to create alternative narratives. Hamzeh and Oliver (2012), like Knez and colleagues (2012), contend that teachers should avoid narrow stereotypes, develop deep understanding of girls’ experiences, and build collaborative relationships with girls and their families. Interestingly, scholars have suggested that PE activities,
themselves, are rarely problematic; instead problems result from “situational contexts” (Benn et al., 2011). This idea is somewhat at odds with holistic perspectives that frame pedagogy as interaction between subject matter, teacher, and student (see, for example, Amade-Escot, 2006).

Teachers’ cultural competence

The second major research thread dealing with cultural diversity and PE has centred on the consequences for teachers of changing student demographics in their classes. A foundation argument that emerged in early publications and has continued to orient researchers’ attention has been that, if physical educators are to provide equitable experiences, they need to meet challenges resulting from increasing pluralism (Benn et al., 2011). Scholars considering teachers’ cultural competence have posited that: (1) ‘traditional’ (often read as ‘current’) PE practices are unlikely to meet the needs of children living in ‘new’ cultural milieus; and (2) since teachers continue to be recruited from a white middle class, considerable ‘cultural distance’ is likely to exist between teachers and their pupils (Burden, Hodge, Bryant, & Harrison, 2004; Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Much of the work examining teachers’ cultural competence has been conducted in the United States utilizing multiculturalist frameworks (see DeSensi, 1995). This research has examined how teachers and their programmes might become more culturally responsive, relevant, and sensitive (Mowling, Brock, & Hastie, 2011).

Although relatively few studies have illustrated empirically physical educators’ underpreparedness to work with cultural diversity, there is some evidence to support this claim. Investigations have shown for instance that teachers in the US are frequently monolingual, experience communication difficulties with English language learners, have varying knowledge of cultural and religious requirements of minority groups, and at least some feel ill-prepared to work with heterogeneous groups (Columna, Foley, & Lytle, 2010). Many of the teachers in Columna and colleagues’ (2010) descriptive survey acknowledged that cultural diversity is valuable, but indicated that they experience difficulties implementing culturally responsive pedagogies. Dagkas and Benn’s (2006) examination of PE in Greece and Britain showed that a number of practitioners believed their training had not prepared them for multicultural classes. Instead, these teachers suggested they had learned to deal with diversity on the job.

Accounts of transformative interventions in PE also are relatively rare. Hastie et al. (2006) drew on Ladson-Billing’s (1995) work with culturally relevant pedagogies to develop a stepping unit with African-American children. Reporting reasonable levels of success, Hastie and colleagues experienced apprehension related to teaching unfamiliar content which was closely connected to their pupils’ cultural heritage. Apprehension was also foregrounded in Rovegno and Gregg’s (2007) insightful account of teaching a Native American folk dance unit to a third grade at a predominantly African-American elementary school. The account raises a raft of dilemmas that relate to issues such as structural inequality, authenticity, and teacher knowledge. At the same time, the authors encourage pedagogues to experiment with ways of helping children to appreciate pluralism. In slightly different ways, both accounts suggest that anxiety may be a necessary part of changing traditional power relationships (see also Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Importantly, Hastie et al.’s research raises the question of why there are few people from minority groups working in academia, a topic given thorough consideration by Hodge and Wiggins (2010) in a North American context and Lundvall and Meckbach (2012) in a Swedish context.

Teachers’ reports of lack of preparedness have put Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) under the spotlight. In an early paper, Burden and colleagues (2004) suggested that teacher education programmes tend to be ethnocentric and do not recognize ways in which they privilege white perspectives. Shortcomings in PETE programmes are, according to Burden...
et al. (2004), in line with the teachers’ concerns in the Dagkas and Benn (2006) investigation. This may point to a prime reason why beginning teachers encounter problems when working in culturally diverse schools. In a similar vein, Benn and Dagkas (2006) argue that although schooling has changed with society, higher education lags behind. In considering diversity training in PETE programmes, two themes have emerged: the need for reflection and the need for cross-ethnic contact.

Burden and colleagues (2004) emphasize the need to increase PETE students’ capacities for reflection around cultural difference as a central strategy of helping beginning teachers deal with diversity. They recommend that teacher educators ensure that novice teachers reflect on the assumptions they have about learners. Rather than providing one-off courses in multiculturalism, Burden et al. suggest that teacher educators introduce multiculturalist content across courses. Continuing work in this area, Burden (2011) maintains that PETE educators are responsible for learning about PETE students’ constructions of minority cultures. Burden et al. (2013) expand on these ideas in a more recent paper, proposing that teacher educators should help beginning teachers to “willingly and critically examin[e] their own attitudes and beliefs about, and attitudes toward student diversity” (Burden et al., 2013, p. 177), gain knowledge about students’ values, cultural norms, and languages; and develop language objectives in order to improve communication.

