

# Sport and Physical Education for Development and Peace as a Wicked Problem

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## Abstract

Wicked problems are unlike tame problems in ways that make addressing them highly challenging. Among the key, relevant differences between wicked and tame problems in the realm of sport and physical education as vehicles for fostering development and peace are: the lack of a prescriptive, agreed-upon definition to help us resolve a wicked problem; their absence of a clear end point when all agree that the problem has been resolved; their uniqueness among other wicked problems that might look similar; and, the high stakes involved for people's lives when we engage with a wicked problem. Those who strive to resolve wicked problems such as those identified as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals often turn to sport and physical education as their tool. However, their path to success in both design and implementation of appropriate programs does not always feature important aspects of wicked problems on which teachers and coaches can build. This paper examines whether that misalignment is a challenge for the design and implementation of sport and physical education programs intended to promote and foster development and peace and how to take into account features of wicked problems to strengthen such programs.

**Keywords:** sport, physical education, development, peace, wicked problems

## 1. Introduction

Lauzon (2006) described a tame problem as a relatively stable one on which there is agreement on the nature of the problem itself and the kind of solution it requires. However, the pressing global development and peace challenges we face now are not tame but are what have been called wicked problems. Education, broadly discussed here to include sport and physical education, is a key element underpinning attempts for equitable development and peace-making, and it must adapt to the realities of the problems it wishes to help address. More than a half century ago in a journal called *Policy Sciences*, a paper entitled (rather uninspiringly) "Dilemmas in general theory in planning" introduced the concept of the wicked problem, ones that involve broad and deep social, cultural, health, political, and economic influences (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Those working in the realm of sport and physical education regularly create and implement programs that attempt to address such wicked problems as poverty, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying and aggression, and gender inequality, discrimination, and violence. These are all wicked problems and we argue in this paper that the concept has more relevance than ever before to the ways in which we work for development and peace. Yet to date, a wicked problems framework has not been purposefully and typically used to envision, design, and deliver sport and physical education projects in development and peace-making efforts. We believe that this gap between theory and practice is an important issue to explore. To frame sport and physical education in the development and peace context as tame problems rather than wicked problems, in our view, can have a significant negative influence on the positive impact of the programs in the same way as failing to account for issues such as gender, race, and colonialism. Therefore, we examine this potential weakness in program conceptualization by taking four key, relevant characteristics of wicked problems and using them as a lens through which to examine cases that can help us to understand whether these characteristics are taken into account in program design and implementation. In each case we also suggest how a wicked problems approach might strengthen sport for development and peace design and implementation.

## 2. Research Questions

Our research questions are:

- (1) what makes a wicked problem approach to sport and physical education for development and peace different from a tame problem approach?;
- (2) do sport and physical education for development and peace projects typically incorporate principles of wicked problem resolution into their design and implementation; and,
- (3) how do we incorporate our understanding of those differences to inform our design and delivery of sport and physical education for development and peace programs?

## 3. Sport and Physical Education Pillars of Development and Peace Work

It has long been argued that sport and physical education build life skills and values beyond the game (see, for example, Martinek and Hellison, 2016). Don Hellison was an iconic lifelong proponent of this point of view and his Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility model served, and continues to serve, as the foundation for much of the underlying philosophy on which development programs are built. For example, Darnell and Black (2011) highlight the emergence of sport as a pillar of development work although Darnell (2010) offers a caution that skilfully integrating sport and physical education into development work is neither easy nor simple and very much a matter of finding the balance between what is good about sport and physical education as development tools and what is not.

