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The Marginalization of Physical Education: Problems and Solutions—Part 2

Addressing Parents' Perceptions in the Marginalization of Physical Education

DEBORAH A. SHEEHY

*The influence of parents—over policymakers, other parents,
and their children's attitudes —cannot be ignored.*

Physical education continues to occupy the fringe of the academic experience of public school students. With the exception of South Carolina, physical education is not part of the high-stakes testing movement, and consequently we continue to see a reduction in required physical education credits and minutes, and districts allowing students to substitute athletics and band for physical education. Additionally, the media often portrays physical education teachers negatively (Duncan, Nolan, & Wood, 2002). For example, several television shows, movies, and comic strips have portrayed physical education teachers as overweight and militaristic coaches who drill and command the masses. This stereotypical portrayal of physical education teachers serves to reinforce strongly held notions that “those who can, do; those who cannot, teach; and those who cannot teach, teach physical education.”

The marginalization of physical education is a complex issue that continues to overshadow the unique contribution that quality physical education can make to the lives of young people. This is in part because the marginal status of physical education has become the status quo, while physical education teachers, for the most part, have failed to engage in practices that would combat this situation. For example, both Kretchmar (2006) and Doolittle (2007) identified two basic problems that have plagued high school physical education for years: (1) physical education teachers have failed to provide in-class experiences that students perceive as meaningful, and (2) physical education teachers have failed to convey to students that mastering a skill is important. As a result, short units have prevailed within a multiactivity curriculum dominated by team sports, with grading practices that focus on attitude, participation, and effort. Doolittle stated that a third problem exists in that physical education teachers have not explained to parents, students, other teachers, and administrators what is distinct about quality physical education.

The marginalization of physical education is further compounded by the overshadowing effect of the prior experiences of parents, other teachers, and administrators. This can be problematic for several reasons. First, it is not a secret that parents have a level of political influence that determines some of what happens in schools. For example, parents may choose to serve on the school committee, parent-teacher association, and other policy-making bodies, which give them some power over what happens or does not happen in physical education. Moreover, in many cases, parents in a particular school district have the power through voting to lend or deny their support for quality physical education in the face of fiscal problems. Second,

parents have the potential to influence their children's attitudes and behaviors toward physical education, as well as the attitudes and behaviors of other parents.

It is vital that physical education teachers try to understand parents' perceptions of the subject and take steps to address their perceptions in a manner that will counteract marginalization. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine parental perceptions of physical education and provide suggestions for addressing those perceptions in an effort to elevate the status of physical education in schools.

Parental Perceptions of Physical Education

Research results have indicated that parents, for the most part, have given high ratings to physical education (Graham, 2008; Sheehy, 2006). In fact, according to a 2002 study by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), 84 percent of parents had a positive perception of physical education in general, and 81 percent of parents believed that daily physical education should be mandatory. Additionally, James, Griffin, and France (2005) found that 80.1 percent of parents appreciated the use of assessment in physical education and 79.3 percent revealed that their child's physical education grade was as important as grades earned in academics—again indicative of a positive disposition toward physical education.

Although there is a great deal of evidence that parents' perceptions of physical education are positive, many parents still perceive physical education as less important than other academic subjects. For example, Sheehy (2006) reported that 67 percent of parents interviewed mentioned that the school's grading system ("S," "N," "U" grades for art, music, and physical education, and "A," "B," "C" grades for other subjects) was a sign of physical education's lower status in the curriculum. Unlike the parents surveyed by James et al. (2005), the parents interviewed by Sheehy (2006) confirmed that the manner in which physical education grades are reported indicates, in their eyes, that physical education is a low-status subject compared to other academic subjects.

This perception may be due in part to the fact that parents receive little information about their child's physical education program. Research results showed that 40 percent of the parents knew "nothing at all" about their child's physical education program (Sheehy, 2006). Results further indicated that parents who reported having "some information" typically acquired this information infrequently and from an indirect source (their child). The amount of detailed information provided by the child depended on both the interest and persistence of the parent. Consequently, many parents formed their perceptions based on information that was outdated, inaccurate, or incomplete.

