

Physical Education in the Elementary School

Trends and challenges.

PHYSICAL education is primarily concerned with the physical manipulation of the most perfectly developed, complex and interesting of known organisms—the human body. Marvels of this body have been copied by engineers for centuries in the construction of buildings, bridges and machines. The complexity and infinite potential of this human machine can be immensely frightening to teachers.

Elementary teachers confronted with 35 squirming children may shy at their responsibility for teaching a subject involving physical skill. Unfortunately, most elementary teachers have had very few physical education experiences in their professional preparation. Contemplating their plight, they are faced with the realization that, to teach physical education, a background of physical skills plus a knowledge of the whys and hows of teaching these skills is essential. Since accidents are invited by the unskilled and since skirts and nylons are not conducive to vigorous activity, many elementary teachers tend to shun the instructional

aspects of physical education. Therefore, the teaching of skills is spotty. Experience indicates again and again that example is the best teacher, and the teacher may be the only book some of the students ever read. Frightened, ill prepared, poorly coordinated and inappropriately dressed, the classroom teacher is presented a frustrating task, conducive to criticism and failure.

Ideally, specialists in each building could solve most of the elementary physical education problems. Since this is a moot question at present, conscientious classroom teachers must find resources at their disposal to assist them in their preparation for physical education. City, district, county or state coordinators of physical education have a wealth of teaching materials including grade level guides, card files, films, books, records and lists of other resource people. Coordinators should also be available to conduct periodic in-service classes or workshops.

Educational television will provide limited to almost endless opportunities as its potential is explored: limited in remote areas; almost endless in urban areas. Through television, districts can provide a specialist in the classroom. In the

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meantime, the classroom teacher is responsible for providing the basics of movement to his students. Swimming probably provides the ideal example of what is basic—for every swimming instructor soon discovers that until a child learns to relax and permit the unseen forces of the water to support him, there is little likelihood of his learning to swim. The supporting forces that tend to buoy the child toward efficient basic sports movement are good posture, running, jumping, climbing, balancing, and throwing, catching, bouncing, shooting, kicking and batting a ball. Simple games and relays employing the use of the basic movements, plus daily fitness activities, will provide a firm foundation upon which all movement skills may build.

Movement Education

Movement is an inherent characteristic of the human being. Efficient movement, however, must be learned and developed through directed experience, supervised experimentation, imitation, or by pure accident. Movement education, in the past, has generally been associated with so-called modern dance. Indeed, modern dance experts have provided leadership and have imparted impetus to movement education. Changes, however, are in the making. Any type of movement, whether it be postural correction, leaping through the air, sports skills, work or play, will soon be considered movement education by informed educators.

More activity for all children is a trend today in elementary physical education. The cat chasing the rat around a circle of inactive boys and girls is no longer symbolic of an activity program. Emphasis is on physical fitness skills in which all children can participate at once during much of the activity period.

Teachers will find improvising an interesting and stimulating activity for all. For example, animal walks are known to be excellent total body developers; therefore, it may be advisable to substitute certain selected animal walks for standing in various games and relays. Taking a crab walk position in such simple games as keep away, hot ball, and dodge ball (in which the ball is pushed with one foot) is not only stimulating to children but also a vigorous physical conditioner. Standing, running and dodging in the face up, all fours, crab walk position tend to draw the shoulders back and strengthen the arms, legs and stomach, in addition to developing endurance.

Imaginative responses to, "How many ways can you hop, jump or leap?" will provide subject matter for several active sessions. Application of the jumping or hopping idea to animals might suggest kangaroos, frogs, rabbits, grasshoppers, bucking horses or crickets. Suggestions of jumping or hopping toys might result in jacks-in-the-box, rope skipping bears, pogo sticks, or Mexican jumping beans.

Interpreting a day at the circus, farm, zoo or pet shop, where primary children demonstrate the animals visited, will generate enthusiastic activity for days. More elaborate performances for assemblies or parents might include simple headpieces made of colored art paper and stapled together to form animal likenesses.

Shadow Practice

Equipment and supplies are desirable and generally necessary for the most effective physical education classes, but creative teachers with imagination will find ways of circumventing almost any obstacle. All skills for games involving equipment may be taught and practiced without the equipment, especially in the

preliminary stages of learning. Throwing, catching, bowling, passing, dribbling, shooting, batting and stroking a ball may be taught without ball or bat. Finesse of the movement is the objective. The rhythmic pattern of the skill soon becomes so ingrained with practice that, when equipment is used, undivided attention is devoted to timing and accuracy.

