

# THE PURPOSES OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND THEIR PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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## **Abstract**

*Physical education (PE) claims credit for serving multiple purposes such as health, value, or developmental education. Health purposes include physical activity levels and public health approaches. Value purposes contain moral education and lifestyle approaches. Developmental purposes comprise holistic and academic achievement-oriented approaches. This article investigates the various purposes of PE and its practical implications when being absolutized. Scientific evidence regarding each purpose of PE is presented as well. The paper closes with advise for integrating all possible purposes of PE into PE programs.*

**Key words:** *physical education, child development, life style, schools, school students, physical education teachers*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Among school subjects, physical education (PE) may appear beside about 20 to 30 other subjects that occupy a spot in individual school curriculums. However, PE does not hold a very strong position against other core subjects such as nature sciences, mathematics, or languages. PE always seems to be first to suffer cuts when it comes to resource distribution and policy-making (Houlihan & Green, 2006). Albeit, there is plenty of discussion and debate as well as evidence, PE teachers and advocates can correspond to when making efforts to justify PE amongst academic school subjects. From the PE teachers' perspective, the fight for PE being equally recognized compared to traditional core subjects starts with arguing toward the purpose of PE using empirical evidence in the process. This paper aims at critically investigating the evidence available on the purpose of PE. Purposes of PE extracted out of current study findings will be concisely presented in order to discuss their implications to PE classes. Special emphasis will be put on absolutizing respective purposes of PE in the practical PE context.

## **PURPOSES AND IMPLICATIONS**

Despite diverse conceptual orientations and developments of PE on the international level (Naul, 2011), the conclusive universal PE curriculum "imperative" includes fostering healthy lifestyle behaviors, general psycho-social, cultural and moral attitudes in children and adolescents (Hardman, 2007). Furthermore, the scientific evidence concerning the educational benefits and outcomes of PE and sport in the school context

according to multiple domains (physical, lifestyle, affective, social, cognitive) is shown through a undoubtedly large body of research and debate (Bailey, 2006). The following presentation of empirical evidence and the critical investigation of its implications will be structured in relation to the topics that run through the literature targeting the discussion in question. These are health, values, and development.

### *Health*

As PE is the only subject in school that is defined through physical activity, it certainly provides physical activity levels (PALs) that are sufficient to provide positive health effects (e.g. fitness) and prevent or fight overweight, obesity, and chronic diseases (Le Masurier & Corbin, 2006; Strong et al., 2005). PALs in PE significantly contribute to daily PALs in school students (Pate, O'Neill, & McIver, 2011; Slingerland, Oomen, & Borghouts, 2011; Stratton, Fairclough, & Ridgers, 2008). Furthermore, PE's public health effects are well documented in PE-oriented research studies (Pate et al., 2011).

Absolutizing the purpose of PE solely to the health aspect implies three major scenarios. First, PE would be simply understood as means of a compensatory approach. PE would approach students under the premise of "pure" exercising, emphasizing cardio-vascular and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. This would mean that keeping students running laps in regular PE classes would be the essential lesson content. Thus, the question arises whether a PE teacher possessing a college degree is needed for such activities. Any

“drill instructor”-like person who is able to operate a stopwatch and instruct students to run faster may excel in this PE version. Second, PE would be reduced to a physical domain, thereby negating the multidimensional nature of physical activity at all. Cognitive and affective aspects would not play any role anymore. Even the “psycho” as in the “psychomotor” learning domain would not be needed anymore as well as learning taxonomies in general. Third, in line with the first two implications, PE may just vanish out of the school subject core. A subject with such content that does not need a college level educated teacher to be taught may just be excluded from regular school schedules. Students may exercise during their leisure-time outside school. They may turn to boys and girls clubs, recreational centers, sports clubs, or could just go running on the streets on their own to reach health-enhancing levels of physical activity and exercise.

