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Hidden Curriculum in Physical Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

The basic objective of this study about hidden curriculum (HC) is not only to understand a school experience but also to understand, in general terms, the relationship between schooling and society. This study sets out to explore the ideologies transmitted through HC in the Physical Education (PE) subject as seen through a secondary education class. An ethnographic method was used, in the course of which information was collected by means of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, one with the teacher and seven with pupils from the group selected on account of their role in the group or because they had been involved in certain situations of interest observed. The qualitative analysis process of the data consisted of reducing the information based on thematic criteria, data exposition and comment and the verification of conclusions. The main findings suggest that both pupils and teachers, albeit differently, regard PE as having an instrumentalist nature removed from the functions, challenges and competencies currently attributed to it. Moreover, pupils and teachers alike perceived personal effort as the factor which most strongly conditioned evaluation, although the teaching staff clearly did so on the basis of a specific discourse of performance ideology. Teachers attached greater priority to the smooth and normal evolution of the session in the face of possible individual incidents in the course of the class, even ignoring such incidents in order to be able to continue to attend to the class. Such situations may condition pupils' participation and motivation in PE classes through the perception of such fears and insecurities derived from public opinion about their motor interventions.

Keywords: faculty, pedagogy, ideology of performance, healthism.

Introduction

In 1968, Philip W. Jackson published *Life in Classrooms*, a book compiling the outcomes of the extensive ethnographic research he had conducted in different schools in the United States. This immersion in school life led him to identify ideas that were transmitted implicitly to pupils through the set of routines and forms of organisation in schools. The author coined the term Hidden Curriculum (HC) for this ensemble of ideas which go largely unnoticed by the educational community. Despite the relevance of his work, Jackson was not the first scholar to draw attention to the hidden transmission of ideas in the educational system. Classic authors of the stature of Durkheim or Gramsci had already attributed competencies to schools that fell way outside official academic curricula. The relationship between HC and reproduction theories subsequently prompted authors such as Henry Giroux, and numerous others, to analyse and challenge these ideas and develop critical pedagogy as a practice for turning the school into a driver of social change rather than an instrument of reproduction.

Research into HC in physical education (PE) has its clear point of departure in the work of Linda L. Bain (1975). From her very first publication, this researcher sought to describe the different ways in which HC acts in PE classrooms. Initially, her analysis of the study of HC in PE focused on personal values culled from the literature up until that time (Bain, 1976). These values were rights and obligations in the classroom for which no provision was made in academic syllabuses, and they became an opportunity to explore the student's HC as it is developed in the PE subject depending on pupil gender and social provenance. Bain (1985; 1990) went on to correct her initial research and extended her study of HC by observing the meanings or significance attached to classroom routines by teachers and pupils, bringing in a feminist outlook which ultimately spawned myriad related research. In doing so, she broke away from the line pursued in her earlier work, asserting that the basic objective of studying HC is not merely to understand the school experience (schooling), but rather to understand the relationship between schooling and society.

Other authors of international repute have since investigated the phenomenon of HC and PE, as noted by Devís et al., (2005). Cases in point would be Tinning (1990), Kirk (1992) or Fernández-Balboa (1993), who studied the ideologies that prevail in PE. These studies are founded on the notion that PE is not neutral and that its specific deployment is driven by the interests of certain groups (Kirk & Tinning, 1990). Some examples of this are technocratic rationality (Fernández-Balboa &

Muros, 2006), which is obsessed with accomplishing objectives regarded as non-problematic by deploying increasingly more efficient methodologies (Bain, 1990), or the ideology of performance, associated with the former, which sees pupils' bodies as an instrument at the service of the values associated with competitive sport and the school as a training ground (Crum, 2017; Devís, 2001; Molina & Beltrán, 2007). As Kirk explained (1990), the ideology of performance has allowed PE to seek to justify its presence on the school curriculum, as healthism (Colquhoun, 1990) is now doing, a growing discourse in these parts and one which, while it may not adhere to educational parameters and does admit critical analysis, would appear to promote performance or appearance (Bain, 1990) and prescribes what medicine recommends to PE (Devís & Peiró, 1992).