There is always a need to examine our assumptions, even when they are supported by evidence, and the idea that sport and physical education serve to nurture “good people” has been challenged from different perspectives. Kidd (2011), while always a strong and highly credible advocate for sport as a positive human endeavour, argued that sport simply as sport was not necessarily a guaranteed pathway to development and that sport and physical education claims for success “often outdistance the evidence” (p. 605). Dao (2020) in his immersive study of Vietnamese communities emphasized the importance of those planning to engage in sport for development and peace projects to delve deeply into communal ideals, history, culture and daily lived realities of those for whom projects are intended as development and peace supports. Zipp, Smith and Darnell (2019) noted that even language such as “positive gender roles” and “health and wellbeing” that we might superficially accept without much thought as desired outcomes of sport and physical education projects are not without values embedded that might not always be understood in the same way by everyone. Further to the issue of deeper meaning not always taken into account in sport and physical education for development and peace work, the interrelationships among functioning, capabilities, resources, and achievements have been well-articulated by Svennsen and Levine (2017) in a comprehensive way not always considered in program creation.

## 4. Sport and Physical Education Themselves Contribute to the Framing of Challenges as Tame Problems

Sport and physical education are, for most who participate in them, complex forms of play. As Huizinga (1955) explained, play has the characteristics of being undertaken freely, of standing separate from ordinary or real life in terms of its time and place, of having order that is “absolute and supreme”, and of being unconnected to material interest or profit to be gained from it. (Professional athletes and professional sport businesses do not conform to that final requirement of play as Huizinga described it but a discussion of that is beyond the scope of this paper.) However, sport and physical education that rely heavily on play both in terms of curriculum and pedagogy confront its participants with tame problems and not wicked problems. Our reasoning for this focuses on four of the most relevant differences presented by Rittel and Webber as they pertain to sport and physical education for development and peace initiatives.

### 4.1 Wicked Problems Are Hard to Define in a Prescriptive Way

Every sport has a rulebook and that rulebook defines what is called in the context of solving problems the “solution space”. In sport and in the many movement challenges presented in physical education, the solution space is finite and relatively simple, comprised of all the possible ways in which the activity is permitted to be undertaken. Coaches and teachers, in fact, strive to make that solution space as unambiguous as they can for their athletes and students. There are very specific things we can do and many things we cannot to achieve a goal. All the rules or physical constraints of an activity are the way in which the problem is defined. The problem for the participants is to fill the gap between the state existing at the start, say of a game, and the state in which they want the game to be when it is over. In order to convert the condition given at the start of the activity to a positive one in one at the end, they know when they begin what they are allowed to do. (If one is tasked with walking from one end of a balance beam to another, it is not permitted to step off, walk to the other end on the floor, and then climb back onto the beam.)

In contrast, wicked problems do not have a set of well-defined permissible operations that we are allowed to perform when approaching the problem. In the realm of wicked problems, there is no rulebook of everything that can be done. The means by which we might resolve a wicked problem often require considerable thought about what a permissible operation could and should be because wicked problems always involve complex individual, family, social, cultural, educational, and political interactions. It is not clear when we attempt to resolve them what we can do and what we cannot do in the same way that, no matter what a sports rulebook or physical education activity makes very clear to everyone involved. Further to this, there are sport governing bodies that review regularly the rules of a sport to see if there are changes that will make the game better. We owe a debt of gratitude to the person who saw that taking the bottom out of the peach basket in the Springfield, Connecticut gymnasium would speed up a basketball game and allow the college ladder to be used elsewhere. Similarly, physical education curriculum in schools defines what constitutes what a student must be able to do to be physically literate. However, such governing bodies with official, centralized, and agreed-upon status to make the rules do not exist in the same way for wicked problems which seldom give us clarity about “how to play”.

#### *4.2 Wicked Problems Do Not Have a Stopping Rule*

In sport and physical education, stopping rules are essential and might be structured as time limits, as in one hour of playing time in football with stoppages in play not considered part of that game time. There might be a fixed number of innings such as in baseball or overs in limited-overs cricket. Alternatively, there might be a measurement limit, for example when in curling or bowling the fixed number of stones or balls have been thrown. There might be a performance limit like having to achieve a certain time or distance in a fitness test. And, in less formal forms of sport, participants have long referred to the “next goal wins” approach to define the game’s stopping rule. The stopping rule of a tame problem always tell us when the “game is over”. The same is true of physical education tasks in which the goal is specified with a stopping rule such as the distance to be run, the number of repetitions of an activity to be done, or the number of successful attempts of a skill to be completed.

