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Movement as an Embodied Pedagogy

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Author Biography

Vicky Randall is an educator, researcher, and consultant in Physical Education and a Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Gloucestershire. She is also a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) and the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). Vicky is an advocate for children's mental health, serving as a stormbreak ambassador and member of the Cross-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood. She has published widely in the field of primary physical education, including international texts *An Introduction to Primary Physical Education* and *Contemporary Issues in Primary Physical Education*.

ABSTRACT:

This chapter explores the critical role of movement-based pedagogies in supporting children's emotional wellbeing within primary education. As the need for early, inclusive and habitual strategies to prevent long-term mental health issues becomes increasingly recognised, movement emerges as a powerful, whole-school approach to nurturing the child as a whole being (Stolz, 2014). Grounded in research that connects neurobiological and physiological processes with the environments in which children live and move, this chapter synthesises current evidence and practice to highlight movement's multifaceted value beyond traditional physical education. It challenges a prevailing discourse that movement is confined to sport, competition, or skill acquisition, advocating instead for a more integrated, everyday use of movement to support learning and wellbeing across the curriculum. The chapter positions movement not as an extracurricular activity, but as a core pedagogical tool - one that can be intentionally embedded by all educators to foster emotional resilience, self-regulation, and agency. By reconceptualising movement as central to the educational experience, this chapter invites educators to cultivate external environments that align with children's internal needs, creating spaces where emotional and cognitive growth can thrive in tandem. Ultimately, it argues for a shift towards pedagogical practices that embrace movement as essential to fostering holistic wellbeing in school communities.

Personal Reflection

Being physically active has always been a part of my life. Not realising its significance as a child, I had no idea of the role it would play in shaping my future relationships, hobbies, education and career choices. Even now, I feel I am only scratching the surface of how important movement is in my life.

As a teacher of physical education, and a former performance youth coach, I placed a high premium on children's ability to move, but this was almost entirely based upon sports participation, skill execution, performance, or some form of organised activity. It wasn't until I started working with stormbreak, a children's mental health charity that uses movement in an intentional way to help children better understand themselves, others and the world they live in, that I realised just how magical movement is. Throughout my career, I have always been troubled by why so many teachers fear the physical, despite everyone having a body, and being immersed in a profession that in itself, is physically demanding!

The intention of this chapter is to reframe the role of movement in primary schools away from its more popular understanding within physical education, sport and performance (not taking away from their important role they also have). Instead, I wish to consider where movement can be integrated into the daily practices of teaching and educating, so children can have a greater awareness of their body, understand what it means to have a body (specifically their body), and to see how moving is inherent in everything they do.

Introduction

As educators, we care deeply about our students. We want them to be well, to learn meaningfully, to be happy, and to form relationships that are healthy and sustaining. Education, therefore, cannot merely be reduced to the transmission of knowledge. Yet, contemporary educational practices often privilege outcomes such as grades, test scores, attainment, and performance (see Ball, 2003) creating a culture of expectation, regulation and pressure. This is further endorsed by rewards and sanctions, as Ball (2003) explains, this can be material as well as symbolic, ensuring performance of the individual is based on a measure of productivity and an indication of their worth or value. Such practices are detrimental to wellbeing rather than supportive of it. As Rich and Evans (2009, p.1) highlight 'some young people's bodies and subjectivities can be badly damaged in the pursuit of 'academic' and other forms of corporeal excellence'. An overt focus on the outcome, can be dehumanising and risk undermining the person within the learning process and, in doing so, weaken

a human connection to learning. Educators who emphasise only a discourse of performance of the body can lose sight of the human aspects of what it is to move (McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2001).

This concern is not new. Dewey, in his critique of education (1938/1997a) questioned:

How many [students] acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter (p.15).

Dewey's condemnation of traditional education methods that rely heavily on cognition and rote learning, highlight a fundamental concern: the body is too often treated merely as a vessel for the mind, rather than as integral to meaning making (see Stolz, 2022). Education that neglects the body risks disconnecting knowledge from a person's lived experience

There exists an inherent fear amongst educators to make use of the child's body in the learning experience. Specifically, to promote contact and touch (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018), to take physical risks (Hyndman & Telford, 2015), and to experience physical challenge (Randall, 2026). While teachers should of course 'do no harm', there is ironically a greater risk to learning, and to wellbeing, by ignoring what the body is designed to do – move. Connecting the body and mind should not be considered detrimental to educational goals; rather, it complements and enriches them. Learning that is experienced i.e. felt and enacted, can deepen an individual's understanding and purpose. It is within this context that movement emerges as a powerful pedagogical resource. Peter Arnold's (1979) seminal conceptualisation of learning *in, through, and about* movement recognises the body's extraordinary capacity to "make meaning" (Brown, 2013). While Arnold's work is most widely known within physical education and sport pedagogy, its relevance extends far beyond these fields. Arnold's (1979) framework reminds us that movement has value not only as curriculum content, supporting a child's physical development, coordination, performance and skill acquisition (learning *in* movement), and as an object of intellectual understanding (learning *about* movement), but as a medium for broader learning (learning *through* movement). Knowledge thus becomes lived and applied through experience, rather than abstracted from it.

