

PEDAGOGY

Beyond “Fun”: The Real Need in Physical Education

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Abstract

As obesity rates and physical inactivity levels continue to rise among American youth, the need for quality physical education programs is more important than ever. However, to many observers, physical education is a hindrance to academic time and a subject that does not bring value to the educational system. It is imperative for physical educators to advocate for and substantiate the true importance of the discipline. Children of today’s generation have limited experiences being in a physically demanding environment, but have many opportunities, especially through technology, to be in a “fun” environment; thus, there is a push for physical education and physical activity overall to be fun. However, children who are not physically challenged do not develop the mental fortitude to persevere and succeed in physically demanding activities and many other aspects of life in general. The physical education classroom is an ideal setting to foster a challenging and engaging environment that can help develop the skills, knowledge, fitness, mental resiliency, and self-confidence to succeed and continue in physical activity and fitness enhancement. Maintaining a sole focus of fun in physical education will not bring on the behavioral change desired for lifetime activity and fitness, because the skills needed for such endeavors will not be thoroughly established. The purpose of this article is to

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jump-start a crucial conversation among academicians about the importance of presenting challenging and engaging educational environments that align with the educational groundwork that has shaped the physical education field. Through a demanding and rigorous physical education curriculum, students will better develop the required skills and confidence to continue in lifetime activity and fitness, and fun will be a lasting by-product.

With obesity rates and the prevalence of hypokinetic diseases exponentially increasing across all age groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015a, 2015b), the need for physical education (PE) in schools is at an all-time high (Pate et al., 2006; SHAPE America, 2013). Recent research has also established a positive correlation between physical activity and academic performance (CDC, 2010). Paradoxically however, PE programs within schools are under attack, facing budget cuts, increased requirements for academic time dedicated to standardized testing and/or higher level courses for college acceptance, and an overall stance of many K–12 administrators that PE does not bring value to the school day with its poor program curriculum (Brink, 2002; Dakss, 2005; Marshall & Hardman, 2000; McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009; Sealey, 2010).

In light of these realities, PE professionals should ask themselves the question, are we making a lasting impact that brings value to our profession? The answer should be resoundingly yes, yet as evidenced by the consistent upsurge in sedentary behavior across all ages (Katzmarzyk, 2010; Thorp, Owen, Neuhaus, & Dunstan, 2011), many PE programs fail to bring true value to students to be lifetime participants in physical activity (PA) and fitness. PE may not be the “silver bullet” that will change behaviors of an entire generation, but it can nevertheless serve many. Specifically, an impactful PE program can stimulate student growth and interest in lifetime PA and fitness by facilitating students’ motor skill development, health-related fitness, health-related fitness knowledge, overall PA levels, sport/game performance, and social skill set (SHAPE America, 2013). It is certainly time to jump-start a crucial conversation among academicians about the importance of presenting challenging and engaging educational environments that align with the educational groundwork that has shaped the physical education field.

To further elaborate on the perspective of an impactful approach to PE, in this article we compare and contrast the notion of challenging engagement with simply implementing “fun” within the PE context. From a PE and psychology of sport and exercise standpoint, there is a recent push for PA to be fun or at the very least pleasant (Werle, Wansink, & Payne, 2014). This push has been derived from psychological principles of hedonism and pleasure. Hedonism is the view that a good life is a pleasant life (Feldman, 2004), and the pleasure principle view states that people avoid pain and seek pleasure (Freud, 1951). Consistent with these tenets, within the PE realm there appears to be a tendency to make PE fun with the prospect that this will facilitate students’ lifetime PA participation (Garn & Cothran, 2006). However, reducing PE to just fun may not result in long-term adoption of PA and maintenance of fitness across the lifespan. In the advocacy for change, it is not sufficient to suggest or endorse one particular curriculum to be implemented on a national level. Rather, the hope is to impose a call to action for educators and creators of PE curricula to consider an alternate approach to the learning environment in which PE classes are taught.

Fun: A By-Product of Quality Physical Education

Fun, defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary as amusing, entertaining, enjoyable, or lighthearted pleasure, can be the by-product of a quality PE program for which the primary objective is engaging the students to learn, develop, grow, persevere, and succeed. This proposition further aligns with the pedagogy of PE as described in the goals, standards, and vision set forth by SHAPE America and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE):

- “To develop physically literate individuals who have the knowledge, skills and confidence to enjoy a lifetime of healthful physical activity” (SHAPE America, 2013, p. 1).
- “To pursue a lifetime of healthful PA, a physically literate individual has learned the skills necessary to participate in a variety of physical activities, knows the implications and the benefits of involvement in various types of physical activities, participates regularly in PA, is physically fit, and values PA and its contributions to a healthful lifestyle” (SHAPE America, 2013, p. 1, adapted from NASPE, 2004, and Mandigo, Francis, Lodewyk, & Lopez, 2012).

- “A quality physical education program provides learning opportunities, appropriate instruction, meaningful and challenging content, and student and program assessment” (NASPE, 2013, p. 1).