Wicked problems do not usually end because of some predefined ways of knowing when we are finished that are built into the definition of the problem itself. Instead, the people solving them typically stop for reasons that are not about the problem itself. They run out of time. They run out of money. They run out of patience. They run out of political will. They run up against a technological wall beyond which what is needed has not been invented yet. They run out of ideas when up against seemingly intractable obstacles. They decide that they have done the best they could do under the circumstances for now. Wicked problems are never really solved upon arrival in a utopian final state: they just become re-solved on an ongoing basis in different circumstances at different times. Wicked problems simply do not have that perfect end point at which to aim that tells us we are indisputably done.

#### *4.3 Wicked Problems Are Unique Problems Even When They Appear to Have Similarities to Other Problems*

Tame problems tend to be at least like some other tame problems. That is what Lauzon identified when he wrote of tame problems being “stable” (Lauzon, 2006) and if we stretch our minds far enough we can almost always find some similarity between a current tame problem and one that has come before. There are identifiable features in tame problems that allow us to say it is this kind of problem or it is that kind of problem and having done that we can use our experience to solve the one that is in front of us. Indeed, every soccer, basketball, and baseball game played in a formal way last year everywhere on the planet and every physical education gymnastics class started in the same way as every other one with everyone on the same page about what was happening.

The rules of a sport or physical education activity are crafted in a way that makes the activity highly prescribed in terms of the problems that must be solved. Sport and physical education classes are remarkably familiar each time we engage in them. In contrast, wicked problems are one of a kind even when appearing similar to previous experience and, therefore, copycat solutions or “tried and true” methods cannot be assumed to work in the same way as they did when used before in different circumstances. The assumption that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to a wicked problem is a path not to solving a wicked problem but often to creating worse problems than previously existed. Wicked problems like the ones most commonly addressed using sport and physical education as tools are almost always unique in important ways. We must approach them with an open mind and understand that our previous experience, even if a former sport and physical education approach was successful, is at best only a guide about where we might start to imagine a strategy and is perhaps even a very unreliable guide to what is going to work in a new particular time and place.

#### *4.4 Wicked Problems Do Not Give Us the Luxury of Being Wrong in the Same Way That Tame Problems Do*

We typically expand our knowledge by people being wrong about what they thought was true. Scientists advance hypotheses and design experiments to test those hypotheses and many times the results of those experiments do not support the hypothesis that everyone assumed was correct. Athletes, coaches, sports therapists, sports

psychologists, and followers of sport all engage in a similar, though less scientifically rigorous process. After years of believing what the best pre-game meal for an athlete is, sports nutritionists discover that what was once common knowledge has, in fact, always been wrong. They are not criticized for disproving previous assumptions: they are congratulated for finding a way to improve athletic performance.

With the wicked problems typically addressed by sport and physical education programs, though, we are not just trying to expand our knowledge or find a better way to win a game or break a record or learn a new physical skill. We are trying to make the world a better place. We are working with open systems that are filled with uncertainty and we are working in a social environment where human viewpoints of all kinds embed themselves in the definition of the problem. When we approach a wicked problem using sport as the means to make life better, getting things wrong when resolving it has a direct effect on people's lives. The stakes are high: addressing wicked problems is not a video game with a reset button or one game in a long season in which there will be wins and losses or one of just many physical education classes in a school year leading to a final grade. That is why it is so important to recognize that wicked problems do not give us the luxury of being wrong about the resolutions we bring to them.

