

Case Study on A solution to intercultural tensions

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Improving participation in opportunities for developing physical literacy depends on many aspects, perhaps most importantly situation. The context in which one is born can determine much about potential life experiences, encompassing factors such as geographical location, socio-economic conditions, political, religious and cultural situation. Values, attitudes and behaviours are learned in particular contexts and influenced by significant others in the socialization process; they include attitudes towards the body, dress codes and culturally valued movement forms. In terms of global understanding, while there are basic human rights such as the right of every child to physical education (UN 1978), lived realities can be very different. School-based physical literacy opportunities are still not a reality for all children. Government rhetoric is sometimes not matched in the lives of young people (Hardman and Marshall 2009). Despite the efforts of many researchers and policy-makers, improving the gender agenda or the integration of children with special needs, is still not fully realized globally (Ibid). But societies are dynamic not static. Globalization impacts on everyone as phenomena such as migration, information sharing and mixing of culturally valued movement forms, ensures the challenges of managing cultural diversity are a growing reality in most countries. Tensions can arise between different, but equally valued, ways of thinking about and using the body and physicality. Resolving problems related to inclusion / exclusion from the physical activity arenas for all age groups needs to be sensitive to context and difference and requires willingness between all parties to seek answers through negotiation.

One example of partnership in solution seeking was in the BASS Project (Benn et al 2009, Dagkas et al 2009). In this case study inter-cultural tensions arose in England, in a large multi-ethnic city with many different religions, the largest minority group being Pakistani and Muslim. The problem arose when Muslim parents starting withdrawing their daughters from physical education lessons on religious grounds. Rhetorically, the social, political and education context is one of inclusivity and embracing of cultural diversity. There is a statutory national curriculum for all children that included physical education, and a commitment to religious freedom and upholding of the human right to 'manifest one's own religion'. It is also important to note that Islamophobia and concerns about the hijab are regularly evidenced in the UK (and European) experiences of Muslim people and in media discourse (Runnymede Trust 1997, Richardson 2004, Fekete 2008).

In relation to physical education, the religiosity of some Muslim families led to preferences to 'embody faith' (Benn et al 2009) in ways that were denied in the traditional systems and structures of the physical education / sport participation environment in England. Such embodiment refers to body modesty, covering arms, legs and head, and gender segregation, considered essential to belief and to identity as Muslim women. Traditional cultural expectations in physical education / school sport systems such as mixed-sex lessons and shorts / tee shirts were barriers to participation for these families, hence withdrawal. The problem was not with participating in physical activity but with systems and structures that denied preferences to embody faith.

Head teachers were sometimes unable to meet requests to change policy and practice, often for pragmatic reasons such as the lack of same-sex staffing if groups were split, or pool

environments being managed by local leisure services and therefore beyond their control. Heads were also aware that change for small numbers had impact on many others and any school-based solutions were connected to local, and usually limited, resources to address multiple challenges to meet the needs of all their students.

The process and results of the BASS Project are published elsewhere but here it is worth reflecting on some key issues. Good practice features were identified from some schools and shared in final guidance. Common to these were principles of flexibility, respect for personal choice, and accommodation of difference; for example including the young people in kit design. The emphasis was on making changes to be more inclusive. The most important point was giving access to participation. In the schools, least difficulties arose where parents were fully informed of expectations and strong links had been developed, often through community women-only sporting events. The results of this study centered on increasing understanding of the issue itself and criticizing the structural barriers to participation. Most importantly, to return to the opening statement, the English *context* of the inclusion / exclusion debate surrounding adherence to religious requirements in physical education in the state education system was essential to understanding how to resolve intercultural tensions. Such a problem concerning requests to allow respect that arose in one English city would not have arisen in some countries, for example where outward manifestation of belief is denied or in others where it is compulsory.

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