The five national standards, briefly defined, include (1) competency in movement, (2) apply knowledge to movement and performance, (3) achieve a health-enhancing level of PA and fitness, (4) engage in responsible personal and social behavior, and (5) recognize the value of PA (SHAPE America, 2013). Through evaluation of these goals and standards, we deduce that growth and development leading to appreciation and continued behavior should be the consistent focus in PE rather than simply having fun.

For the notion of fun, it is also important to note that in today’s society the luxury of convenience and instant gratification is of utmost prevalence. As such, along with technological advancements, basics of everyday life often come quick and easy and are achieved with the least effort from individuals (Dzewaltowski, 2008; Ng & Popkin, 2012). From fast food to motorized transportation, from smart gadgets to countless other innovations, individuals do not have to exert the physical work and/or mental perseverance that was once required to fulfill daily tasks and needs (Ng & Popkin, 2012). Although today’s physical inactivity levels are not exclusively due to emerging technologies, such technological advances have contributed to the decrease of outdoor manual labor chores or chores for youth in general (Ng & Popkin, 2012; Rende, 2015).

Technology: Rise of the Machines

Furthermore, current technological advancements have altered the perception of PA for many people. When it comes to PA and fitness, technology has aided in the development of a sedentary generation that routinely watches TV, plays video games, and/or spends a vast amount of their time on the Internet via computer or phone (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2011; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Straker, Abbott, & Smith, 2013). In regard to instant gratification, technological advances have afforded children with a figurative and literal restart button, allowing them to restart or change a game that may not have been as good or as fun, much like the instant Internet

search tool that provides a shortcut from mental digging and investigating (Rideout, 2012).

From a practical standpoint, when children leave school the majority will choose sitting indoors, eating junk food, and playing video games over being outside in the elements and participating in physically demanding activities (Wiecha et al., 2006). The inside sedentary activities are much easier than PA and bring enjoyment/fun to many kids, and in fact children can connect wirelessly with one another to socialize and even play video games together without leaving their homes. Thus, it can be argued that the mentality of fun and instant gratification help sedentary amusement supersede PA for many people.

Importance of Physical Activity in Helping Develop Important Psychological Skills

Physical work and many forms of PA help build mental toughness (Gerber et al., 2012). It is plausible that as technological advancements surface, the need for physical work and PA decrease, and thus fewer opportunities to develop mental fortitude to push beyond comfort arise. The lack in mental perseverance as a result of decreasing physical work is important to consider, because mentally tough individuals “have a high sense of self-belief and unshakable faith that they can control their own destiny; these individuals can remain relatively unaffected by competition and adversity” (Clough, Earle, & Sewell, 2002, p. 38). Consequently, failure to develop mental toughness may hurt a person’s chances of successfully mastering life’s challenges and succeeding in high-pressure environments (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2007).

Participation in high school sports provides a challenging and engaging learning environment that is focused on skill development and high levels of PA and fitness. High school sports and PE are separate entities with different characteristics (e.g., competitive emphasis, specialized activity vs. multiple activities, student choice vs. requirement), but PE professionals need to consider the relevant qualities between the two. The most pertinent connection is the mental fortitude developed through the challenging high school sports environment that is similarly transferrable in the PE setting.

Research indicates that individuals who participate in high school sports are more active as adults than are nonparticipants (Alfano, Klesges, Murray, Beech, & McClanahan, 2002; Dohle & Wansink, 2013; Perkins, Jacobs, Barber, & Eccles, 2004; Tammelin, Nayha, Hills, & Jarvelin, 2003; Team-Up for Youth, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Additional evidence also suggests that high school sport participants report higher levels of self-esteem and possess greater leadership ability (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012), and varsity high school athletes are more likely to go to college and earn more money as adults than are nonathlete college graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Personality traits and ability levels play an intricate role in the subsequent success of high school sport participants, but the concept of challenging and engaging growth in children by fostering a work ethic that takes children beyond their perceived limits can be paralleled. The demanding environment of high school athletics helps student-athletes develop a mental fortitude and drive for success, along with skill and fitness development. From this, PE professionals can derive how impactful challenging PA is to students' overall development. However, if students are not challenged to develop the mental skills and fitness attributes that precede success, they will likely have difficulty finding lasting enjoyment or confidence to pursue further PA and fitness endeavors.

An additional element for physical educators to consider with respect to high school and youth sport participation is that the majority of students (73% of youth 6–12 years and 60% of youth 13–17 years) do not participate in competitive PA on a weekly basis (Sports and Fitness Industry Association, 2013). For such students, PE is the main avenue to enhance skill, knowledge, mental resiliency, and appreciation of PA and fitness and the subsequent health benefits derived from incorporating PA into their daily life. This does not require PE students to be “athletes.” As a matter of fact, PE should not be centered on athletics, but rather show students that it is not necessary to be an “athlete” to be successful in physical movement, activity, and fitness. Confidence in performing PA and enhancing fitness can be produced by a curriculum that challenges students to engage and succeed, rather than one that offers “fun” activities.