Another point of interest in the study of HC in PE stems from questions of gender and sexuality (Devís et al., 2005). Besides the studies by Bain, mention should also be made of Patricia Griffin (1989), who produced an interesting ethnographic study in which she concluded that male and female pupils have scant interaction with each other and that male students tend to behave more aggressively, whereas the conduct of female pupils is characterised by a penchant for cooperation and more verbal, rather than physical, behaviours. According to Griffin, these findings lead to the conclusion that gender is the most important socialising agent in PE, meaning that understanding it is key in transforming reality. Therefore, it transpires that these questions of gender, as well as sexuality, implicitly permeate many of the teaching actions of PE teachers, thereby conditioning the way that pupils participate in the subject and the practice of physical activity (Beltrán-Carrillo & Devís, 2019).

More recently, studies such as those by Olson et al., (2016) or Casey (2017) have established a very close link between the term HC and ideology and discourse, striving to keep HC in PE on the latter's pedagogical and sociological research agenda.

In the light of the foregoing, the objective of this study is to ascertain which of these ideologies are transmitted through hidden curriculum in a secondary school PE class.

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative research methodology using the educational ethnography strategy, which is the result of applying ethnographic practice and anthropological reflection to the study of the school as an institution (Velasco and Díaz de Rada, 2006). It is a

single-case study which involves a process of investigation characterised by a detailed, systematic and in-depth examination of the case in question (Stake, 2007)

The researcher was involved in this study for a period of two months, in the form of two weekly sessions, thereby fulfilling the requirements pertaining to being in the field, in the environment being studied, thus enabling him to become familiar with and recognise many of the events and details of the reality observed, while also being able to act to extend his information and exchange impressions with the participants. On the other hand, in certain cases this presence could modify the research setting or make the participants feel awkward.

Participants

This study was conducted in the PE subject of a second-year compulsory education public school in the city of Valencia numbering 23 pupils, 12 girls and 11 boys. The school where the research was conducted is public and is located in the centre of the city of Valencia. The majority of the pupils are from Spanish-speaking families with an average socio-economic level, employed in the services sector or as freelance workers, according to the School's Educational Project. The teacher is a 32-year-old male who has taught PE in different academic years and also in the Spanish Baccalaureate. He was also the tutor of one of the authors of the study who, over a two-month period, did his teacher training 22 hours a week participated at the school. During the observation period, and before the interviews were held, the student or trainee teacher informed and secured the consent of the families and the teacher by means of a letter. He also informed the school management and guidance department, who gave their approval following a small personal interview in the course of which the research procedures were explained.

Materials and Instruments

The ethnographic method uses a set of resources to compile and analyse the elements being studied, such as participant observation, interview and documentary analysis (Álvarez, 2008). For the purpose of data triangulation, in this study the information was collected by means of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, one with the teacher and seven with pupils from the group (four girls and three boys), selected on account of their role in the group or because they had been involved in certain situations of interest. This selection was performed firstly by means of convenience sampling, leveraging the predisposition of two girl pu-

pils to participate in the research. These two initial interviews were followed by a snowball sampling selection strategy in which pupils mentioned and/or recommended by the previous interviewees were chosen with a view to obtaining access to participants who might otherwise be more difficult to identify through simple observation, albeit with an evident relationship with the object of study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2001). Therefore, both data collection tools enable us to study certain elements from different standpoints and compare them from the perspective of the observer.

Procedure

The research was conducted during the first term of 2017, and involved the observation of a total number of 13 one-hour-long PE sessions (8 sessions of the Rugby tag teaching unit and 5 acrobatic gymnastics sessions).