It is not that achieving the goal of an activity in sport or physical education is necessarily easy: it is just that doing so was not a wicked problem because everyone knew how to play, there was a clear path to knowing when the activity had finished, the activity was a lot like every other one from past experience in its structure, and in the spirit of Huizinga's play theory, when the activity was over it was over and had no further relevance.

#### *4.5 Summary*

We have identified four fundamental differences between how we approach the tame problem of playing sport and how we need to approach the wicked problems of life in the communities our Sport for Development and Peace programs are intended to address. These are:

1. Wicked problems are hard to define in a prescriptive way
2. Wicked problems do not have a stopping rule
3. Wicked problems are unique, and
4. Wicked problems do not offer us the luxury of being wrong

### **5. Sport and Physical Education for Development and Peace Program Implications of the Difference Between Tame and Wicked Problems**

*5.1* First, do sport and physical education for development and peace programs meet the challenge of understanding that wicked programs have no readily prescriptive definition of the problem they attempt to resolve?

Some situations into which a program might be implemented are so complex that the developmental role of sport or physical education becomes an ineffective overpromise. Consider the example described by Koopmans and Doidge (2021) of sport for youth in Ugandan refugee camps. The Rwamwanja camp, in southwestern Uganda, houses 70,000 refugees, most of whom came from Congo to escape the M23 and the more widespread Kivu rebellions in 2012 and 2013. The camp is administered by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister's Department of Refugees (OPM). Services to refugees, such as education, water and sanitation, and agricultural support, are implemented by various non-governmental agencies such as the Lutheran World Federation, the Windle Charitable Trust, Africa Humanitarian Action, and African Initiative for Relief Development.

The goal of the project there is to use sport as a youth development tool to have a significant and direct impact on young people's emotions and development skills. By doing so, the intent is to build greater awareness of how structured physical activity positively affects youth in refugee settlements. However, while the effort is admirable, sport or physical education are not the only or even a necessary ways to promote the kind of development that youth require in this camp. While they have potential benefits including psychological and physical diversion, advances in other areas such as living conditions, access to education, hygiene, and safety are factors that will much more effectively impact youth development. The singular goal that sport and physical education can achieve is more a solution to a tame problem – perhaps the temporary diversion from genuinely bad conditions in which to grow up – than being part of a broader, more integrated resolution of the wicked problem of offering a way to progress from refugee encampment life.

Stakeholders with diverse interests in supporting those living in refugee camps may have different goals in mind. A bank's corporate social responsibility department will not see the developmental priorities in a refugee camp in the same way as a religiously affiliated organization. Finding a solution that merges the goals of all those involved

with different value systems, cultural views, and priorities would be hard even when solving a tame problem in easier social circumstances. When attempting to solve the wicked problem of there being no commonly understood definition of the problem on which all agree, it might prove impossible for sport and physical education to be easily-integrated as part of a holistic resolution of the circumstances of refugees.

Koopmans and Doidge (2021) recognized that while efforts to support sport in Rwamwanja might not directly address particular issues or structures that affect the lives of refugees, they argued that it can be a valuable tool when breaking down boundaries, supporting positive relationships and creating supportive community environments. Nevertheless, there are so many moving parts that must be addressed in situations like Rwamwanja that to create a positive living environment for people that it ought to be a topic of debate whether sport or physical education can be part of a meaningful resolution of a wicked problem rather than merely a distracting complication.

5.2 Second, do programs meet the wicked problem challenge of understanding the absence of a stopping rule, recognizing that seeking to 'solve' the problem in some final way is not possible?

A program when implemented most likely has a finishing date most often because of conditions imposed from beyond the problem itself. However, the wicked problem being addressed is not likely to be completely resolved by that finishing date. An important goal of any sport and physical education program must be to create capacity that will endure after the originating program has reached a termination date (and its proponents have likely departed the scene).

