

Asking After the Lived Experiences of and with Difficulty in Physical Activity in the Lifeworlds of Children and Young People by Maureen Connolly, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1990

"Teaching children is an act of love." (Beekman, 1982).

Maureen Connolly's dissertation is an in-depth exploration of the notion of difficulty in physical education. More specifically, this study describes what a physically difficult experience is like from an emic or insider's point of view. Connolly's research question is directed to 11- to 18-year-old children and youth.

The provocative title is indicative of the care Connolly took throughout the entire study to select words that came as close as possible to describing the lived experience of difficulty itself. "Asking after" is in reference to the kind of critical dialogue that occurred after "difficulty" had been experienced. The dissertation has many messages; however, a predominant theme is Connolly's commitment to making the experience of physical activity "child/youth friendly" by encouraging physical educators to be more thoughtful when they approach children and youth.

The dissertation has an impressive thoroughness to it. This attention to detail gives the reader confidence that nothing has been overlooked. For example, the first chapter is dedicated to explaining the meaning and appropriateness of each word in the research question and this sense of completeness is maintained throughout the study. Although Connolly suggests that "the words never seem to fit together well enough" (p. 5), her concern for the way we talk to children comes through in her careful selection of language throughout the thesis.

Connolly suggests that in physical education "the structural functionalist/positivist ethic has made performance, success, competence, and achievement the focal points of physical activity" (p. 43). She further states that little is known about the "immeasurable, often inexpressible experiences of and with difficulty in physical activity" (p. 44) and that there is a need for more studies that try to understand experiences from the perspective of the participant. Connolly chose to approach her research question phenomenologically applying "methods" developed by van Manen and Giorgi.

Connolly interviewed 11 children and young people "to explore the notion of difficulty in physical activity: What is a difficult physical experience? How is it different from other experiences? How is it pedagogical?" (p. 43) The children and young people are referred to as co-authors in this study and the study provides them with an opportunity to speak. The reader is introduced to each of the co-authors at the beginning of the thesis and maintains contact with them throughout the discussion of the themes that follow. The co-authoring partnerships took place over an eight-month period and involved approximately 60 in-person interviews.

Connolly chose 11- to 18-year-olds because of her experience with this age group and because, as she put it, "the pre-teen and teenage years are quite microscopic and complex; further, I believe that young people of this age live in a world that is quite unfamiliar to us in many ways" (p. 51). The 11 children/young people were involved in various dance, gymnastics, games, and physical training activities. It is obvious that a special kind of friendship developed between Connolly

ly and her co-authors: "Asking a person a question is an act of trust.... During the course of the interviews I had to trust the children and young people and they had to trust me" (p. 76).

What emerged from Connolly's interviews was the "constellation of difficulty," the notion that difficulty "is a relationship between a doer and an object/happening which resists and demands and is ultimately a relationship between the doer and herself/himself" (p. 87). This information was presented and discussed by Connolly as follows:

The critical, thematically-based, phenomenological analysis which follows will, then, include a consideration of ineffability and embodiment; of degrees and kinds of resistance and demand and their sub-themes of strangeness, control, decision, change, investment, and self-honesty; of "with" themes of attitude experiences, physically felt experiences, and feeling and emotion experiences; and of "attitude-toward" and "body-subject" (p. 90).

Within the consideration of the "constellation of difficulty" each theme was discussed and explored by examining the etymology of the theme followed by illustrative segments from the interviews. All this is pulled together with related literature and ongoing description, discussion and commentary.

In her concluding chapters Connolly brings us back to dance and discusses the implications of her work for physical education. She suggests that in her study, dance "presented itself as primordial movement" (p. 320) and the metaphors of dance were present throughout the discussions of difficulty in physical activity. She encourages a rethinking of the role of dance in physical education and counsels us "to become more attentive to the dance within the game or under the games so that moving can be a personal and intersubjective discovery, journey, and commitment" (p. 327).

This dissertation provides us with many valuable insights. First, Connolly demonstrates that it is possible to meet the needs of all participants in a research study by nurturing a sympathetic relationship between the researcher and the "subjects." Second, although this study focuses on the meaning of difficulty in physical activity, many of us will find Connolly's insights helpful as we attempt to make sense of other difficult experiences in the lives of children and young people. Third, Connolly alerts us to an ever-widening praxis gap in physical education wherein theory is being separated from practice as the profession strives for acceptance as a scientific discipline. An example of this shift toward a positivist model is the renaming of physical education faculties to include such terms as human kinetics, exercise science, and kinesiology in their titles. In this regard, the study compels physical educators to reexamine the way they view their profession. As Connolly so aptly puts it, "it is time to move."

Readers should be cautioned that although this dissertation is an excellent piece of scholarly work, it is not easy reading. Throughout the dissertation, elaborate justifications are provided for the appropriateness of the words, the researcher/co-author relationship, and the method. At times I felt Connolly was overly concerned with defending her method against the positivist paradigm.