In methodological terms, the pupils learnt basic rugby skills and tactics based on pure global and global polarising attention practice strategies (Sánchez-Bañuelos, 1989) through a task setting-based command style (Mosston & Ashworth, 1993). In short, a style based on a classic session structure with scant pupil participation, as in the case described by Prat et al. (2019). This style took the form of different modified games intended from the outset to place the technical elements and the rules of the sport in a real-game situation context. The same strategies and styles were applied in acrobatic gymnastics, with an organisation based on pairs and groups of three for pupils to execute different figures in an ascending order of difficulty. The trainee teacher did the field work, taking on the role of observer-participant (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) during his work experience at the school or, in other words, through partial and sporadic participation. Throughout this observation period, the author used note-taking as a method for recording information, analysed chronologically and intelligibly. Elements such as class organisation, spontaneous pupil distribution, inter-group interactions and group-teacher interactions were used for note-taking purposes. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews were held in sessions agreed to in advance with the teacher to ensure that the absence of a given pupil would not disrupt the normal course of the classes as planned by the teacher. The interviews were held in a corner of the gym and were recorded on a mobile telephone over a variable time (between 26 and 42 minutes). The questions were based on predetermined categories taken from a bibliographic review performed in advance dealing with the scientific evidence of HC in PE: technocratic rationality, gender questions and questions of origin. Examples of the first

category of questions are provided below, although some of them were modified in the course of the interview: “What is the purpose of PE? What role do you think PE plays in your education? In your opinion, which pupils in the class are best at PE and why?”.

The credibility criteria, which in qualitative research may be defined as the sum of reliability and validity (Goetz & LeCompte, 1988) must be underpinned by ethical principles. Thus, to guarantee credibility, the literature recommends accurate designs, detailed descriptions or a critical review of drafts, besides the observance of ethical behaviour, such as the use of pseudonyms, informed consent or the confirmation of the transcriptions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), among other aspects. In this regard, this study provides a detailed description of the setting and the methodological procedure, thus enabling it to be replicated. Moreover, a certain triangulation of techniques and informants was used, yielding data which, when discussed with other studies, provide a consistent narrative. Finally, and to guarantee ethical conduct, the participants’ well-being was never threatened or compromised, pseudonyms were used, participation was voluntary and the consent of the pupils, their families and the teacher involved was secured.

Data Analysis

All the recordings were transcribed literally and analysed together with the observer-participant’s field data notebook. The qualitative data analysis process consisted of data reduction, exposition of the data and the verification of conclusions (Massot et al., 2004). In other words, activities related to selection, focalisation and the abstraction of units of meaning based on thematic criteria. Although the study in general used a mixed coding and categorisation process, the categories selected and presented in this article were determined deductively. More specifically, categories that refer, in one way or another, to some of the specific ideologies of HC in PE: “Being in tip-top shape”, “Effort” and “Participation”. Similarly, and due to space constraints, categories related to gender and/or origin questions have been excluded.

Results and Discussion

Characterisation of the PE sessions

The 2nd-year secondary-school PE session generally began after between seven and ten minutes had elapsed. This time was used by pupils to leave their backpacks in the changing rooms and to assemble in a specific place

in the gym equipped with a small table and a blackboard/whiteboard. The teacher was a young person who maintained a cordial relationship with the pupils. Many of the boys and girls greeted him on seeing him and sat down to wait. The teacher would then take the class register, make the relevant announcements and then go on to explain the first activity in the session.

The class apparently unfolded on a substantially routine and incident-free basis. In this regard, the actual teacher referred to the group in question as “a highly integrating group” and that “in general, the group’s predisposition has been quite high this year” (Observer’s notebook, 7.2.2017). Therefore, and *a priori*, the educational context may be regarded as ideal, with a non-disruptive group of pupils evincing no discriminatory behaviour and attitudes and positively predisposed towards the teaching-learning process. Following the examples of Tinning (1992), the classes were well-taught, as embodied in the orderliness of the group, the teacher’s control over the latter and participation.

