Chapter 8: Professional Development of Teachers in Physical Education—Where Are We Now?

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We welcomed and have learned from the opportunity to read and respond to the seven chapters in this monograph, although neither of us is a physical education practitioner or researcher. Both of us were competitive athletes—Heather, a Golden Gloves boxer and now a boxing coach, and Steve, a college football player and wrestler—and one of us is the child of a physical education teacher. Both of us are philosophers of education by training, versed in a Western philosophic tradition with strong roots in Classical Athenian educational values that integrate body, mind, and spirit.

As we read these independent chapters and their introduction, we were struck by the story that emerged: a story both coherent and unfinished. Its coherence lies in its portrayal of a four-year initiative in professional development of physical education teachers in an urban context in a particular historical moment. Despite different points of focus and emphasis in each chapter, outsiders like us can understand the story that these chapters tell. The unfinished nature of the story lies in two dimensions: historical and contemporary. Not only is physical education at a crossroads in American educational history, with the next developments in that history yet unclear, but the research story of the intervention described in these pages is necessarily unfinished. There is more work to be done in professional development in Columbus Public Schools (and nationally), and there is more research to be done on that work. Part of our task in this chapter is to learn from the other chapters what might lie around the bend, to speculate about where the story might lead.

The story that is collectively told by these articles might be captured in the following way. Recent national policy initiatives have resulted in physical education going the way of other parts of the public school curriculum that are now considered more dispensable than they once were. Philosopher Harry Broudy (1988) once wrote that the post-WWII emphasis on core academic subjects had led to the arts in public schools being marginalized to a “nice, but not necessary,” status. The macropolitics of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have contributed to a similar
problem for those who advocate physical education as an essential component of the education of children and youth. Physical education teachers simultaneously express their sense of power as content specialists and their sense of powerlessness to do anything about the diminishing resources for physical education in the public school curriculum. In such an environment, practitioners are not sure how their work contributes to the public goals of education as it is currently framed, and they confess that their arguments do not persuade colleagues, the public, and school administrators of the importance of their work.

Lacking resources for their own professional development, practitioners rarely have the occasion to think together about how to strengthen physical education instruction, either at the policy or at the classroom level. The story goes on to show that in the midst of this state of affairs, introduction of new professional development resources, provided in collaboration with a research university, has allowed teachers to form valued professional learning communities, or communities of practice, in physical education. These learning communities have allowed teachers to reflect together on the conduct and practice of physical education in their urban setting. In doing so, a number of lessons about professional development were learned and documented—lessons having to do with professional community, with content knowledge, and with school leadership. At the same time, the research community learned something about the limits of its ability, over this brief period of the funded intervention, to say with certainty what the outcomes of the professional development will ultimately be.

Of what value is that story? Although these chapters place the issues of physical education in schools in the macro context historically and nationally, they implicitly focus on the micro context: in particular, the teacher as the unit of change. In the remainder of this reflection, we will try to say why this makes sense in large urban environments, why we see the chapters in this monograph as both promising and challenging for the future of physical education in urban schools, and why we think these chapters have strong implications for envisioning the school—more immediately than the teacher or the district—as the most effective unit of change.

We begin with the concept of urban itself. In a piece called, “What’s Urban Got to Do With It?” (Chou & Tozer, 2006), we identified three major constructs that create a continuum of urban conditions, all of which are addressed in one way or another in the pages of this monograph. The notion of continuum is important: while only about 10 cities in the United States have over a million inhabitants, for example, and are the most familiar touchstones in conversations about urban education (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and so on), many more cities confront the challenges of urban life in the post-WWII, post-Industrial Era that gave rise to the current school reform movement. These conditions are as follows.

1. The size and attendant bureaucracy that alone, apart from other considerations, present challenges of school organization and teacher voice in large systems.

2. The ethnic and economic heterogeneity that present challenges to teachers who themselves do not share in common the cultural capital of their students, and that present challenges to school systems that find themselves providing a wide range of health and human services (including two and even three meals a day) to students who lack these basic human resources.
3. And finally, the cultural politics of urban school reform, which have become the business not just of urban school boards, but urban city governments and state and national policy makers.

