

The Fall and Rise of Physical Education

By George Graham

If there is a single truth about physical education, from preschool through graduate school is that it continues to change. I suspect this is true of all enterprises—business, medicine, education, government and families too. There is constant change—and perhaps the best predictor of the future is the past but that's for philosophers and historians to determine. What I know best is physical education at all levels over the past 45 years. This paper is focused on one person's view of what has happened over that period and a glimpse, albeit somewhat blurry, into the future of our profession. The paper is divided into four categories—K-12 teachers, PETE, professional organizations and the values of society in terms of physical education and physical activity.

I also want to add that I am writing this at the terminus of my career (somehow that sounds better than writing the end of my career.) This is important because I feel entitled to tell it like it is—with no worries that I might offend someone that I might be working with in the future on a project or committee. I also freely admit that this paper is written without relying on the professional literature to support my theories. Both of these factoids—terminus of career combined without having to base my paper on the literature is a freeing experience—and as I begin this paper one I am looking forward to.

K-12 Teachers

The first of the four sections is on K-12 teachers because they are clearly the most significant part of our profession--and also the largest number. Every school day thousands of physical educators are assigned to teach millions of students. And some actually do teach. Others supervise—or at least are in the same vicinity of their students some of the time. In this paper I suggest we can categorize physical educators into eight categories—with some overlapping, of course.

Rollers

The first category of teachers are what I have termed the rollers—as they are highly skilled at rolling out balls—and doing little else. In the winter they are in the gym. A few students play pick-up basketball, others sit in the bleachers and talk with friends, text, or sleep. The teacher is in the vicinity—and may even interact with the students from time to time. This scenario is repeated in the fall with soccer or flag football and in the spring with softball. Softball season is especially appealing to rollers because they can bring out a chaise lounge and work on their tans. (I actually observed this occur at a high school in Athens, Georgia. The field was located on a four lane, busy street. No one seemed to question this “teaching”, however, because this teacher had recently won the state football championship). I suspect we find rollers more at the high school level than the elementary or middle school level. What amazes me to this day is that few parents or administrators question this type of physical education. Unfortunately, students rarely complain about doing whatever they feel like...and so the rollers roll on—sorry about that.

Gamers

I have termed the next category of teachers, gamers. Gamers are all about finding new games to play with kids. Their sole purpose for attending conferences, for example, is to find some new games to play with the kids on Monday. The teaching amounts to showing the kids how to play the games and then ensuring that they play the games as designed—and often keeping score as well. Typically, the games they play use one ball for an entire class - or have one “it” in a tag game. What has always amazed me is the teacher’s myopia—they fail to see the youngsters who do not have the skill to play the game—and yet they do nothing to assist these youngsters to become better games players. From these experiences generations of competent bystanders have emerged—youngsters who have mastered the art of appearing busy and on-task in physical education when they are anything but engaged. Want proof? Watch a volleyball game and observe the competent

bystanders who are incredibly skilled at moving out of the way so that the more skilled teammates can return the serve successfully.

Fitters

Fitters are my third category of physical educators. These are the folks who attempt to improve the physical fitness of their students. Some of the techniques they use include running laps, calisthenics, fitness circuit and stations and jumping rope. Recently more secondary schools have purchased treadmills, stationary bikes, elliptical machines and weights (both free and attached) that are used by fitters with varying degrees of success. Exergames are also increasingly popular K-12.

I believe in the importance of physical fitness. I do not believe, however, that many of these programs lead to lifelong enjoyment and participation in physical fitness activities. I do think that a semester, or perhaps a year in high school that leads youngsters to becoming physically fit would be an excellent addition to any high school curriculum. But simply requiring kids to do fitness stuff for a day or two a week with no obvious improvement—and lots of unpleasantness, perhaps even pain, hardly seems to be the best route to a physically fit population.

If youngsters could become physically fit, even for a few months, and experience the benefits—the change in the shape of their bodies, the sense of satisfaction derived from hard work, the reduction in stress, etc.—then it seems to me they would be far more inclined to view physical fitness favorably into the future. Physical fitness testing, however, seems to have been a major contributor to the distaste, negative attitudes, and even hate that far too many adults who were in physical education programs for years' harbor about the pain and unpleasantness of running, lifting and stretching that are so critical to living a full and complete and satisfying life. Unfortunately, this realization doesn't occur for many until they are on a walker in a wheel chair.

In American society today there are more and more opportunities for adults to become and remain physically fit. Can we really justify more than one semester, or year, focused solely on physical fitness when there are so many more physical activities that adults could enjoy—and that lead to becoming physically fit?

Brainers

The fourth category of teachers I have labeled the brainers. These are the teachers who see the purpose of K-12 physical education as enhancing the literacy, mathematics and science programs of classroom teachers. My impression is that they are a number of excellent programs designed to do just that. My question is whether these programs should be implemented by classroom teachers or by physical educators. I, for one, believe that physical fitness and sports activities are critically important contributors to a healthy and happy life over many, many years. If the purpose of physical education becomes supporting classroom teachers and neglecting the rich and diverse content of physical education, then I believe that is unfortunate.

I also think the brainers need to be careful about their claims. There is a plethora of research documenting the positive linkage between physical activity and brain function and learning. Few question that linkage. One must question, however, causality claims. If physical activity causes one to be smarter or more intelligent then the brightest students at colleges and universities should be the athletes. While most of us who were athletes are highly intelligent we also know friends and teammates who are not. Why is that if physical activity causes one to be intelligent? In closing this section, let me be clear that the literature continues to document positive relationships between physical activity and brain function and learning. The interpretation by brainers, and other physical educators, however, often sounds as if students who had daily physical education will be smarter and do better in school. Perhaps. But, as far as I know, those studies have yet to be started.