Although, as has already been mentioned, the relationship between the pupils and the subject was apparently ideal, the pupils’ perception of the subject had to be verified beyond the evident amusement and excitement they got out of it. The function attributed by the pupils to PE in the school syllabus and the significance afforded to the content and activities in the sessions are two elements that need to be analysed to be able to understand the prevailing teaching paradigms in this context.

PE helps you to stay in good shape

When we asked the pupils about the objective of the subject or the main purpose sought by the teacher in giving the class, the most frequent answer was to improve health and transmit healthy lifestyle habits:

It is useful because there are people who, if they do not do physical education, do no sport, and it also helps to increase sport a little and for us to be healthier, so to speak (Empar, pupil).

Other students were of the same opinion as Empar and also stated that this was the main objective of the subject. This trend represents a limited and instrumental view of the functions of PE, making it a curricular element intended solely to keep the school population within acceptable health parameters. This could be constructed as a **healthist** function of PE (Colquhoun, 1990; Tinning, 1990) which devalues the pupils’ social functions and all-round development, to name but some issues, and which have been attributed to it in recent years (López Pastor et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, this idea is usually totally linked to the use of free time in a responsible way that is beneficial to health (Devís, 2001).

It is like teaching us to move and not spend the day playing video-games. I mean, running, doing a bit of sport rather than lounging on the sofa all day. Also to teach us that sport can be good fun and healthy at the same time (Pau, pupil).

The subject was addressed as a way of generating resources that they could leverage to fill their leisure time, both at school and in adult life (Devís, 2001). In fact, this link between PE and leisure and recreation was very close in some cases, to the extent that the subject was regarded as a space for leisure or recreation in the school syllabus.

PE is used more or less to get some exercise and, at least as far as I'm concerned, as a form, of amusement, isn't it? I mean it's about getting away from the whole classroom thing, chairs and desks and homework and all that... As well as having a bit of fun, doing activities... It's about not just sitting around, but getting some exercise, moving your muscles (Pau, pupil).

Therefore, the pupils regarded PE not necessarily as a subject that provides motor training through motor training, but rather as one that fulfils the sole function of amusement (Tinning, 1992). When the teacher was questioned about the main objective of his subject, he said that his basic premise in designing classes was to convey a set of values, an intention which was apparently removed from the pupils' perceptions. And the operative word is "apparently removed", because the subject ultimately continues to be regarded as an instrument, either to improve health or to instil values, and this divests it of its educational mainstays, leading it to be associated with the prevailing technical discourse. Education through movement, if we recall Arnold's taxonomy (1991), is fully embodied in this point. Moreover, the pupils' perception is often related to the way in which the teacher imparts the subject beyond any explicit intentions the teacher may have. In this regard, authors such as Bain (1976) found that the real intention of PE teaching staff was, first and foremost, to increase pupil participation and amusement, keeping them occupied and active in the course of the sessions while avoiding conflicts. This purpose fits in better with the perception of the pupils in this study than with the teacher's claims with regard to the subject's priorities.

Nevertheless, when the focus was taken away from subject in general and the usefulness of the teaching of motor skills was addressed specifically, the main reason why the teacher regarded movement education as indispensable was for the purpose of teaching health-related content. The conception of PE as a tool dedicated to

improving the body shared by the teacher and pupils is clearly reminiscent of the body-machine metaphor (Barrett Beryl, 1996). This dual perspective of the body, and a highly technocratic attitude to the subject, was internalised by the pupils, who in some cases actually equated physical fitness with academic achievements in PE. This was the case of one girl who was asked which students were best at PE:

Student: Yes, I think it is a boy, but there are also girls.

Researcher: And why a boy rather than a girl?

Student: Because he's short and very athletic, so...

Researcher: But being short is not always an advantage...

Student: Maybe, but he's really skilled. He's a good runner, he plays rugby, he's athletic, he's a good dancer...

(Esther, pupil).