The problems that programs address began long before the project began and will exist after the project's end date is imposed. A determination of project completion is usually made with respect to time, funding, and motivation of those working on the project and not because the problem itself can be definitively said to be solved or the people living with it genuinely helped. Projects proposed and funded in the Global North follow procedures that include an artificial stopping rule (e.g., university research grants or philanthropic foundation support) and even when originally proposed outcomes are not achieved, these inputs have a pre-ordained shelf life. When that endpoint is reached, resources vanish and progress made to that point will be in danger of reverting to previous conditions or worsening relative to the state before the project implementation. Efforts to address wicked problems in sport and physical education for development and peace can fall prey to the failure to create sustainable solutions that local people can continue to pursue as the basis for successful long-term change.

Consider the example described by Dart (2022) of attempts at sport and peacebuilding among Israeli and Palestinian youth. Periods of political tensions and security concerns due to escalated conflict in the region have often led to the suspension of joint sports activities, impacting the continuous development of these peacebuilding projects. The result of stopping these intercultural projects is still ongoing at the time of this writing as the consequence of on-the-ground of war in Gaza grind on and it is inevitable that any attempt at continuous sport and physical education work will be disrupted with long-term repercussions for all.

As Dart (2022) noted, a peacebuilding project is futile in the absence of any realistic path to peace amid generations of hatred and cultural estrangements. If peace is to be built it will be done not with a sweep of a physical activity wand but with bricks and mortar of a peace edifice placed carefully and intentionally over time. Programs having an externally-imposed stopping rule (such as war and political chaos) impact not only the youth that were involved but also upcoming generations. The youth that were involved in play activities may have begun to build and establish a cultural tolerance and potentially build relationships between each other, a basis, however small, for future peacebuilding. With the program forced to stop, they will not get the chance to enhance their relationships and therefore not be the generation to build change in their views of one another. Worse, trust in process itself will be damaged and future attempts to build peace in later generations will be perceived inevitably as more promises that will be broken.

There is no way to place sport and physical education projects in a protective bubble that makes them impervious to external conditions. However, particularly in volatile and historically unstable circumstances, any project should begin with the goal not of providing the program as typically envisioned (for example, playing together with reflections on what it means under program mentorship) but of building self-determination into the design of the experience from the start. What will the participants be able to do on their own if the project finds itself confronted with a stopping rule that wicked problems simply do not have?

5.3 Third, do sport and physical education programs for development and peace take into account that every wicked problem is unique?

Past solutions cannot be recreated to aid in resolving what appears to be the same issue in a different context.

Multiple influencing factors are uniquely at play in each circumstance including the source and amount of funding to support the project, the local resources available, cultural and language differences, and even the climatic conditions. Many projects may have similar goals in mind but a sustainable approach to a wicked problem must be unique to the local environment at a particular time.

Schreiner, Kastrup, and Mayer (2022) highlight in their analysis of the close connections between the German government and German sports federations how external factors relevant to a sport and physical education project, often conducted by joint organizations with different underlying motivations and goals, can affect a seemingly “standard” project design. Partnerships are often crucial to success but they bring challenges. Often, a government’s goals when funding development and peace work are more than the stated goals of the project itself. They may be to build political influence and establishing “soft power” in ways that overreach the project’s stated goals. Private corporations are necessarily different in their approach, often focusing on establishing corporate social responsibility awareness of their company’s image. Also, sports organizations typically have their sport’s development in mind when partnering in sport and physical education programs. When different partners are involved the question arises: “if the organizations have different goals, how do they manage to design and coordinate joint projects and to define the goals, content, and tasks of the jointly implemented projects?” (Schreiner et al., 2022)

As Schreiner et al (2022) point out, there are motivating factors such as money, power, sympathy, trust, and knowledge binding the involved parties as they strive to achieve an overall goal. The combination of factors is unique to each project. Each partnership differs in its potential placement, views, motivations and desired outcomes and even when the initiating conditions of a project look the same as in other cases, the ongoing dynamic of a project will always be unique. Resolutions can never be directly replicated since factors such as timing, changing political and corporate frameworks, funding, and evolving local culture will never be identical. That means designing and implementing a unique project and not one from another place and time.