Embodied experiences in school can also have implications beyond knowledge acquisition, strengthening a greater connectivity to wellbeing and human flourishing (Durden-Myers et al., 2020). The body is a personal, emotional, and social entity. A disconnection from bodily experience to how we think, feel or connect with places (nature and environment) and others, may contribute

to a diminished sense of meaning and agency. Reclaiming the body within pedagogy, is not only an educational concern, but a matter for life itself.

This chapter draws upon Arnold's (1979) conceptualisation of movement as embodied learning as approach to wellbeing in schools. It seeks to present movement, not with the intention to address poor wellbeing or to teach children about wellbeing, but how it can be understood as a pedagogical tool that supports deeper connectivity between understanding, experience, and meaning (Mavilidi et al., 2022). Through illustrative examples from practice, this chapter demonstrates how teachers in the primary school can intentionally use movement to enrich learning and support the wellbeing of their pupils.

Theoretical Underpinnings: An embodied movement pedagogy

The popular definition of physical activity is taken from Caspersen et al. (1985, p.126) as 'any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure' and refers to all forms of movement. Piggin (2020) argues that defining physical activity in this way frames movement as a purely mechanistic activity and alone is inadequate to account for the complexities and purpose of *why* we move.

While Arnold (1979) explains that learning *in*, *through* and *about* movement is important in the curriculum field of physical education and sport, it is not solely through physical education and sport where children move. Arnold's (1979) concept of learning *through* movement is helpful in broadening an understanding and disposition towards movement in contemporary education as a vehicle for wider educational outcomes. The use of movement through learning transcends a traditional focus of physical activity for health or skill acquisition. Rather than it being an end in itself, it becomes a means through which learners develop the capacity to engage personally, socially, and morally with the world in which they live. In the context of curriculum and schooling, learning *through* movement can be used as a pedagogical tool (Mavilidi et al., 2022), to create opportunities for experience and meaning making, where activities are designed towards participation, interaction, and challenge. The learning thus becomes embodied, rather than left abstract or symbolic.

Nguyen and Larson (2015, p.332) define embodied pedagogy as 'learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction'. The nature of embodied pedagogy requires the child to be involved in a sensory way within their learning, in essence how the child connects learning to what they see, feel and hear (smell and taste!). Dewey argued that (1916/1997b) 'senses

are avenues of knowledge not because external facts are somehow 'conveyed' to the brain, but because they are used in doing something with a purpose' (p. 142). Not only is there an assertion that the body has an extraordinary ability to connect to knowledge and internalise it, but also a tangible opportunity for the child to connect with the matter of their learning.

Stolz (2022) explains that the body is existentially lived but not fully known. Through experience, the body either acts as an object within the environment or generates sensations through bodily movement. The body, however, is not experienced as two separate entities, it is one. The body is always present and therefore acts as a constant in the child's learning and life. The moving body is essentially how we experience, explore and interact with each other and the world. Durden-Myers et al. (2021) explains that movement and, more specifically the 'human embodied dimension' (p46), is fundamental to life and its meaning.

The concept of embodied learning is drawn from the theory of embodied cognition and the philosophical ideas of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Ravn (2022, p2) explains that 'Merleau-Ponty describes how perception and movement are fundamental to the ongoing process of revealing to us what the body is and can be'. Rather than treating the mind as separate from the body, and as a passive observer in the learning process (Aartun et al., 2023) contemporary approaches to teaching and learning challenge such heuristic linear thinking, recognising children as complete "whole beings" (Stolz, 2014).

Husserl (1913/1982) further explains that the body experiences life, either immediately through self-manifestation (interiority), or through reflection upon experience (exteriority) (Stolz, 2022). These experiences and manifestations are complex and multilayered. For example, a child recalling a lesson where they were outside looking for natural objects to bring back into the classroom to draw, may recall the exteriority of moving from place to place around the school grounds, while at the same time be able to locate the internal sensations such as the muscles contracting, the heart beating, the mechanism of breathing hard, the body reaching, climbing, crouching, the wind on their face, or the sun in their eyes, as well as feelings of excitement, discomfort, or uncertainty. For each child, the same task creates a highly individualised lived experience. It is here that phenomenologists accept that subjectivity of experience is embodied (Stolz, 2022).