Innovators

Innovators are physical educators who are seeking the latest and greatest activities or equipment for their students. These are fun teachers to be around and I am sure the kids enjoy their programs too. So too do commercial vendors and marketers whose business is to sell products for their commissions. I must admit that I have a bit of innovator in me—I like new and different stuff—but I should also ask: “what is the purpose of this equipment”? is it worth the expense? Will it be in my program 2-3 years from now?”

At-Risk

The seventh category of physical educators are those who see their purpose as providing youngsters with social responsibility skills. These educators often work in challenging situations with at-risk students. Sports primarily are used as an incentive for youngsters to cooperate with their peers and teachers. If you behave appropriately you get to play basketball or volleyball. Misbehavior leads to lack of playing time. In these programs the goal is appropriate social behavior rather than physical activity for a lifetime—although that can certainly be a serendipitous effect.

Activators

As the cornucopia of benefits associated with regular physical activity continue to be documented there is an increasing movement to provide opportunities for students to be active during the school day. Ideally schools would be able to provide students with 60 minutes of physical activity daily through before and after school programs, recess, and physical education. There is no argument about the importance of regular physical activity for children, teens and adults. There is an increasing concern, however, that physical activity replaces education. While 60 minutes of physical activity is a laudable goal one wonders about what, if anything, students are expected to learn. Clearly there is little, or no, educational background that are

necessary prerequisites for leading youngsters in physical activities—in fact, there are a wealth of DVD's and other programs that profess to do just that. Thus the only expertise necessary is to be able to insert and push the start and stop button on a DVD player. If this trend continues one can't help but wonder about the future needs for licensed physical educators.

Teachers

My last category is teachers. Here's my bias. I believe physical educators should be teachers who intentionally design curriculums and programs for learning—and then teach accordingly. Today we have national and state and district standards that have been developed, critiqued, and revised again and again. These standards, developed by the best and brightest in our profession, suggest what can be learned in programs of physical education taught by teachers.

How can one tell a teacher? Let me provide an oversimplified description—three criteria. The first criterion is that teachers actually describe and demonstrate what they want students to learn in their lessons—and then check for understanding to be certain that the students have grasped what the teacher wants them to learn. This is vastly different than explaining the rules of a game!

The second criterion is that teachers provide feedback about what they are teaching to the students—not about the score, but the strategy, motor skill or technique that is the lesson objective.

The third criterion is that weeks and months later the students can describe and/or demonstrate what they have learned. Again it's not the rules of the game—but it may be a dance, a throwing technique, a strategy, etc.

The standards outline the content—the teachers develop the learning experiences that lead youngsters to retain them for a lifetime. Just as youngsters learn to read, to

compute, to analyze in classrooms over their school years, effective physical education teachers provide a wealth of lasting experiences in gyms and on fields that lead youngsters to enjoyably participate in physical activity for a lifetime.

Bottom Line

No doubt you don't agree with all of these characterizations of physical educators. Certainly some teachers represent more than one of these descriptions, perhaps several of them. The point of these characterizations, however, is not to provide 100% accurate portrayals. The point I want to make is this—if you can accept that these are somewhat accurate portrayals you will agree that individuals in these categories have very different purposes/goals. I won't elaborate on the obvious here. But I do want to contrast the varying purposes/goals with those of other subjects taught in schools. Learning to read, for example, is goal of literacy teachers. Understanding and applying mathematical concepts is the goal of math teachers. Science teachers...well, you get the point.

While math and science and reading teachers disagree on the best approaches to guiding youngsters to understand and apply their concepts there is clear agreement on the end purpose—and that purpose is understood by the kids, the parents, administrators and legislators. Physical education in schools, however, is all over the board. There is no clear purpose for the program or goals that is universally agreed upon. And the professed goals for many of the characterizations described above are often unrealistic and almost laughable. For example, can we really expect youngsters to improve their physical fitness when they only have one 30-minute class a week? Is it reasonable to expect students to learn to throw or catch or bat a ball when they have a total of 20-50 practice opportunities a year? Should we really expect youngsters to get along with others when they have a two day a week program that does not address the bigger issues in their lives—what goes on at home and with their peers?

This leads me to the question—what is the purpose of K-12 physical education. I was a part of the original group in Shaker Heights, Ohio when we wrote “Is, Has, Does, Knows and Values”. Do I still agree with this definition of a physically educated person? I do. Are any of these expectations realistic for most K-12 physical education programs? I think not.

Perhaps the point I am trying to make is now obvious. With so many purposes for physical education, it is no wonder that we have difficulty garnering the support for K-12 physical education that so many of us so fervently believe in. Few question the purpose of reading, or math or science teachers. When budgets get tight many question why youngsters need physical education teachers, especially if a trained aide, or parent, can lead “physical activity” lessons during the school day. Interestingly art and music also are threatened when budgets get tight and there is a strong argument for keeping them in the school day. At the end of the day, however, there is no argument stronger than the health of our kids—and adults. After all, if we are in poor health our ability to read, or compute, or understand science or appreciate art or music becomes far less important than regaining our health. As may have said over the centuries—physical activity is medicine. And physical education teachers have the task of turning kids on to physical activity for a lifetime. Unfortunately, it appears that only a minority of physical educators have chosen to accept this responsibility. In my view far too many have chosen to ignore this goal and instead find ways to keep kids busy, happy and good for the few minutes a week that they have physical education.