5.4 Fourth, do sport and physical education programs for development and peace recognize that wicked problems do not give us the luxury of being wrong in our resolution of them because people’s lives are at stake in a tangible way?

Sometimes projects do fail. Unfortunately, it is rare for published work in sport and physical education for development and peace to document a project that did not meet its goals. Critiques of programs that did not accomplish their goals, that left participants worse off than they were before participating, or that created ill will between local communities and those who brought the project to them simply do not appear often in the literature, if at all, as a source of information upon which to discuss why wicked problems do not afford scope for flawed program design and delivery.

If we learn at least as much from our failures as our successes, it is unfortunate that we do not have more discussion about what did not work or what was counterproductive. Blom, Judge, Whitley, Gerstein, Huffman, and Hillyer (2015) identified this, noting that “it is crucial for all stakeholders to openly share information regarding lessons learned through program development and implementation”. However, even in their paper with that as an important premise, they focused almost exclusively on the features of sport and physical education programs that led to success rather than to failure. One rare area where examples of failure are discussed is that of colonization and indigenous/aboriginal experience with sport and physical education programming. Thiessen’s (2011) review of the work of organizations promoting the idea of global citizenship, highlights “the complex and, in some respects, problematic approach to global citizenship promoted by SDP [sport for development and peace] organizations” (p. 572). This is pertinent to the discussion of colonization and indigenous/aboriginal experience because, again from Thiessen (2011), there is an underpinning of “othering” in many programs that can lead to a dangerous and anti-development milieu of paternalism and neo-imperialism.

In that light, Arellano and Downey (2018) investigated the impact of sport and physical education for development and peace programs in Canadian indigenous communities. Using the game of lacrosse as their example, they argue that by using a sport simply as a means to promote what are intended to be positive outcomes but failing to situate lacrosse as a “medicinal game that is engrained in the socio-political and epistemological intricacies of Indigenous nations” (p. 16), a highly significant opportunity is lost. That creates the danger of sport and physical education as an allegedly apolitical and universal tool of development and peace becoming a shape-shifting instrument of colonialism, changing its form but not its function. This is reminiscent of Thiessen’s (2011) example of the very British game of cricket being considered an all-purpose utensil in the service of the Empire’s “civilizing mission”. That, in turn, illuminates a clear wrong that is a luxury that a core purpose of sport and physical education cannot afford in a development and peace context.

## 6. Conclusion

The original formulation of the idea of wicked problems has endured and strengthened over more than five decades. It remains an idea of value when a linear application of the standard scientific method does not lead us to resolutions of significant problems. This includes sport and physical education as both a community of practice and an area of scholarly investigation. Crowley and Head (2017) noted in their retrospective on the original paper by Rittel and Webber that there remain significant implications of the idea of wicked problems as we continue to come to grips with the “fundamental engagement with rationalism, closed and open systems, politics in society, pluralism and challenges to the efficacy of professional expertise” that animated the original paper.

Sport and physical education, despite claims for it being a universal language and a culture based on positive values, does not always nurture empathy, inclusivity, ethics, and alignment with and leadership for social change which are the typical desired outcomes of sport and physical education programs. However, framing programs in the context of wicked problem resolution rather than only as tame problem resolution requires purposive thought incorporating critical, ethical, design, and systems concepts about the process and resources needed to avoid the pitfalls of facing wicked problems with tame problem approaches. People targeted by sport and physical education programs and people creating and implementing them need and deserve at the very least consideration of a wicked problems awareness for their shared participation to achieve its potential outcomes. We conclude from our review of the selected case studies presented here that this is not always the case. Therefore, there is a need to re-envision sport and physical education for development and peace programs in a way aligned to the reality that, in most cases, their purpose is to address not a tame problem but a wicked problem.

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