#### *Values*

The United States national PE curriculum standards by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2004) state in Standard 6 that PE aims at achieving that a student “values physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction”. Consistent with this approach, behavioral science-oriented research has shown that PE-related interventions have a positive impact on students’ leisure time physical activity (Slingerland & Borghouts, 2011). In addition, several research findings suggest that positive attitudes toward and flourishing motivation in PE influence the likelihood of an active lifestyle through adulthood (Haerens, Kirk, Cardon, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

Using approaches such as moral, value, or character education, PE has shown significant impact on students’ values (Wang, 2011). For instance, Mouratidou, Goutza and Chatzopoulos’s (2007) intervention program successfully developed fair play and sportsmanship in PE students. Furthermore, scientific evidence indicates social inclusion effects of PE (Bailey, 2006).

If PE would absolutize fostering an active lifestyle, PE may lose its component of vigorous exhausting physical activity content. There is no recipe on how to teach an active lifestyle through PE, and there probably will not be one ever, since students show different individual interest, motivation, and socialization regarding physical activity and PE. In order to cause a perception of

usefulness and enjoyment, PE may turn to low-activity and more casual-oriented content (e.g. bowling) and turn to a pure entertainment subject. In this process, PE may lose content that may also be considered as cultural heritage such as folk dance or gymnastics. Trend sports that are popular in media and celebrities may dominate as well. Luring students into risk sports or sports with excessive practice frequencies and routines may have a negative health impact in this case.

Absolutizing value and moral education, PE would mean sacrificing moving time in favor of group and individual discussion. As a positive moral development in PE students does not happen by itself (Mouratidou et al., 2007), the PE teacher would need to interrupt on every non-norm-conform incident. Students’ intrinsic motivation in physical play and sports may be replaced by an “overly intellectual” everlasting reflecting on moral behavior inside and outside the gym. The students may be robbed of the authentic experience of relentless competitive behavior to win, which is apparent in competitive sports outside school. Moreover, this scenario would make grading essentially difficult, as the major content of morally appropriate behavior would also need to be the major component of students’ grades.

#### *Development*

A holistic approach to PE is well advocated through multiple sources, usually putting emphasis on combining teaching, learning, and community engagement (Le Masurier & Corbin, 2006; NASPE, 2011; Weiss, 2011). PE therefore has to address all three domains (psychomotor, cognitive, affective). The combined evidence regarding physical, lifestyle, affective, social, and cognitive benefits of PE (Bailey, 2006) may stand for proof that PE may actually educate the whole child.

In regard to the relation of PE and academic achievement, there is significant proof that physical activity, and therefore PE as the major provider of physical activity in schools, significantly influences students’ cognitive development and academic performance (Haapala, 2012; Singh, Uijtdewilligen, Twisk, van Mechelen, & Chinapaw, 2012). Thus, cutting PE would mean cutting students’ academic achievements, too.

Absolutizing a holistic approach to PE would put excessive demands on PE classes and their teachers. The assumption that PE can do it all and cure flaws of the particular educational system appears to be unrealistic. A single subject can’t

archive such goals alone and maybe “wants to do too much” (Armour & Jones, 1998). In addition, assessing developmental stages on multiple levels and domains appears to be problematic, especially when accounting PE teachers’ education and ability to do so.

Absolutizing PE’s role in providing sufficient physical activity for academic success would have the same consequences as for absolutizing PE’s health purpose, such as a compensatory understanding of PE and physical activity, and its possible banning from school to recreational time.

### CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Advocating PE always means to acknowledge its purpose variety with each purpose having an

important role in educating school-aged youth. Absolutizing one single purpose would change the nature of PE, tweaking teaching philosophy, content, teaching methods, pedagogical scenarios, and instructional design. Integrating all purposes into a single PE lesson is impossible. Covering all purposes over the course of an academic year and organize them in particular school PE curriculums may be a good way to start planning. PE programs should also have the freedom to emphasize one or more purposes due to regional school characteristics. Nevertheless, the PE teachers’ role appears to be more important than ever, as they should be treated like universal geniuses that can integrate the various PE purposes by “simply” doing their job.

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