

Daily Quality Physical Education – Not an Option A Blue-Sky Paper on Physical Education

Barbara J. Smith

Physical education seems to fit on the lower rung of the subject status ladder. It's time to change the linear view of disciplines in school for many reasons. While we are aware that human beings need to be active to be healthy, we tend to lose sight of the role physical education can play in the overall development of the mind. The theory of 'healthy body-healthy mind' is often commonplace in advertisements for community fitness venues, but the research that proves beyond a doubt such a connection is spotty.

As a physical educator in my early teaching life, I was convinced intuitively of such complementary benefits, yet the attention to such study seemed to fizzle out. As researchers in the field of physical education turned their attention to heart health, they shifted their identity. The 'education' in physical education, seemed abandoned, replaced as the specific science strand – Kinesiology. I recall working at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada when the Faculty of Physical Education was talking about the transformation. While I saw the science of physical education as an important part of the subject, I was also aware that for young people to develop healthy understandings, attitudes, and behavior, the field needed to look beyond physiology, anatomy and kinesiology. The potential for psychology, *social-cultural theory*, and *Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP)*, for instance, to help bridge the gap between knowing we should be active and being active, is lost with the transfer of focus from the broader scope of physical education to Kinesiology.

For the most part, these Faculties are now generating scientists, not educators. The gap widens even more when expert athletes fail to see connections with their own school physical education experience. How often do you hear Super Bowl or Olympic Champions make a plea for Daily Quality Physical Education? Unlike many artists who were first inspired by their music and theatre arts teachers, the athletes thank their community coaches or their parents for their inspiration and physical prowess. It seems obvious that people are aware of the value of physical activity; parents and tots early swimming classes have lengthy waitlists and community gymnastics programs are buzzing after school and on weekends. Families are engaged as participants, fans or coaches on basketball courts, baseball diamonds, soccer pitches, football fields and ice rinks, which offer much more play time than most school teams, sporting just over a dozen shirts.

There is not much drive for schools to play a physical educating role in young people's lives. While curriculum designers recognize there are physical ways of knowing, the demands of standardized tests keep English Language Arts and Mathematics firmly in the position of being 'the' most important disciplines in school. Even with the most elegantly crafted mission and vision statements that use words like the "whole child", "social and emotional growth" or "science", the measure of value comes down to time and money. Is physical education a discipline students in most schools take every day?

No. Do most schools hire physical education specialist teachers? No. Pratt (1980) claimed: “The neglect of physiological objectives in the curriculum literature is symptomatic of the separation in schools of mind and body and of the general failure of educators to promote children’s well-being” (p. 314).

While there are significant forces that could be more supportive of a quality physical education program, it may be time to for physical education to re-invent itself. This means educators need to address current strengths and weaknesses of physical education programming. As noted, “Ideally, schools will provide a physical medium for students to acquire lifelong active habits. To develop an appreciation for active lifestyles, physical activity needs to be a daily activity, beyond a fifteen break at recess” (Smith, in press, 2019). While PHE Canada defines *Quality Daily Physical Education (QDPE)* as a: “well-planned school program of compulsory physical education provided for a minimum of 30 minutes each day to all students (kindergarten to grade 12) throughout the school year”, educators understand that nothing of value happens in a 30-minute block of time. How long does it take a typical adult to get to the gym, change, and work-out? How the following 9 elements (Figure 1) of QPDE can be accomplished in such piece meal time allotments, is a mystery to me.

Figure 1: 9 Elements of QDPE Programming

1	Daily curricular instruction for all students (K-12) for a minimum of 30 minutes;
2	Well planned lessons incorporating a wide range of activities;
3	A high level of participation by all students in each class;
4	An emphasis on fun, enjoyment, success, fair play, self-fulfillment and personal health;
5	Appropriate activities for the age and stage of each student;
6	Activities which enhance cardiovascular systems, muscular strength, endurance and flexibility;
7	A participation based intramural program;
8	Qualified, enthusiastic teachers; and,
9	Creative and safe use of facilities and equipment (phecanada.ca).