Cutting across these conditions are dynamics of a new three R’s: racism, resources, and resistance, all of which complicate any one of the three major categories just listed. The dynamics of racism and inadequate resources are familiar to anyone teaching and researching in urban environments, while the dynamics of resistance—resistance by teachers to change, resistance of schools and districts to top-down policies, and resistance by students and families to school curricula and practices they find objectionable or irrelevant—are less-often remarked upon (Chou & Tozer, 2006). These three categories and the dynamics of the three R’s illustrate why urban-ness must be understood as a continuum. In Chicago, with over 600 schools, in Columbus, with over 100 schools, and in many low-income suburbs surrounding central cities, all of these factors continue to combat, to a greater or lesser degree, massive efforts to improve urban schools.

What do these categories and the new three R’s illuminate about the story or urban professional development told in this monograph? First, they remind us of why physical education teachers feel so powerless to improve the teaching and learning of physical education in schools. What power do teachers have over the conditions described above and detailed so well in chapter 1? History tells us that the answer is, “very little.” What an individual teacher can do to effect change at the macro level is negligible, and teachers already have large political organizations, in the form of two powerful teachers unions, that seem to have had little impact.

But history also tells us unequivocally that teachers can have power at the school level, if they organize together to have collective impact on how a given school educates its students. This is why, in virtually every major urban center, some nonselective neighborhood schools (not just selective “magnet” schools that cream off academically proficient students) have exceeded state and national norms (numerous examples can be found on the Web sites of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Education Trust, or Designs for Change). And in each of these cases, a central ingredient in the success of these schools is some form of intentional, professional learning community that help teachers work together to learn what they must to serve the learning needs of children and youth.

The importance of professional learning communities resonates throughout this monograph. It reminds us that teachers and administrators at the school level—despite the macropolitics and mandates of urban school reform and despite racism, inadequate resources, and teacher and student resistance—can succeed in urban schools. We are reminded of Rochester Teachers Union President Adam Urbanski’s oft-spoken dictum: “Socioeconomic factors are a powerful predictor of student achievement—in the absence of good instruction” (Urbanski, 2003). Teachers and administrators who plan curriculum and examine their instruction together, so that students experience horizontally and vertically integrated learning experiences, are able to show remarkable results. We are reminded, as well, that we have known this for a long time. The late Ron Edmonds, father of the Effective Schools movement, asked in 1979,

“How many effective schools would you have to see . . . to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, I suspect
you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that pupil performance derives from family background instead of the school’s response to the family background.” (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2006, p. 420)

So the ideas that urban schools can educate children well, that high-quality instruction is the key, and that professional learning communities are the key to changing instructional practices are all well established in the literature. And this monograph gives us reason to believe that physical education teachers can form effective professional learning communities that at the very least establish what is termed here the “infrastructure” within which professional development can take place — with student outcomes awaiting further research. Two more essential questions remain, however: (1) how are professional learning communities established on a scale that can truly have an impact on large urban environments, and (2) what impact can this have on the macro conditions that continue to marginalize physical education in urban schools?

To the first question we argue that in large urban environments, a paradox exists: the scale of urban school systems tempts us to believe that systemic change requires system-level initiatives, but the unwieldy and inefficient bureaucracy suggests that the most effective levers for change exist at the level of the individual school. How can that paradox be resolved?

Our resolution lies in a theme that recurs in several, but not all, of the chapters in this monograph: leadership at the school level. The inability of urban systems to change at scale through system-level initiative is as well documented as the ability of an individual school to out-perform the urban system. But in no case we know of has a school done this without effective leadership at the school level — and this typically points directly to the principal. Chapters 2 and 5, in particular, emphasize the role of the principal, for good or ill, in supporting teacher development. The research record of recent years — in the work of Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005); Leithwood, Anderson, Louis, and Wahlstrom (2004); Sparks (2005); and many others — makes this point even more strongly. Why? Because increasingly, the quality of instruction in a school is a product not simply of individual teacher expertise, but of schoolwide structures that provide the time and other resources for teachers to form vital professional learning communities that change curriculum and instruction within the school (Hall & Hord, 2006, Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001). Absent a principal to support such structures, they are highly unlikely to take place.