Providing possibilities for cross-racial contact has also been touted as an important strategy for enhancing the cultural responsiveness of PETE programmes. Calls for increased cross-cultural contact have been made largely in recognition of the fact that PETE cohorts have tended to be homogenous in a number of respects including socio-economic status, religion, and ethnicity. Benn and Dagkas (2006) allude to the persistence and scope of this pattern, noting that recruitment and retention of ethnic minority teachers has been a national concern in Britain since at least the 1980s.

To offset this tendency, Burden et al. (2013) propose more “aggressive” recruitment of minority group individuals into higher education. As an alternative strategy, Columna and colleagues (2010) suggest that PETE programmes provide “real life experiences whereby [PETE students] are exposed to diverse cultures” (p. 308). Benn and Dagkas (2006) provide an interesting counter to these contentions, suggesting that teachers are more likely to develop attitudes and knowledge of other cultures as a result of their personal experiences outside of their pre-service teacher training. These assertions raise questions about the limits of PETE and what might realistically be achieved within teacher education, a point to which we will return.

Benn and Dagkas (2006) make an additional comment regarding teacher education, noting that single-sex PETE training in Britain was halted in the mid-1980s. They suggest that while this may have led to increased gender equity, mixed-sex training for PE now works against the inclusion of Muslim women in PETE programmes. In an attempt to be more inclusive, the researchers grouped Muslim primary school trainees together so that they could receive training in a gender-segregated context. The women reported feeling more comfortable but at the same time, the investigators noted that the strategy meant denying other students opportunities to learn about Islam.

A final topic contributing to discussions on the implications of changing demographics for teachers is the issue of language proficiency. Recently, Burden et al. (2013) suggested that limited English proficiency can restrict communication and lead to poor educational performance in PE. They proposed using ethnolinguistically relevant pedagogies and the ability to communicate with students from diverse backgrounds is an essential skill. This analytic paper follows a series of more practically oriented pieces aimed at providing teachers with strategies to work with English Language Learners (ELLs). Columna, Senne, and Lytle (2009) for example, provide...
recommendations for how Euro-American teachers can communicate effectively with Hispanic parents. Clancy and Hruska (2005) work from the assumption that PE provides an excellent setting for supporting language acquisition and give suggestions for how PE teachers can help ELLs improve their English, a theme that has also been addressed by Bell and Lorenzi (2004).

**Ethnicity and experiences of physical education**

As noted at the outset of the chapter, researchers are conducting studies that do not directly run into the threads dealing with either Muslim girls’ participation or teachers’ cultural competence. Nonetheless, these studies shed light on the issue of cultural diversity and PE. This research complements the work above and hence has the potential to extend our understanding of PE practice in times of increasing plurality.

Experiences of pupils with migration backgrounds in PE have garnered a modest amount of researcher attention. Unlike their female counterparts, Muslim boys’ participation in Western forms of PE has remained out of frame for many scholars. Farooq and Parker (2009) provide an exception. These researchers conducted an ethnographic investigation of Muslim adolescent males’ constructions of masculinities in a Muslim independent school. They show how the students and schools place high value on PE and sport. A significant part of this value lies in PE’s perceived cathartic dimension and many of the participants describe PE and sport as means to expulse negative feelings and become more disciplined. Indeed, echoing earlier work on muscular Christianity (Mangan, 2000), PE and sport are viewed as practices through which boys could come closer to “what God wanted them to be” (Farooq & Parker, 2009, p. 289).

Fitzpatrick (2011) provides an examination of PE in the lives of Maori and Pasifika youth in New Zealand, suggesting that for these groups too, PE holds an important place albeit for different reasons. Through ethnographic work, she highlights the contradictory meanings that PE assumes for these young people. PE is, according to Fitzpatrick (2011), linked to friendship, playfulness, and critical engagement but is also a space where large brown bodies are marginalized and framed as athletic but intellectually lacking. In a second paper, Fitzpatrick (2013) notes that PE manages to maintain its non-academic status despite considerable academic engagement required at senior high school. This, she argues, has specific relevance for Maori and Pacific Island young people in terms of educational engagement. An important contribution of this paper relates to ‘Renee’, a student teacher of Maori descent. Using Bourdieu’s concepts of habit and field, Fitzpatrick provides a vivid illustration of how ethnic minority students can succeed and progress in the field of PE and at the same time are forced to move between indigenous private spheres and Eurocentric academic and professional spheres (see also Hodge & Wiggens, 2010; Lundvall & Meckbach, 2012).