Using movement as a pedagogical approach, draws the child's attention to the experience of the task. This might be encouraged by asking questions such as: where did you go, how did it feel, and what did you see, hear, and touch? This creates greater connectivity of the body to the task, than merely viewing it as a means to an end. Embodiment is not a tantalising new approach to education (Perry & Medina, 2011).

Whether we chose to attend to it or not, the body will continue to exist in the learning process (intended or otherwise) as children will make connections through each experience that is afforded to them. As educators we have a choice to acknowledge and value the body, through the process of learning, or pursue the notion of the static body that is merely there as a vessel to hold knowledge. If the body is only used on occasions for performance or high stakes forms of assessment, it is then it is just a temporal gesture towards movement for the purpose of a task completion or work (Standal & Bratten, 2021). To have a greater purpose for wellbeing, the world should be experienced as a joyful and pleasurable experience, not a chore.

In *Health, Stress and Coping*, Antonovsky (1979) argues that in the pursuit of health, attention has been misdirected towards *disease* rather than *ease*. Traditional approaches have focused on pathogenesis, emphasising disease prevention through the reduction of risk factors. Antonovsky (1979) proposes a shift towards “salutogenesis”, a perspective concerned with health promotion and the conditions that enable individuals to experience meaningfulness, wellbeing, and fulfilment.

Central to the salutogenic model is the concept of developing a sense of coherence (SoC), defined as an individual’s orientation towards life as being comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful (Mittelmark, 2022). A person’s SoC develops from infancy and is shaped by cultural context and life experiences. These experiences influence how individuals encounter stressors and access resources. Antonovsky (1979) suggests that at any stage of development, a child’s SoC can be understood as a resource that supports coping with age-related challenges. Individuals with a strong SoC are more likely to perceive stimuli as neutral rather than threatening, making them less likely to interpret stressful situations as anxiety-provoking (Braun-Lewensohn & Mayer, 2020). Consequently, SoC plays a key role in determining the resources available to support wellbeing.

Environment and experience, alongside genetic factors, significantly shape behaviour and SoC. Adversity and negative life events can disrupt physiological brain development, leading to altered neural circuits associated with aggression, depression, and anxiety. In contrast, positive experiences and enriched environments support healthy brain function and behaviour (Mittelmark, 2022). Creating movement-rich and physically active environments can stimulate positive neural changes that influence future behaviours. In line with Hebbian theory, repeated experiences strengthen neural connections, enhancing brain efficiency and learning (De Fano et al., 2019). Regular opportunities to move within the environments in which children (and teachers) live, work, learn and play support both neurological development and long-term wellbeing.

Pedagogical Ideas for Practice: Embodied Movement

Movement for a greater connectivity with the curriculum

The Education Endowment Fund (EEF) (2021) report on *Cognitive Science Approaches in the Classroom: A Review of the Evidence* states indicates whole body movements and gestures can support cognition and learning, specifically with research for maths education. Where children may experience frustration or difficulty in mathematical learning (or in other curriculum areas), the body can be a powerful tool to turn the abstract into a tangible experience to help make sense of concepts or big ideas. Such activities might include:

- A physical number line: Children set out a line of cones and move along the line jumping, hopping or stepping forwards (to count on) and backwards (to subtract).
- Clapping games: clapping while counting can help children experience and recognise patterns e.g. in pairs, one child claps the odd number, and their partner claps the even numbers.
- Number sorting games: where children move in the space and are asked to form groups of a number. This can be further visualised with groups that have a remainder.
- Developing an appreciation of number in context. Children run as fast as they can over a world record time for the 100m. They visually see the difference between what they can achieve and what is humanly possible. This can also be framed through approximations e.g. approximately how far do you think you will be able to travel to in relation to the world record time?

Similarly, an embodied experience may also be used to support meaning, connectivity and understanding in science. The example below is an activity for pupils that explains the properties of air, liquid and solids and forces.

- As a class respond to the following cues demonstrating each in the following way:
A solid property - everyone in the class is moves to be in contact with each in close proximity using hands or feet. Your solid form can take on different shapes.

A liquid Property – remain close together but flow and travel between each other maintaining a distance (without contact).

A gas property – your movement is independent as you travel in the space and does not stay in any fixed shape.