In light of the aforementioned issues and the multitude of other factors that hinder PA participation and fitness in youth and adults, physical educators must reevaluate their intentionality toward what they want and need to accomplish in their classroom. Consequently, they should consider the following proposition: “Yes, we can offer appealing games and let the kids have fun and play, but is that truly going to make a long-term difference?” Such an approach may make a difference in momentary PA gains that in turn could enhance fitness, but the sustainability becomes limited without the intentional development of skills and knowledge. Students need to find success, confidence, and mental resiliency within the PE classroom, but they cannot fully accomplish this without educators creating an environment that fosters challenge and engagement beyond students’ typical comfort zone.

It is important to note, however, that play and fun are an integral part of a child’s development and help improve decision making, creativity, self-confidence, social interaction, physical skill, and other valuable traits (Ginsburg, 2007). It is also known that the more a person likes an activity, the more he or she is likely to repeat that activity in the future (Woolford et al., 2012). Hence the incorporation of fun can reinforce a desired behavior, and children should indeed spend time in free play and PA exploration. Conversely, the PE classroom is not a controlled recess in which the teacher’s role is that of a supervisor and facilitator of free play. Students should and need to have more opportunities for free play, and physical educators should be at the forefront to advocate for more recess and PA in school and out of school. Nonetheless, the PE classroom should be based on a curriculum that challenges and facilitates improvement of motor skills, fitness levels, fitness knowledge, and social aptitude with the prospects of helping each student achieve self-confidence, find success, develop mental toughness, and appreciate physical work and activity.

In fact, the perspective presented herein closely coincides with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which purports that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are the motivations that guide individual behavior. A PE program that provides a sense of competence through skill mastery, a sense of autonomy through realistic challenges, and a sense of relatedness through the group na-

ture of its setting could tap into the deeper intricacies of human behavior or more specifically into what makes the behavior a long-term habit. Because of its educational rather than play-based emphasis, such an approach to PE is also consistent with the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), which postulates that in educational settings, a learning process occurs between an experienced adult and a child to close a “gap” in the child’s knowledge. Physical educators can also advance the relatedness of their curriculum within the academic classroom setting by collaborating with other educators and bridging the concepts typically reinforced solely within the school’s gymnasium across an entire curriculum or learning agenda through providing either short PA breaks within the school day or incorporating PA into lesson plans (CDC, 2010).

Some argue that a PE program needs a challenging curriculum to push students beyond comfort levels; however, such a curriculum can shy students away from PA and fitness. But this argument does not hold, given that when reflecting back on the negative aspects of their PE experiences, individuals do not seem to contest rigor (Rikard & Banville, 2007). In fact, evidence indicates that especially among female students and less skilled students, there seems to be unease and uncertainty about forced competition in common sporting games in which male athletes with more skill are considered competent and dominate the event (Myrick, 1996; Rikard & Banville, 2007). This is important because individuals who do not consider themselves competent or confident in an activity are less likely to participate in said activity (Warner et al., 2014). With many physical educators using large-sided games as a vast part of the curriculum, PA is possible but the educational attainment and engagement becomes limited. Challenging students to work hard and push themselves is not preventing or hindering the development of lifelong PA; in retrospect, the lack of a rigorous and challenging curriculum may be the very reason why students are not continuing in PA (Dismore & Bailey, 2011). Particularly relevant herein: Success breeds success. Meaning, if we as PE professionals are able to engage students in developing the skills, knowledge, fitness, mental resiliency, and self-confidence via a rigorous and challenging mastery approach curriculum, we will likely make more of an impact on students’ lifetime PA levels than we would with a curriculum centered on game playing and having

fun (Ferrer-Caja & Weiss, 2000; Parish & Treasure, 2003; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2003).

Conclusion

There is a need for a shift from fostering environments that are simply fun to challenging and engaging educational environments that align with the (foundational) physical education groundwork that has shaped the PE field. Although this shift would push students out of their comfort zones and possibly impinge on their momentary enjoyment and desires, it would simultaneously provide students with true learning opportunities beyond play. Those learning opportunities are the foundation to a lifetime of PA and healthy fitness levels, which will inevitably lead to a higher quality of life (Anokye, Trueman, Green, Pavey, & Taylor, 2012). Physical educators need to respond to this call to action to challenge their students beyond the simple curriculum of learning a few skills and then playing games to get the students momentarily physically active and appease the students' enjoyment levels. As stated, PE is indeed not a controlled recess, but when treated like one the value of the profession and the need for the discipline become discredited. Physical educators can and should push their students to levels not thought possible and truly equip them with the physical, cognitive, social, and mental skills to be physically active for a lifetime. A strategic shift toward challenging and engaging environments will help clear the negative perception around the worth of PE classes in schools (Brink, 2002; Dakss, 2005; Marshall & Hardman, 2000; McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009; Sealey, 2010) and ultimately reestablish PE as a responsibility and priority of any quality educational system.

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