Pugilists have for generations used shadow boxing as a conditioner and means of sharpening the timing for intricate boxing moves. Shadow practice in other sports skills will permit all children in a class to practice at once by pantomiming or pretending to do the skill. No equipment is necessary during shadow practice, but a record player is recommended to set the tempo for the movement. Sixty one-hand basketball set-shots may be executed by a fourth grade class in one minute using the shadow method of instruction. By means of comparison, in a class of 30 children, with four basketballs to the class, it would take more than two hours for each child to have the same number of practice shots at a goal. As the number of children in the class is increased or the quantity of balls is decreased, the difference becomes greater. Making a goal while performing under the severe scrutiny of one's peers often makes early practice with a ball a tense, unnatural movement. Shadow practice will eliminate these pressures and may be used to teach or review many elements of movement skills from rope skipping to soccer dribbling whether or not equipment is readily accessible. It is true that if ball skills are taught using the shadow method, balls must be used eventually or interest will wane.

Study of mechanical equipment on a field trip, or through pictures, followed

by interpretations of their movement, helps primary children sharpen their techniques of observation, plus increasing the flexibility of their bodies. Equipment may be classified according to use such as: construction (bulldozer, crane, ditch digger, loader, dump truck, pile driver, earth mover and tamper); transportation (piston engine, automobile, airplane, motor boat and draw bridge); miscellaneous (washing machine, oil well pump, farm equipment and others). After imitating individual pieces of machinery, teachers may suggest that children work in complementary groups: a bulldozer piles the dirt; a loader lifts it into the dump truck; the truck hauls the load to a dump.

Meeting Equipment Needs

Originality in use of available school furniture and cast-off equipment challenges teachers and students to do the most with what they have. Tables and benches can become tunnels and vaulting boxes. Two chairs are converted into a set of parallel bars for the execution of simple stunts. A mop handle is transformed into a ball bat, golf club, wand, roller or crank for swinging, jumping, pushing, pulling or twisting. Jump ropes turn into dancing partners, discarded bowling pins pass as dumbbells, bicycle inner tubes are used as stretching devices, and surplus ropes and cargo nets are made into climbers. All of these substitute equipment innovations are adaptable to most ages and grade levels, but the skills involved in each should have a planned progression through the grades like all other development skills.

Current literature by optometrists, psychologists, and remedial reading specialists reinforces convictions of physical educators that there is a direct relationship between bilateral movement skills

and academic achievement in most young children. It has generally been accepted that increased circulation of the blood to the brain, caused by exercise, makes the individual more alert and better prepared to meet mental problems and stresses. Future curricula should provide primary teachers with a sequential series of exercises to develop bilateral movement skills of children, which in turn will reinforce their reading and writing skills. Included should be: animal walks in all four positions; balance beam skills; ball rolling, tossing, catching, bouncing and dribbling; and coordination skills. These, with other related activities, will be suggested as a means of increasing a child's academic potential.

Before a child is able to sit for reasonably long periods of time reading and writing, words and/or numbers, normal sequacious physical development must have preceded. Muscles control the eyes in reading, the hands and fingers in writing, and the trunk in the sitting posture. These muscles need to be conditioned for their function in reading and writing (witness the restlessness of the primary child after a half hour of seatwork). Muscles controlling the eyes and fingers are small. Small muscles develop more slowly than the large arm, leg and trunk muscles. The infant uses his large muscles almost immediately in sweeping movements of the arms and legs. Continued development finds him turning himself over, crawling, pulling himself up to his feet and finally walking. Knowledge of his surroundings is enhanced by his ability to move freely about to explore his environment. But suddenly, the child is placed in a classroom setting where large movements disturb others. A transition period is necessary in order for children to change from active home life to the semi-active classroom.

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Each boy or girl has but one life. How he spends his time at work or play depends largely on how teachers have influenced and prepared him. A healthy, physically fit child has the capacity to face the world. Interaction of mind and body is most apparent to the observant teacher. A sick child is unable to concentrate or move efficiently. Poor posture might mirror insecurity, uneasiness, timidity or self-consciousness. Self-confidence, alertness and forcefulness are generally reflected in good posture. The insecure child is unable to perform to his physical or mental potential and, conversely, the child may become more insecure by his inability to perform physically or mentally. Tensions and anxieties are released through sports and games so that a child's entire outlook may be changed by an improved feeling of well being. Elementary teachers can be prepared to meet these challenges of the complex child.

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