Another difficulty that I encountered concerned the structure of the description, discussion, and commentary sections. Although these chapters were very comprehensive, the structure used seemed to affect the flow of the document.

A final concern is the question of accessibility. Connolly states that one aspect of her project was to present an interpretation that could be shared (p. 48). In her own words, "this research project is committed to improving the way I stand in the world with and for children." If her ultimate goal is to improve the lifeworld of children by making physical activity more "child-friendly," I assume that she wants to share her insights with physical education professionals. However, few physical educators would have the background in phenomenological research required to appreciate the richness of this dissertation. Nevertheless Connolly's dissertation is written with great care and a deep sense of commitment to children and young people. Her project has demonstrated an approach to doing research with children that is at once thoughtful and loving.

Reference

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Educators' Perspectives on Assessment: Tensions, Contradictions and Dilemmas by James Field, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Victoria, 1991

For the past 10 years educational assessment has become the central focus of efforts at school reform, at least in the United States. Every major reform proposal has argued for more and better testing. The technology of assessment is seen as the tool that can both direct and drive schools toward greater productivity. Underlying these attempted solutions are consistent cultural belief systems and organizational structures. Individuals are, in many ways, controlled by organizational structures, but at the same time these structures are composed of individuals in interaction. It is the private belief systems of these individuals, formed within the collective beliefs of the culture, that are consequential for classrooms and for children.

James Field's dissertation is a study of personal stances toward, and beliefs about, the assessment of reading. Through detailed interviews with teachers and administrators, this study describes assessment as it exists in the lived experiences of 17 British Columbia educators: teachers, principals, board office, and Ministry officials. Field's interviews bring us to appreciate the intensely personal nature of evaluation and its consequences. But by placing the perspectives and concerns of these educators in historical and cultural context, he takes the "mere" personal descriptions to the level of their political and educational implications. Field's work elegantly lifts assessment out of the domain of technical problem and locates it squarely in the domain of people problem; problems of relationships, values, and conflicts.

This remarkably detailed work is based firmly in a well-articulated symbolic interactionist perspective. Although the study draws on only 17 individuals' perspectives, educators throughout the culture that Field describes will find voices that echo some of their own beliefs and fears, along with voices that raise fresh concerns.

Although the study is focused, it is also wide-ranging, and several domains of literature are carefully woven together to intensify the focus. First, Field provides a thoughtful and critical analysis of those studies that deal with

assessment as part of the relationships between schools and society. Second, in the process of his thorough description of the methodology of his study, Field provides a very tidy review of symbolic interactionism, and the relationship between analyses of individual selves and the macro negotiated order of the system within which the individuals live and work. Third, in order to provide a cultural and historical context through which to view the interviews, we are given a concise and critical trip through the history of scientific knowledge—the evolution of technological thinking—and through relevant historical documents, to provide the Canadian, and specifically British Columbian, educational context.

Field's analyses of the interviews provide themes to describe the lived experience of assessment for the participants. The first, "sitting beside to assist" and "sitting above to judge," represent quite clearly distinguishable assessment roles. Field argues that "sitting beside" produces intuitive knowledge whereas "sitting above" produces abstract knowledge, and that these roles exist in a complementary dialogical or conversational relationship. Perhaps it would be more consistent to assert that these roles value, or privilege, different kinds of knowledge. Graves (1983) talks about the roles of advocate and of adversary, the first of which involves sitting alongside the child, at the same height, and so forth. Roles convey messages to students as well about power, control, literacy, and about who one is as a literate person.

The second theme Field draws from his interviews is described by the polarity "map-making" and "exploring the territory." Map-making refers to the organization of assessment so that one has a structure within which to locate children's development and one's knowledge of that development. Exploring the territory refers to leaving the map to explore learning and behavior not on the map, or quitting the map altogether. His informants speak of the tensions between these demands and of having left the map, the fear of becoming lost, of losing one's sense of place. The lost sense of place is one of the "sources of uncertainty" that constitutes the largest section of Field's analysis. His informants speak extensively of the uncertainties in their assessments that arise through the social and geographic mobility of children, the ambiguity in what counts as reading, the rapid changes in beliefs in schooling practices, the lack of common ground among colleagues and stakeholders in education, and bad assessment. Though the participants in this study are in considerable conflict both within and among themselves, and frequently uncertain about many aspects of their practice, their own belief systems are part of the glue that holds together the cultural belief system of which they are a part. Indeed, they are often drawn to the secure certainty of the tests of which they are highly critical.

