

Curriculum Developments

Column Editor: Melvin W. Barnes

Contributor: Douglas A. Fessenden¹

Physical Education in a Time of Search

PERSONS engaged in physical education have been on the defensive for a long, long time. An inquiry about their goals, therefore, is likely to evoke either a militant recital of their occupational grievances or a decanting of excellent but timeworn objectives culled from the writings of early 20th Century leaders—objectives so timeworn as to have become relatively meaningless, and reduced to the status of nice-sounding words. The plight of today's physical education teacher is vaguely reminiscent of the instructor in classic languages who, during another upheaval resulting from "rethinking" of curricular aims, invested more energy in defending what he taught than in teaching it.

Viewed from the vantage point of nearly 40 years' experience as a teacher of physical education, the problem appears to derive from two sources. These are: (a) failure of common agreement, even at the top, as to what educational goals should be sought; and (b) the difficulty of mounting a program which will permit accurate measurement of outcomes. In the absence of the first the second is obviously impossible.

¹ Dr. Fessenden, of San Francisco State College, recently spent a sabbatical semester visiting physical education programs in the West. The observations in this column stem from his study.

The current hassle over the meaning of physical fitness provides an excellent example of the factor which causes grave concern. Professor Delbert Oberteuffer, whose voice represents a broad segment of professional physical education people, has stated flatly that physical fitness *per se* is a myth. In sharp contrast, the 1961 publication, *Youth Physical Fitness*, prepared as a policy guide for school physical education by the President's Council on Youth Fitness, contains the following statement: "Physical fitness is a basic objective of physical education." Dr. Oberteuffer's statement was not intended to be interpreted out of context. Similarly, Bud Wilkinson, heading the President's Council, has said emphatically and repeatedly that school physical education must be a great deal more than a program of graded exercises. Nonetheless the lines are being pretty sharply drawn.

There are other basic principles on which physical educators are sharply divided. Yet, provided one skirts the "academic-nonacademic" problem, nothing is so likely to produce disagreement as a discussion concerning the meaning of physical fitness.

During a recent spot-check survey of public school physical education, I was disturbed to find programs in which such

activities as golf, tennis, and dance had been omitted in order to provide more time for body-building exercises. I was equally disturbed by observing programs virtually devoid of vigorous activity. Both represent extremes and both, from my point of view, are considerably off target.

Why this multiple split in opinion regarding basic purposes exists is a matter of pure speculation. Yet that it does exist is an incontrovertible fact. Note, for example, the range of opinion reflected in responses to one question, which I asked of school officials in seven Western states: "What do you see as the main purpose served by your program of physical education?"

"Our basic aim is to instill a sense of discipline and respect for authority."

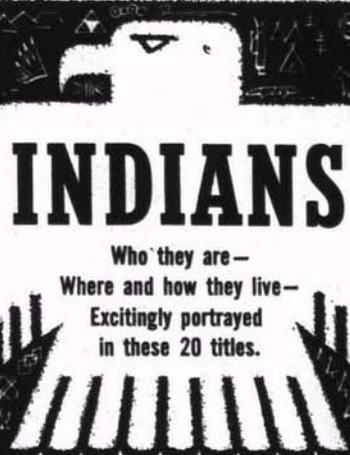
"The only real justification for physical education is to build strong and capable bodies."

"We view our physical education program as an instrument to be employed in the development of adequate, well adjusted personalities."

The question elicited such a variety of responses that one finds it difficult to identify a common program denominator.

It may well be that the very lack of unanimity has engendered a feeling of insecurity, which could explain the current stampede of so many physical education people to get on the physical fitness bandwagon. In the area of fitness, measurement of outcomes can be reported in quantitative terms. Pupil advancement toward national norms, spelled out in hard statistics, makes good reading in the superintendent's report to the board.