Barker and colleagues’ (2014) work from Switzerland stresses the highly individualized nature of young people’s PE experiences. In contrast to Farooq and Parker (2009) and Fitzpatrick (2011, 2013), Barker et al. (2014) pick up on the ambivalence some young people with migration backgrounds feel towards the school subject. Focusing on three cases, Barker and colleagues show how PE can be enjoyable and rewarding, restrictive and frustrating, or boring and embarrassing depending on how it intersects with young people’s discursive histories. Central arguments are that generalizations common within popular discourses work to homogenize people with migration backgrounds and that one’s ethnicity can have subtle and unexpected effects on the ways that pupils make sense of PE.

Finally, the body is a theme that has attracted race and ethnicity scholars’ attention in the field of PE (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 2011, 2013). Azzarito (2009) noted, for example, that PE students’ constructions of ideal bodies were gendered and racialized. She pointed out that while many
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students resisted talking explicitly about race in relation to bodies, the ideal body was typically white. Working with British Asian girls, Hill and Azzarito (2012) conducted a participatory visual ethnography to investigate the gendered and racialized nature of body discourses. They noted that young people’s body narratives provide them with multiple readings of bodies and that the ways that girls make sense of themselves as active bodies have consequences for whether they engage with sport or physical activity.

Future directions and questions of change

A significant question at this point is: where will physical education scholars direct their attention in the future? There seem to be several areas that deserve further exploration. First, and foremost, despite a number of investigations describing contexts and attitudes, few are explicitly pedagogical in nature. Taking pedagogy as an activity that simultaneously involves curriculum, teacher, and learner, there is a need to account for how pedagogies are currently enacted and how they might be reconsidered, revised, or re-enacted in contexts of cultural heterogeneity. Indeed, if our intention is to facilitate transformative learning, there is a need to trial new content and new forms of teaching and share these experiences with others.

Inclusive and socially just practices are undoubtedly taking place and, in line with a more general thrust in current research, researchers might pay greater attention to ‘transformative’ sites where things are ‘working’. More could be learned from cases where cultural diversity is seen as an advantage and where diverse forms of cultural knowledge are practised and valued. More concretely, scholars might examine schools and PETE programmes that have culturally heterogeneous cohorts and situations in which students from minority groups are thriving. Alternatively, scholars might collaborate with teachers and teacher educators who are doing exceptional work with their students. These kinds of cases have been reported but often only peripherally. A concerted focus on the circumstances that contribute to these situations could provide valuable insights that could revitalize current practices.

Theorists and practitioners might also consider the aims of school curricula and how these affect physical educators’ work with minority groups. There has been much discussion about the objectives of PE as well as the rationale and ‘ideal form’ of the subject (Bailey et al., 2009; Kirk, 2010). These discussions have specific relevance to ethnicity and vice versa. Programmes based on the notion of ‘maximum physical activity for health’ are likely to elicit very different reactions from Muslim families (or Sikh, Hindu, or Catholic families) compared to programmes based on socio-critical principles that can involve quite radical challenges to traditional norms and values. Simply put, there is a need to go beyond framing PE as a neutral, positive activity where increasing participation is automatically desirable, to question how the nuanced politics of PE interacts with pupils’ own political and identity projects.

In a similar vein, some thought should be given to claims that PE is able to remedy broader social ills and that physical educators should extend their focus to include areas such as pupils’ language proficiency. Some scholars have argued convincingly that PE’s educational claims are already too diffuse (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009) and – in line with the name of the school subject – that it would be prudent to focus our attention on learning in the physical domain (Evans, 2004). An awareness of the discussion would appear to have significant bearing on future research endeavours in the area of ethnicity and PE.

Intersectionality provides a key concept for further research. Gender and ethnicity as theoretical constructs have been combined in a handful of investigations and more work is surely needed. Yet socio-economic class remains conspicuous by its almost total absence. It seems if not preposterous then at least very strange that in discussions of ethnicity and PE, few scholars have
questioned how markers of ethnic difference that lead to marginalization and stigmatization combine with limited access to social and economic capital to affect individuals’ PE experiences. Sociological studies of schooling have long demonstrated that class plays an important role in educational achievement (Bernstein, 1971). An important challenge for physical educators is to explain how class processes play out in culturally diverse PE settings.