In his analysis of the historical context, Field pays particular attention to the legacy of "Descartes', Bacon's, and Kant's obsession for clarity, demarcation, separation and control" (p. 123) in the institutional lives of educators. The cultural legacy of these philosophers appears to have powerful consequences for the educators in this study. Teachers' knowledge, normally non-numerical, often intuitive, and gained through personal involvement, is always seen as inferior, even by the educators themselves. Although the overall theme in Field's analysis is of knowing, and what is allowed to count as knowing, this theme is dominated by the theme of insecurity. Insecurity comes of being unable to accept one's own knowledge as real and valuable, and of facing the enormous

expanse of the unknown and the uncertain: certainty that there is a right answer, but no certainty that one has it, and the distinct possibility that someone will find out that one hasn't.

Schön (1983) refers to this as a "crisis of confidence" in the profession, and Bordo (1987) refers to it as "epistemological insecurity." That it surfaces explosively in Field's study is barely surprising given the context in which teachers work, dominated as it is by standardized, objective tests. These tests are seen as formal, providing objective, hard data, and they are highly valued in the technological culture Field describes. This same culture devalues teachers' knowledge of their students, which is viewed as soft, subjective, and informal. The tests devalue teachers' knowledge of their students. At the same time, they set up comparative situations between teachers, and maintain a belief in single right answers and right ways to teach, a perfect context for insecurity and defensiveness. As Field points out, this situation constrains the likelihood that teachers will find it possible to rethink their practice or gain the strength of a supportive community of learners. Each teacher lives in professional isolation, and in fear that their probable errors will be found out. Thus productive discussion, which could challenge the technological framing of the situation, is rare.

As an example, Field's informants raise the dilemma of grading, a dilemma also explored by Noddings (1984) and Lyons (1990). The sheer requirement of grading is a component of technological thinking in its objectification, its quantification, and its motivational function of reward and punishment. The basic requirement to grade is not questioned by Field's informants. Instead, they are concerned with how to manage it without training and in difficult conditions. It seems that if educators admitted more publicly to the vague, value-laden, ethical struggle of producing grades in schools, the public might place less confidence in grades as long-term and simply additive indicators.

The thoroughness of our enculturation and the dominance of the technological perspective might be measured by Field's own use of the dichotomy of subjective/objective. For example he comments that "general subjective impressions of the interview were recorded" (p. 76). The dominance of the technological perspective is also attested to in Field's perfectly legitimate acknowledgment of the limitations of the study: "Many of the limitations of this study are related to a large order limitation mentioned earlier, and that is, that the researcher is and was an inescapable part of that which he studies" (p. 78).

But his insightful discussion of the symbolic interactionist position points out that this is true of all research. That it has to be stated, and specifically for this study, provides additional evidence of the pervasiveness of the assumption of objectivity for scientific investigation established by Field's review of the historical context.

As Field describes the legacy of Descartes, Bacon, Hume, and Kant in technological thinking, he hints at the relevance of gender issues. Certainly, the privileging of masculine ways of knowing in the culture does not add to the confidence of teachers, the majority of whom are women. Beyond that, however, the Baconian legacy of domination and control may be even greater than Field describes given a largely female teaching community and a largely male administrative body, a distribution reflected somewhat in the informants in this study. Indeed, in the

quotations Field uses from Bacon on the extraction of knowledge by “throwing nature of the wrack” and “wresting answers from her,” as Evelyn Fox-Keller (1985) points out, it is probably not insignificant that nature is represented as female.

Field at once honors and contextualizes the conflicting perspectives brought by these educators. In his closing comments, he argues that we must live with these conflicts and “keep all of these possibilities alive ... in an on-going ‘community of conversation,’ so that we can listen carefully to each of these voices and take them into consideration, adopt them as perspectives each time we assess, however much difficulty and agony they cause us” (p. 196). I share these sentiments with Field. Nonetheless, I have the suspicion that to seek dialogue in the midst of the technological belief system so prevalent in the culture he so clearly describes may not be possible. It is not clear that dialogue can exist in a context of unequal distribution of power. The symbolic interactionist perspective that he brings to this analysis admits to multiple possibilities. The technological belief system which is so dominant in the culture he describes (and substantially more so in the United States) does not admit to a diversity of truths and therefore does not require listening. In such a situation of unequal power, dialogue is hardly possible. Monologue is more likely. Part of the problem is that the metaphors of discussion are drawn from the extant language of the culture which has the dominance of the technological framework built in. On the one hand the study describes the political nature of the problem. On the other, these closing comments downplay the political differences between the perspectives offered, a dilemma I find myself facing regularly.

Our perspectives and our practices are constrained by our understandings of ourselves and our context, but by making ourselves overtly historical and contextual, revealing ourselves to ourselves, we open the possibility of conscious change. James Field’s study, to the extent that we can identify with his descriptions, opens the possibility of this understanding. If I have any regrets about Field’s excellent study, it is only that the seam of understanding that Field follows does not extend to the major stakeholders in the system, the students. Nonetheless, this dissertation makes particularly enlightening reading, perhaps required reading for most educators.

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