This insight is particularly important in large urban environments, because the larger the system, the less leverage the central office has in positively influencing the culture of each school. The effectiveness of central office initiatives in changing schools “at scale” is miserable, largely because any top-down initiative — in literacy, in mathematics, in special education, in accountability, or in many other areas — can only be as strong as the commitment and ability of each school to implement it. In fact, “fidelity of implementation” is emerging as a common theme in researchers’ efforts to document the (in)effectiveness of district initiatives. Assessing the effectiveness of an initiative that is not really implemented is of limited value. The teachers in this monograph commented on the importance of supportive principals, those who value teacher–principal partnerships for change and who support teacher development. Similarly, the principal is essential to the implementation of any district initiative, and the larger the district, the less leverage the central office
will have over school principal performance.

In contrast, for example, some of the most outstanding high school districts in Illinois, in terms of measured student performance, are one-school districts, where the central office can have immediate impact on principal and teacher performance. Even the second-largest high school district in Illinois has only six schools. The superintendent can initiate, collaborate with, support, and monitor change efforts by having meetings of six school leaders around a small conference table, confident that six principals who have been handpicked from a large pool of capable candidates will form an impressive professional community of their own. Meanwhile, a few miles away, nearly 80 high school principals in Chicago represent a wide range of commitment and expertise, each reporting to intermediate-level administrators who are also wide ranging in their leadership abilities and in the support they receive from the central office. The quality of each school leader has far greater impact on the school than the superintendent and central office can ever hope to have.

From this perspective, for teachers to be agents of change, the school must be the unit of change; and for the school to be the unit of change, universities and districts must work together in new ways to produce school leaders who know how to support professional learning communities of the kind described in this monograph and supported by an ever-growing body of research (Marzano et al., 2005). Such initiatives have already begun in several large urban school districts, including Columbus, where Ohio State University has a strong school leadership development program. To the extent that capable, transformative school leaders are placed in every school—and this is not a pipe dream in a district the size of Columbus, teacher professional development and student learning gains will almost assuredly follow.

But even if the university and the school district were to be able to guarantee a top-flight principal in every school, what implications might this have for physical education, given the national macropolitics described in chapter 1? If physical education continues to be regarded as “nice, but not necessary,” and NCLB accountability measures drive the allocation of resources away from physical education toward the academic core subjects, what good can principals and professional learning communities do? Will better principals and professional learning communities prove to be simply a case of rearranging deck chairs on a sinking ship?

Making the Connections Among Research, Vision, and Leadership in Physical Education

When schools invest in new priorities, the established priorities are placed at risk, as vocational education teachers will attest. They recall the days when large portions of the secondary school population were preparing directly for the world of work rather than for postsecondary education—and many urban high school enrollments were predominantly vocational tracks (Tozer et al., 2005). Similarly, physical education teachers today can recall a time when every child in public school had physical education several times a week, when everyone at junior high school “dressed for gym” and showered after, and when universities had physical education departments with physical education teacher training at their core—as opposed to departments of kinesiology centered around basic research. Not that all
of these developments are necessarily bad, but they are evidence that the educational landscape does change, and that resources flow in new directions as change occurs. And chapter 1 reports that in Columbus, where the district has essential control of the curriculum requirements, both time and money for physical education are diminishing. This is a national trend, and it began well before NCLB. Physical education requirements in the United States have declined in recent decades, despite the Centers for Disease Control recommendation that schools should require daily physical education in grades K–12 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997; the emphasis is in the original). In California, a state that was once a national leader in physical education programs, “physical education staffing and programs have suffered serious erosion,” according to a state legislative study (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997). And in Columbus today, this monograph tells us that the current requirement for elementary school physical education is two 30-min lessons each week.

In the face of these trends, the monograph focuses on the “infrastructure” of professional development for physical education teachers. In chapter 1, Ward and O’Sullivan argue that “without this infrastructure, little can be done in this district to improve physical education for children.” It is, of course, obvious to the authors that even though this infrastructure might be necessary, it will not be sufficient for adequate physical education instruction in Columbus if NCLB and other macro-level trends continue to squeeze the physical education curriculum. These macro-level issues were not the focus of the research reported in the monograph, and we are not asserting that they should have been. However, as the monograph makes clear, the infrastructural supports that were the focus of the research are partly dependent on those macro-level developments. Time and money are essential for the building of professional learning communities, yet decreases in time and money for physical education are traceable to NCLB and other policy trends and priorities.