Effort is what matters most

Talking about PE in instrumental terms partly helps to underscore one of the problems regarded as most relevant by the teacher: how to get the pupils to understand the way they would be evaluated. On the one hand, the teacher regarded the effort made by pupils as an essential factor when evaluating them, particularly their attitude in each session. Nevertheless, he also acknowledged that it would be easier for the more adroit pupils to get higher marks or grades in the subject. This belief, which is limiting, is consistent with a performance ideology applied to PE according to which people who perform better, more efficiently or have better motor skills are positively rated, whereas less competent pupils are rated more poorly, to the extent of generating intolerance and rejection of them (Molina & Beltran, 2007). Moreover, this view constitutes a conception of evaluation anchored in a traditional approach in which teachers are the keystone around which the entire evaluation process is constructed and this process is implemented by means of general and one-way hetero-evaluations based on gauging motor performance while nevertheless failing to give due consideration to pupils' individual progression in their teaching-learning process (Alvarez, 2001). Unfortunately, the pupils did not see this as an impediment to getting good marks or grades in PE since they ended up accepting the assessment of effort as an important component of grading.

(...) the effort you make also matters: some people are good at it but make no effort in any class, whereas others are not very good but try hard. That is different. Not only how good you are at it affects your grade (Marcos, pupil).

Although the teacher subscribed to the discourse of the performance ideology, most of the pupils admitted

that their motor skills as such improved little in the PE sessions, and the fact is that, as Devís and Peiró (1992) point out, the time periods provided for in school teaching units are insufficient to guarantee any real improvement in motor development. Consequently, greater value was attached to what you were (anthropometrically and physiologically) than what you learnt (López Pastor, 1999)

It is therefore evident that both teachers and pupils regarded work and individual effort (either solo or as part of a group) as a key element in evaluations and in grading in the PE subject. This culture of effort establishes the foundations of an individualistic and meritocratic conception of academic life, concepts that are embedded in the liberal conception of physical exercise and sport studied by HC investigators of the ilk of Bain (1975) or Fernández-Balboa & Muros (2006). These conceptions lead one to wonder whether equal opportunities and the likelihood of success are directly proportional to the effort made by individuals. In this case, PE justifies this idea, seeking to turn effort into a measurable phenomenon, disregarding other aspects such as each pupil's social and affective context, which also determines their behaviour and actions in and out of class.

I don't want to participate

In the initial sessions of the acrobatic gymnastics didactics unit, we observed one situation which was both frequent and telling:

The teacher started to explain a game called "meatball" or the "conveyor belt" in which one pupil crawls over his or her classmates who are lying very close to each another on the floor and who also perform rolling movements so that the body of the pupil on top of them will be "conveyed" more easily. When Marta realised what the game was about, she protested silently, looking extremely concerned. She lay down on the floor at the beginning of the activity. However, when it was her turn to be the "meatball" she flatly refused, opted out of the game, sat down in a corner of the gym and started to cry. The teacher continued without a word, and my trainee teacher-colleague went over to talk to her (Observer's notebook, 14.3.2017).

The pupil reacted in a similar fashion on two further occasions, whenever the contact was with boys. However, on other occasions, when contact was only with female classmates, the pupil presented no rejection (Observer's notebook, 24.3.2017). When the pupil was asked about these situations in the course of an interview, she said that she was very tall and that she was frightened of hurting her back. The fact that the activities in which she refused to take part involved a very

low physical risk (such as the aforementioned "meatball" game) but did require physical contact with other pupils, male and female, and that she had no problems participating in more demanding activities involving a greater physical risk (such as building a two-tier human figure) with classmates of the same gender leads us to consider the possibility that Marta was not being entirely truthful. This situation is illustrative of the teacher's inability to intervene effectively, and, it must also be said, of the investigator's failure to coax a sincere version of the events from the pupil. However, a similar example reported in the article by Monforte and Pérez-Samaniego (2017) about fear and PE refers to how while girls may be more willing to talk about the experience of fear, doing so may lead them to be labelled particularly as failed neoliberal subjects. Moreover, according to Molina and Beltrán (2007), a personal characteristic is not what (negatively) affects a pupil most, but rather the fact that such a characteristic is made public. Apparently, what prevented this girl from cooperating normally with her classmates, and more particularly with boys, was the possibility of them finding out how much she weighed. In this regard, when this pupil was asked about what she felt the PE teacher was trying to teach in his classes, she responded as follows:

Well, I think he is trying to make us all closer to each other, have greater self-confidence... Maybe I am not explaining myself very clearly, but he wants everyone to get to know each other better, but physically, not mentally, I mean he wants us to know who the strongest person is... I don't know, I think it is something like that (Marta, pupil).

With this reflection, we may deduce that she often regarded the PE classes as a place where pupils lost their privacy and intimacy, as Bain had already observed (1975). She interprets it as an obligation to act and interact with her classmates in a way that brings her hang-ups and insecurities to light. Some specific examples are displaying skills in public, that classmates overstep the physical contact barrier or having to be on top of others. The outcome is that such experiences may increase pupils' lack of interest in physical activity and even in the subject (Beltrán-Carrillo & Devís, 2019). More specifically, and according to the aforementioned authors, these pupils (particularly obese boys and girls with a low skill level) suffer the consequences of classes and an evaluation which are geared towards physical performance. Moreover, they are impacted by the influence of the discourse of masculinity and healthism in teachers' expectations and evaluations, biased by possible body prejudices, and they (the girls) experience feelings of discomfort and embarrassment at having to expose their body or a lower level of skill or performance under the

superior gaze of teachers and male classmates. Consequently, this study agrees with Monforte and Pérez-Samaniego (2017) with regard to the need to extend the repertoire of stories such as that of XX to enable teachers to acknowledge fear as a component of their pedagogical practice, since it may help to generate a deeper and more sensitive understanding of the practice of teaching.

Conclusions

PE is a subject with characteristics and needs that make it significantly different to other school subjects. These singularities make it, first of all, an inexhaustible source of situations, dynamics and meanings that are difficult to interpret or, to put it differently, that may have multiple interpretations. According to the specific findings of our research, numerous elements that we could identify as HC were detected in the PE class. First of all, pupils regard the improvement of health and the learning of habits and resources that can be used in their free time as the main objectives of PE. This conception is at odds with the teacher's primary objective, namely to transmit values through motor activities. Notwithstanding, both conceptions afford PE an instrumentalist vision, removed from the functions and challenges it is currently supposed to embody (López-Pastor et al., 2016; Moreno et al., 2012).

On the other hand, pupils and teachers alike perceive personal effort to be the factor that brings the greatest influence to bear upon the evaluation, and therefore on the grade, of the student, even although the teacher states their intention to give the highest marks to pupils with the best motor skills, an aspect clearly rooted in the discourse of performance ideology. Therefore, the teacher's priority hinges on ensuring that the session unfolds smoothly, under their control, to pre-empt possible individual incidents in the course of the class. With this intention, they actually even fail to address certain conflicts in order to continue dealing with the group in general, which echoes the findings of Sánchez-Hernández et al. (2019). These types of situations can condition pupil participation and motivation in PE classes, through the perception of these fears and insecurities derived from public opinion resulting from their motor performance.

The main limitations of our study include its short observation period, which might have reduced our understanding of the educational reality being studied, and the decision, due to space constraints, not to present all the issues related to the social class, gender, sexuality or provenance of the pupils, aspects regarded as important in research into HC in PE.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the study of HC, particularly in PE, is a complex phenomenon which

moreover takes numerous social factors and problems into account. For this reason, any scientific contribution conducted to further knowledge and to explore the different facets of such a multi-faceted concept may be deemed indispensable if we are to move towards a more inclusive school PE model that embraces the individual characteristics and needs of all pupils, male and female.

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