I have no doubt a dedicated team of experts collaborated to come to determine these elements, there remains questions around the notions of what constitutes quality in terms of “range of activities” and “appropriate activities?” Does a range of activities means that a teacher will adequately prepare students for team sports? Will that mean that all students will receive effective instruction in racquet sports, swimming and outdoor education? Does this mean that pre-service programs will educate teachers capable of teaching a comprehensive range of physical activities?

When I first taught physical education, there seemed to be a mix of educators who were comfortable in either in a ‘sport development’ or ‘movement education’ learning approach. The goal of promoting life-long physical activity was also central to PHE curriculum design. There was not much talk about a physically-educated student. The program tended to follow the strength set of the PHE teacher. “Many

physical educators are former athletes, and as such, they tend to approach the subject matter from a coaching perspective” (Smith, in press, 2019).

At the University of Saskatchewan, I often discussed foundational ideas of physical education with Keith Russell, who oversaw their required gymnastics program within the School of Physical Education. Keith also coached the Canadian men’s national gymnastics team and was a key writer of some of incredible coaching certification resources. The idea of developing a framework for physical education that clarified movement mastery within the context of formalized sport and dance experiences took shape in these early discussions. I published these beginning ideas in an article on primary education written for *Orbit* magazine.

Figure 2: Movement Patterns and Activities at Multi-Grade Levels (Smith, 1994, p. 16)

Movement Pattern	Primary	Junior	Middle - High School
Locomoting	relays; dance; lummi sticks	swimming (strokes); skating; snowshoeing	jogging; folk dance; skiing
Holding	balancing upper & lower body; bench posing; parachute	beam balancing; handstand; rope climb; goal tending; plank	trapping (soccer); karate; tai chi; climbing; archery
Sending	throwing ball; kicking targets; rolling objects	passing (basketball); baseball; passing (soccer); hockey; bowling; volley	throw football; serving in badminton; spiking; handball; curling
Receiving	catching utility ball (cooperative games)	catching (basketball) frisbee; forearm pass (volleyball)	goal tending; juggling; pickle ball; ping pong
Landing	land from height on feet; land & roll; donkey kicks	obstacle course; vaulting; goal tending; clap push ups	judo; rebounding; shoulder rolling on hard surfaces
Springing	jumping (straight, tuck); hopscotch); skipping	jump rope; long jump; vaulting; tumbling; simple dive; trampolining	triple jump; high jump; basketball; volleyball; heading (soccer)
Rotating	log roll; forward roll; 360-degree turn	cartwheel, 360-degree jump; turns on bench/beam; swimming	football; pitching; kayaking
Swinging	t-ball; cycling	batting; bars (parallel/uneven bars); high jump	batting (baseball); golf; tennis; badminton; racquet ball; lacrosse
Following	tag games; dance	line dancing; relay (track; swimming) checking	defensive play (soccer; basketball; hockey); blocking
Dodging	tag games; shuttle runs	cooperative games; scoring (basketball; soccer); square dancing	offensive play (soccer, basketball, hockey)

Laban’s Theory of human movement (1947) featured a massive list of variables that were difficult for many physical educators to grasp. I noted, “Rudolf Laban’s theory...spread through the dance world like fire and wound up securing a dominant place within the school curriculum. His body, space, effort, and relationship groupings represent the foundations of most primary physical education

curricula in the country” (Smith, 1994, p. 15). The study of movement theory has enormous potential for developing new innovative activities, especially when each variable can be applied to how the body moves in relation to fixed and moveable objects in space. A traditional PE program can be somewhat random in terms of curriculum selection and design. There is no guarantee “that all movement patterns might be mastered”. I added:

Usually the rationale for the selection of a sport context is the comfort level of the teacher. By looking through a movement pattern lens, physical educators can determine where they can improve, and in doing so, provide a broader scope of a quality program for their students (Smith, in press, 2019).