Viewing the matter from another angle, it seems possible that the sheer force of such men as Jesse Feiring Williams and Jay B. Nash, whose writing dominated



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the thinking of physical educators for the better part of the past half century, and their carefully delineated analyses of the physical educator's role have served to retard rather than to assist in clarifying today's issues. What they had to say of physical education is as sound now as when it was written, and there is a comfortable feeling of security in the acceptance of time-tested dogma. The problem lies in fitting what men said a quarter of a century ago into the context of today's living.

Physical education has been a part of school curricula for as long as schools have existed, yet there are reasons to believe that many teachers in this field are poor social historians. For years physical education was boiled up in a sort of "it's-good-for-you" stew and fed to students whether they liked it or not. In fact, one gets the impression that for many years school people subscribed to the theory that if the student liked "physical culture" it probably was not good for him.

"*A sound mind in a sound body!*" You found this half-true adage over the entrance of most gymnasias erected during the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries. The sound body was assured by use of stall-bars, calisthenics, deep breathing, and wand drills. The mind was the concern of other disciplines.

Something of this sort of thinking was going on in other fields of learning during the same period, but, for a complex of reasons, most physical educators found it harder to break away from this tradition.

Times have now changed and school people no longer regard students as little receptacles to stuff with miscellaneous information, however unrelated this may be to the business of living in a frighteningly complex society, or as having in-

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tellethically disenfranchised bodies in need of discipline. The school is now presumed to have an integrative function and, in this context, physical education must face up to the need to keep open that most ancient of all avenues of learning: movement.

This is not to suggest that physical educators should not take into account such specifics as the need of the human organism for regular exercise; the need for young men and women to be physically prepared to support a total war effort; or, in this time of increasing automation in industry, the need for citizens to be trained in recreational skills; or the necessity to learn how to accept and exploit individual motor capabilities. Viewing the work of the school as a team job has profound implications for the identification of the main purpose for which physical education programs are offered.

It seems to me that some of the major problems in physical education programs are these:

1. At the school level there is wide disagreement in the area of common goals.

2. Many schools still retain unrealistic systems of evaluation and marking.

3. There is little, if any, attempt to identify individual needs, and mass prescription remains in effect.

4. Notable inequities exist in the allotment of supplies, equipment, personnel and facilities in favor of the boys as against the girls.

5. The need for realistic progression in the teaching of motor skills to students as they advance from grade to grade is too often ignored.

6. The athletic tail wags the corporate dog.

Such a cataloging of problems is arbitrary, of course. "On the spot" checks show that few schools can be indicted on the basis of all six points. Unfortunately, one or more seem to apply in most of the schools visited.

Informed and imaginative physical educators are now looking for ways and means to solve these and other related problems. Evidence of new growth is reflected in numerous local projects which take the form of:

Pilot studies in flexible scheduling

Team teaching and ability grouping

Creation of cores of health, physical education, and recreation

Critical appraisal of existing marking systems

Structured leadership programs

Improved programs of rehabilitation

Increased opportunity for election

Recognition of the need to utilize the learning potential inherent in coeducational physical education.

It is along these lines, I believe, that physical education must work its way toward becoming more and more an in-

tegral part of the education of the whole person—not the whole of the education of one part of him.

—DOUGLAS A. FESSENDEN, *Chairman, Division of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, San Francisco State College, California.*

Editorial

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program that contributes to physical fitness. The school physical education program includes the class program for all students, the adapted program which fits the activities to handicapped or atypical individuals, the intramural and extramural program which provides a laboratory experience for the skills and knowledge imparted in the class program, and the interscholastic athletic program for those students with exceptional physical skill. All four of these aspects of the physical education program must function in a manner which affords balance and harmony, and which allows for the achievement of physical fitness and other objectives for *all* students.

9. *The development of physical skills—a major contribution to long-term physical fitness of students.* Obstacle courses and calisthenics represent forms of "canned" activity which yield organic benefits to the student; but a major contribution of any physical education program is to teach boys and girls a wide variety of physical skills. Such skills are the motivating agents which will enable the boy or girl to engage in activities and promote physical fitness, not only in the present but throughout a lifetime as well.

10. *Administrative support and understanding are needed to achieve physical fitness.* The quality of school health and

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