- Children explore forces of push and pull, for example a tug of war, pushing objects across different surfaces to see how far they travel. Or a partner pull, where one child sits on a large bib, on a smooth indoor surface, and their partner pulls (facing away from them) and then pushes them (facing towards them) to the other side of the room.

In these two examples, embodied experiences are intended to create a greater congruence with the learning, through connectivity with people and movement. By creating opportunities where big ideas and concepts can be 'experienced', the child creates tangible moments to recall, discuss, and make sense of the learning. Furthermore, it normalises collaboration, interaction, proximity to one another and appropriate permissive touch.

Movement to promote reflection of lived experience

Below are a series of questions that are based upon the interiority of moving that can be connected to a learning task. This is to ensure that the movement task does not solely become a means to an end activity or performance, and that the processual experience is also valued.

Reflective questions and prompts:

- How did you feel?
- What did you see?
- What did you touch?
- Where did you move?
- What thoughts came to mind when you were ...?
- What was this experience similar to?
- Stop (pause, what do you feel), look (pause, what do you see) and listen (pause, what do you hear)?

Ask children to complete the sentence stems:

- Today I noticed...
- I felt ... when we did
- I focused on.... when we did ...
- When I looked closely at.... I noticed....

Movement for emotional expression

Movement experiences can also support a child's expression and communication of how they feel and what they notice when learning. The examples below frame movement more in the

metaphorical sense, so children can recognise and understand how they are feeling in relation to the task or challenge.

- Express through a movement, how you feel today (e.g. hopping mad or jumping for joy).
- Use your body to illustrate a freeze frame image (like a photograph) of how you are feeling about that situation (expression, gesture, body position).
- Describe how you are feeling towards the task, e.g. like I have a mountain to climb, it feels like a fast sprint to the finish, I am going round in circles.
- When you feel stuck or frustrated, stand up, move around the room and remind yourself that you can keep moving forwards.

Movement to make sense of big ideas

For many children in the primary school, grasping concepts such as relationships, hopefulness, aspirations, self-worth and resilience are incredibly difficult to imagine with relatively minimal lived experience. Movement can create tangible moments for children to be part of safe, inclusive and age-appropriate activities that illustrate 'big ideas'. In chapter 2, the practice called Philosophy for Children is introduced, explaining how a community of enquiry can give children a voice, agency and confidence to talk about matters that relate to them (see Jayman & Quickfall, 2024). Movement can be used as a stimulus for such an enquiry for children to make sense of a concept or idea that can then be discussed and explored.

For example:

- Children take part in a seated run, where they have to overcome imagine obstacles in the road e.g. traffic cones, traffic lights, low flying birds, big hills. It is a race against time to make it to the final destination. How does this activity help us to make sense of what it means to be resilient? What obstacles do you have to overcome each day? Is it always ok to be resilient? Should we also go faster, to achieve our goals quicker?
- Children play a game where they match 3 jumping movements with a partner, after the count of 3 (star jump, straight jump or tuck jump). Stay with the person until you have found a match. When a match is made, move to the next person around the circle. How can this activity help us to learn about relationships? Are all relationships important? If we don't match or connect with someone straight away, should we be friends with them? Can being different, be important to sustain healthy relationships?
- Children play a game of follow my leader around the school grounds. The leader takes their partner to 3 different places where they have a distinct memory. The pairs switch over so there is a new leader. How can this activity help understand what it means to have

empathy? Do we always experience the same thing in the same way? Is it important to know how others think and feel? Why might some people not always feel included?

Conclusion

An embodied, movement-based pedagogy can support a child's connection to what they think, what they feel, and why that matters. In an education system where the body is often positioned as an object of performance, measured, assessed, and regulated, embedding movement into everyday teaching practice helps to rebalance its role. Rather than contributing to anxiety or stress through constant evaluation, movement can reconnect learning to lived, felt experience. Although all teachers and pupils inhabit bodies, there remains hesitation around using movement meaningfully within classroom learning. Developing a greater awareness of how the body and mind work in unity, not as separate entities, can help normalise movement as an integral part of education rather than an optional add-on.

This approach is not proposed as a pathogenic response to concerns about inactivity, nor simply as a strategy to reduce sedentary behaviour, though it may also achieve these outcomes. Instead, it aligns with a salutogenic orientation: movement becomes a way of creating a sense of ease, coherence, and meaning. When children learn through embodied experience, knowledge is no longer abstract or detached but lived and relational. Such experiences strengthen a child's connection, to themselves, to others and to their environment. In doing so, education moves closer to its broader purpose of nurturing young people, not merely producing measurable outcomes.

Suggested Readings

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