Learning how to send a ball in football, soccer, basketball or baseball involves some similar rules such as the opposite foot to the throwing arm should step forward. While we tend to teach PE, one sport at a time, it is possible to teach a movement pattern within multiple contexts. In this way if student learn to play hockey, lacrosse, handball, Frisbee football/golf or other related activities, they have a solid base for applying the rules of sending actions. Rather than the sport be the end, it is the medium. I noted: “A quality Physical Education program emphasizes the learning of basic movement patterns so that young people can apply the principles in many active contexts, as well as be physically prepared for life-long physical activity” (Smith, in press, 2019). When students can access the bank of movement variables, they can create their own games. As well, PE programs should address fitness in terms of cardiovascular health, muscular strength, endurance, and flexibility. Understanding and applying a range of movement patterns can lead to the cultivation of innovative exercises.

Likewise, learning about rules of stability, such as maintaining a wide base of support and keeping the center of gravity low, are central to mastering a ‘holding’ movement pattern. Participating in life-long outdoor education pursuits requires the application of ‘holding principles’. In addition to learning specific skills associated with canoeing, backpacking, paddle boarding, kayaking, sailing, snowshoeing, skiing, biking, climbing, golf, rowing, and orienteering, student mastery can be advanced when students can think about movement pattern links between such activities.

Good for the Mind

A quality daily physical education is good for the mind. Gardner (1985) recognized that Physical Education plays a role in the development of intelligence:

A description of the use of the body as a form of intelligence may at first jar... This divorce between the mental and physical has not infrequently been coupled with the notion that what we do with our bodies is somehow less privileged, less special, than those problem-solving routines carried out chiefly through the use of language, logic or some other relatively abstract symbolic system (pp. 207-208).

While PHE Canada, suggests that physically literate people “move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person,” I sense such a definition does not go far enough to convey what that means. By acknowledging ‘physical literacy’, this is a good first step. More research and dedicated time to pilot and unpack programs that promote physical ways of knowing, as a contributor to overall intelligence, is critical to justifying physical education as a daily part of a student’s day. It’s not enough for students to “develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they need to enable them to engage with poise and confidence across a wide variety of activities” (phecanada.ca).

For Discussion

There is much work to be done to uncover the potential of physical education in schools. To begin with, curriculum experts need to view Physical Education as a medium to develop physical intelligence. Educators need to think about the consequences of a physical gaps in a student’s schooling. Schools need to provide quality programs as well as find ways to sponsor young people to engage in community activity. Partnerships with community programs would be a good starting point. Dance instruction, which can be viewed as inter-disciplinary with the arts, is less common in schools, even though it is a medium for movement mastery.

All the different forms of dance can be challenging for the typical Physical Education teacher to master. How often do we see a volleyball coach teaching ballroom, folk, ballet, modern, jazz or tap dancing? Unfortunately, many students do not have the opportunity to experience the full range of dance classes in school; rather, such expertise lies in community programs outside the walls of the school, for those who can afford such instruction (Smith, in press, 2019).

For those students who are involved in dance and other intensive programs, schools should be supportive of modified workloads, as well as consider the allocation of alterative credits.

Young gymnasts can be training upwards of 24 hours per week; swimmers can be in the pool twice a day. While some sports schools try to support these students, it is rare that such students are granted reduced course loads or assignments, which can add to the sleep deprivation problems that complicate the lives of many young athletes. While some jurisdictions may create special sports schools, it is uncommon for credits to be awarded for expert experience outside school. Even students who have taken rigorous lifeguard training or have achieved black belts in distinguished martial arts, they are rarely afforded Physical Education credits for their exemplary work in the field (Smith, in press, 2019).

Apart from not building healthy habits, young people, especially from families who cannot afford community programs need to have a rigorous physical education program from PK/SK to twelfth grade. If there is no room in the schedule, then there is something wrong with the schedule.

References

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