



Research Report of the Month
OCTOBER 2003

Tsangaridou, N., & O'Sullivan, M. (2003).

Physical education teachers' theories of action and theories in use.

Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 22, pp. 132-152.

The Study

What makes this report interesting and of potential value are the easily recognized variables involved, the good-news/bad-news nature of the results, and the inclusion of materials that may be directly useful in teacher preparation or development activities. Before you allow yourself to be put-off by use of the word "theories" in the title, please understand that the theory involved here is a commonplace to our everyday experience as practitioners: what we say we are going to do (including how and why) -- what we actually do -- and the match (or absence of a match) between the two. In other words, this study is about the similarities and differences between what we talk concerning physical education, and how we actually walk that talk in the gymnasium.

To illustrate, all teachers can describe the goals (purposes) they intend to accomplish when teaching physical education classes. And, all teachers can explain both why reaching those objectives is important for their pupils, and how they intend to go about teaching. Those explanations reflect their notions about the proper nature of education and how teaching and learning work. In other words, we all have some implicit (and sometimes explicit) theories that support our plans for teaching -- what the authors here call "Theories of Action" (TOA). When people watch us teach, they can tell (at least roughly) whether what we actually do, called here our "Theories in Use" (TIU) actually match our espoused TOA. In simple terms, observers can notice instances of congruence or discrepancy between our TOA and TIU.

Quite aside from forming the basis for snide comments about colleagues who don't really "walk the walk," the degree to which our TOA and TIU do or do not match can have serious consequences in teaching practice. When we espouse one thing, but do something quite different, the link between conscious intent and action may be broken -- leaving really unfortunate aspects of instruction to coast along (perhaps for an entire career) unnoticed, and uncorrected.

Participants and Context

The participants were four (1M & 3F) experienced (10+ yrs.) physical education teachers, two each at elementary and secondary levels, and two each in suburban and inner city contexts.

Design and Method

TIA was derived from data provided by direct observation. A nonparticipant investigator observed each teacher in 16-18 regular class sessions (68 observations in total), while they taught such regularly scheduled units as catching, throwing, and kicking, fitness, volleyball, soccer, and tennis. Written field notes were recorded (and later transcribed) for teaching actions and student behaviors. All lessons also were videotaped for further analysis and expansion of field notes. This was supplemented by conversations with the participants before and after class, during which they were asked to talk about their intentions, teaching methods, and rationales for particular actions. In addition, each teacher maintained a journal in which they recorded particular points about each class session that they considered to be important.

Each participant's TOA was generated from data collected in a variety of interview formats. Previously field-tested questions that focused on what the teacher believed about goals and methods of teaching formed the basis for formal, audiotaped (and later transcribed) interviews that took place both before

and at the conclusion of the series of 68 observations. As a last step, a third interview asked each participant to respond to three written vignettes. Each of the brief vignettes (which are appended to the report) provided a story-like description of a situation in physical education – and invited responses that would reveal aspects of the participants' TOA.

For both TOA and TIA, elaborate procedures were implemented to insure trustworthiness in both the data recorded and for the process of analysis that produced characterizations of each teacher's theories. Participants were asked to review both interview transcripts and the interpretations of TOA that the researchers derived from their analysis. In the report, the investigators' assertions about the participants' TOA and TIA are documented with excerpts from interviews and observation field notes.

Results

Did the researchers find that the teachers were doing what they said they should do, what they intended to do, and (probably) what they thought they actually did? Doubtless, you can anticipate at least part of the answer. The match of TOA and TIA differed somewhat for individuals, for units, and for particular aspects of belief and action. Overall, however, the investigators clearly were surprised by both the similarities in TOA for the four participants, and, at least in the case of primary goals and beliefs, how often those matched what was observed as their TIA. Skill development as a program priority, and a focus on content in designing lessons were described as TOA and then congruently acted out as TIA. Espoused ideas about positive class climate, close supervision during practice, and the use of task analysis (including progressions and a degree of individualization) all matched fairly closely with what was observed. Even social theories about equity (for gender and ability) and fair play were played out in teaching actions (if in different ways).

By now, you must be thinking: "But surely there must have been exceptions to this happy homogeneity!" Indeed there were, but they appeared infrequently (if dramatically) and mostly in regard to what might be called a "secondary" level of TOA. For example, teachers who espoused the goal of developing student responsibility – the independent learner -- could provide a very teacher-centered lesson in which routines were designed to leave little or no room for student independence. Often, students were far more responsive to teacher direction than responsible for their actions as learners. Also, teachers who had personal theories about the desirability of encouraging student choices concerning lesson or unit content could operate programs in which there was no opportunity whatever for such selections. In addition, although participants indicated that they thought it necessary (and important) to negotiate elements of their teaching with students (in order to maintain their cooperation), evidence from class observations suggested TIA that was very different. Expectations usually were communicated swiftly and decisively, without any hint that the teachers were prepared to back away from those directions.

Finally, one of the vignettes described an inner city teacher who not only taught a tennis lesson for children of color, but included instruction about strategies (and an action plan) for students to generate funding for tennis facilities in their community (a plan based on the inequity and political immorality of their present circumstances). As you would expect, the participants' responses differed, both individually and in terms of their own professional context. Some regarded such TIA (with its explicit critique of society) to be entirely beyond the purview of their professional responsibilities. Others found the TOA entirely congenial to their own values.

Discussion

In the report, the authors discuss the implications for teacher education and teacher development at some length. They were heartened by the congruence of TOA and TIA in so many important areas. They were disturbed, however, by three findings. First, the absolute and unquestioned allegiance to skill development as the primary purpose of physical education raised questions in their minds (probably with regard to the relative role to be played by development of positive attitudes about the uses of movement skills). Second, they were bothered by the fact that detection of discrepancies between TOA and TIA was not a habitual part of the participants' reflections on their own practice (nor was it something commonly encouraged and practiced in their preservice or inservice teacher training). And, finally, Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan were unsettled by the unwillingness of some participants to extend their TOA concerning equity of opportunity in their own classes, to the inequities that exist for young people in the world outside.

If you do not choose to read the full report as it appears in journal form, I suggest that you may find it illuminating to read and respond to the four attached vignettes – and that you do so before you read how the participants in this study responded.

(Annotations of other research reports may be found in the unlockresearch cumulative archive. At the left of the main page, just click on the button labeled "Archives.")

This article was printed from Unlock Research - <http://www.unlockresearch.com>.
© 2003- 2004 , Lawrence F. Locke. All rights reserved.