We would like to finish with a rather philosophical point regarding future directions. Stuart Hall (2000) proposed that the meeting of cultures is agonistic and never completed. It is a moment that is ambiguous, and “without the promise of celebratory closure or transcendence of the complex” (p. 235). Scholarship on PE and ethnicity might too be framed as part of an on-going process, a site where we write and re-write ethnic (and gender, ability, class, and age) discourses to create new ways of thinking about what we are doing in the name of PE. Rather than see scholars’ task as changing the nature of PE for good (in both senses of the word), we might see scholarship as part of an on-going discussion that is reflexive in the sense that it will influence our own and others’ practices. Research is and will remain essentially incomplete in the sense that it will not provide the final word on ethnicity and PE. This point may be disheartening, liberating, or both but it is a point that we believe deserves consideration when embarking on new projects.

Summary of key findings

• For the most part, existing research can be grouped into two main threads: that dealing with Muslim girls and PE and that which considers physical educators’ responses to cultural diversity. Additionally, there are a small number of investigations focusing on the experiences and perceptions of young people from minority groups.
• Muslim girls have garnered increasing attention in the last two decades due to migration and the increasing presence of cultural discourses (including Islamophobic discourse and the idea that Islam is incompatible with women’s sport and physical activity).
• Scholars have suggested that: (i) dress codes that require girls to expose parts of their bodies; (ii) dance lessons that contain movements which could be seen as sexually provocative; (iii) swimming lessons where males are present; and (iv) religious festivals that require girls to participate in vigorous physical activity while they are fasting, can but do not necessarily prevent Muslim girls from taking part in PE lessons.
• Whether girls fully engage with PE will depend on: familial interpretations of Islam; flexibility of teachers and schools with factors such as dress codes and changing arrangements; and the interest of girls themselves. Programme content does not appear to be a decisive factor when it comes to participation.
• A number of schools are changing to meet the needs of Muslim girls, however progress has been inconsistent and patchy. Schools that serve diverse local communities, are under-resourced, meet high levels of religiosity, and/or have teachers that know little about Islam have been generally less successful.
• The notion that traditional forms of PE do not meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations and that change is indispensable has constituted a persistent argument in literature on ethnicity and PE.
• Some studies have shown that PE teachers tend to be monolingual, have limited knowledge of minority groups, and experience communication difficulties when dealing with these groups.
• A number of scholars have suggested that PETE programmes tend to be ethnocentric and privilege White, European ways of seeing the world. These scholars contend that PETE
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programmes need to counter this theme to better prepare teachers for current and future teaching contexts.

- Two key ways of improving PETE programmes have been identified: facilitating student reflection in the area of race and ethnicity, and providing opportunities for cross-cultural contact.
- Some research exploring students’ experiences of PE suggests that PE holds an important place in the lives of young people from minority groups. Other research, however, highlights ambivalence towards PE.
- Emerging research suggests that bodies are both gendered and racialized and that this has significant consequences for physical educators and their work with bodies.

Reflective questions for discussion

1. While trends undoubtedly exist, variability and heterogeneity are consistent themes in the literature on cultural diversity and PE. How should physical educators deal with the fact that even within one minority group (such as ‘Muslim girls’), significant differences may exist between individuals in the ways that PE is perceived and experienced?
2. Some scholars have suggested that PETE programmes should provide “real life experiences whereby [students] are exposed to diverse cultures” (Columna et al., 2010, p. 308). Do you agree? Justify your answer.
3. There is relatively little research on a number of minority groups and their experiences and perceptions of PE. Why do you think this is? Can you think of groups that have not caught the attention of scholars but might warrant exploration?

Notes

1. In 1997, Kincheloe and Steinberg suggested that ‘inner city issues’ is often used as a kind of shorthand to signify that race is being discussed. In Hellison’s work, race certainly played an important role, even if Hellison did not theorize it explicitly.
2. Hesse (2000) suggests that multiculturalist theory gained less traction in Britain as it came under increasing attack in the 1980s. Hesse suggests that its focus on the celebration of cultural identities was “demonized by the Left as a dangerous distraction to the anti-racist struggle and by the Right as a virulent undermining of the British way of life” (p. 9). Further, multicultural discussions had emerged largely in primary and secondary school contexts and as a political discourse, it was “profoundly under-theorized” (p. 19). According to Hesse, multiculturalism had an entirely different development in the United States. Debates concerning multiculturalism had taken place at universities and, in the 1990s, these debates had extended into the fields of gender and the politics of knowledge. Considerations of multiculturalism involved exploring democratic ideals of citizenship as well as the epistemology of many academic disciplines.
3. Stepping, according to Hastie and colleagues, is often seen as a type of African-American dance. Technically though it is not a dance but “a series of synchronized, rhythmical body movements that are combined with chants and, often, verbal play” (p. 296). Musical instruments are not used and, instead, body movements such as clapping and stamping are used to produce rhythms.

References


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