Situated within those macro-level trends, the research in this monograph takes on new significance to advocates of physical education instruction in schools. The reason for this is that there are clear connections between research, vision, policy, and leadership in schools. More pointedly, the research represented in this monograph could play an important role in shaping the macro-level conditions.

How so? It is instructive to notice an example of another dimension of school curriculum that, like physical education, is not one of the core academic subjects, and one that most observers would argue is more marginalized than physical education: social and emotional learning. Sharing some commonalities with “character education” and “moral education,” among other names, social and emotional learning is rarely a required subject area in public schools. Yet in Illinois, social and emotional learning was added to state learning standards in 2005, and schools throughout the state are now working to integrate these standards into their curricula and into professional development for teachers. New York State is now examining a similar course of action.

How did this happen? In an NCLB world where curriculum, professional development, assessment, and accountability resources are increasingly directed to core academic subjects, how did something as amorphous as social and emotional learning rise to the level of state policy? The answer might be summed up in three terms: vision, research, and advocacy. In regards to vision, the national Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), headquartered at the
University of Illinois at Chicago but led by scholars and educators from throughout the nation, has for many years been shaping a research and policy agenda intended to strengthen social and emotional learning (SEL) in public schools. Once named the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning, their name was changed to replace advance with academic as research began to confirm that social and emotional learning in schools has a documentable impact on academic achievement (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). By collecting and disseminating this research, and advocating its curricular implications to policy audiences, including state legislators, CASEL was able to make its case effectively enough to have SEL standards become the law of the land. In Illinois, the focus of this advocacy and research has now turned to helping local school districts and schools integrate effective curriculum into student learning, and researching the results.

The future of physical education in public schools may well depend on such a combination of vision, research, and advocacy. Part of the success of the SEL story was the ability of its advocates to see that for SEL to be valued by the public and by policy makers, SEL must be tied in part to its impact on what is already highly valued: academic success in schools. The research base in physical education has already begun to support a similar linkage. California policy, for example, recognizes the following:

In addition to the health benefits, there is growing evidence that regular physical activity enhances learning and school achievement. In the same way that exercise benefits the muscles, heart, lung and bones, it also strengthens key areas of the brain. Physical activity fuels the brain with oxygen, enhances connections between neurons and assists in memory. Children in daily physical activity have shown superior academic performance and attitude toward school. Exercise has been shown to improve scores on short-term memory, reaction time and creativity; and young persons who exercised daily outperformed other students on exams. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997)

Although the studies in this monograph intentionally stayed away, for the present, from the question of student outcomes, it is highly likely that the long-term future of physical education will require that a strong case be made for the full range of benefits of physical education instruction, in terms of health, social and emotional wellness, and academic achievement. If policy makers do not adequately value physical education for its own sake, then advocates can strategically tie physical education to existing, strongly held values of academic achievement.

One step toward accomplishing such positive outcomes will almost assuredly be strengthening physical education curriculum and instruction in targeted schools, so that the results of exemplary physical education programs can be documented. For instance, this monograph documents the importance of informal and formal assessment in physical education programs. Such assessments enabled physical education teachers to see the value in demonstrating student outcomes to parents and teachers in their schools. Additionally, teachers must form and sustain the professional development communities they will need to establish such exemplary programs, and school leaders must have the vision to see the value of such learning communities as well as the benefits of strong physical education curricula. Fortunately, in Ohio, local school districts do not have to wait for state policy to
strengthen physical education in their schools, because local districts have authority over physical education requirements. And within a district, partnerships between universities and schools can provide the initial resources for principals with vision to break new ground in the fostering of professional learning communities.

The ultimate “infrastructure” for strengthening physical education in public schools is therefore multilayered. It requires organization, leadership, and resources at the level of teacher professional communities, principals, and state and district policy. This monograph shows us that with vision and leadership, the strengthening of physical education can start in the school as the unit of change.