As a general rule, these research results revealed that parents did not try to contact the physical educator directly for more accurate information regarding their child's physical education program (Sheehy, 2006). The lack of parental contact with the physical education teacher may have been influenced by the parents' own prior experience in physical

education. Often parents experienced low-organized games in which the athletic students dominated while the majority of the class experienced public embarrassment, humiliation, and failure. The results further indicated that parents used their recollections of physical education classes to fill in the gaps when they lacked information about their child's program (Sheehy). For the most part, parents remembered physical education as a meaningless experience—one that they had to tolerate and that their son or daughter must tolerate also. Hence, parents were unlikely to seek information about their child's current program because they believed they already knew what was occurring.

Strategies to Influence Parents' Perceptions

Physical education teachers can use several strategies to communicate with parents and positively influence parents' perceptions of physical education. For example, they can develop a physical education web page. It is important to go beyond what many schools have done, which is simply to provide a black-and-white document that describes the physical education policies. Although this type of document is necessary, consider the fact that in its typical form, such a document is not at all interesting or inviting to parents or students. It is important to display information about the physical education program on the web page in an inviting, interactive, easy-to-understand manner. For example, colors, graphics, and links to other web sites such as AAHPERD (www.aahperd.org), where parents can read about appropriate practices, would all add value to the site.

In addition, teachers should consider featuring an "Appropriate Practice of the Month," or a "Did You Know?" segment, that deliberately addresses many of the inappropriate experiences that parents were subjected to in physical education and provides information about appropriate practices used in physical education today.

Furthermore, use the physical education web page to educate parents on related wellness topics such as current exercise guidelines, healthy eating ideas, and recommendations for proper sleep for both their child and themselves. Rotate the topics regularly so as to encourage students and parents to check the web site often.

Inviting parents to participate in a physical education class is another way to communicate with them, as well as to influence their perceptions of physical education. When parents attend classes and see for themselves the substantive learning that is taking place, they will be better informed in general and better able to ask their child questions about physical education. If it is impossible for parents to visit a physical education class, consider offering before- or after-school opportunities in which parents can participate.

Another idea is to develop an interactive homework assignment that would benefit both students and parents. It is important to make the assignment meaningful and related to what students are learning in physical education. For example, one idea would be for students to interview their parents about the parents' current physical activity levels or



Teachers could encourage family walks as a simple means of involving parents in their children's physical education.

have parents complete a basic questionnaire regarding their physical activity. A more involved homework activity might be the use of the "Favorite Family Recipe Conversion" activity, whereby students and parents work together to make a favorite family recipe healthier and then describe the effect that those changes made (Whalen, Splendorio, & Chiariello, 2007). Regardless of which type of assignment the teacher chooses to use, it is often a good idea to design homework assignments in conjunction with other teachers in order to integrate physical education with a variety of subjects such as math, science, and English.

Another way to influence parents' perceptions of physical education is to organize special events that involve both parents and students. An example of this might be a dance evening during a dance unit. Students go home and teach their parents the dances they are learning in class, and the physical education teacher could also provide cues and various forms of assessment for students and parents to follow. The parents and their child practice each of the dances and then come to school together for an evening of dancing.

A final idea is to combine technology and exercise by organizing a virtual "Walk Across America." Parents and their children are encouraged to keep track of their aerobic exercise (in this case, walking) and log in their miles for a period of 24 weeks. There are free online tools available (e.g., exercise.lbl.gov and walking.about.com) that facilitate the logging of walking efforts. Using these online tools, the total distance can be tracked and reported. If the distance is far, as in the 5,048-mile coast-to-coast virtual experience, grade levels may compete against each other to see which grade reaches the destination first.

For a noncompetitive way of organizing the virtual travel adventure, assign different walking routes to each grade level. For example, students and their parents might travel the Trail of Tears, the Lewis and Clark Trail, or the Selma to Montgomery Historic Trail. Whether competitive or noncompetitive, these types of virtual walking events lend

themselves to integration with other subjects, such as math, history, or science, as students chart their progress while at the same time studying the historical significance of the trail or the flora and fauna of the region.

Conclusion

Physical education teachers need to be proactive, creative, and responsible for establishing and maintaining regular communication with parents in order to address parental perceptions of physical education, both correct and incorrect, as well as to increase the status of physical education. Generally speaking, there are five guiding principles in addition to the strategies presented in this article that can aid in this process:

1. Build a quality, well-rounded physical education program that provides students with a range of experiences in the broad content areas of games, gymnastics, dance, and fitness. In addition, programs should reflect appropriate practices such as having a clear learning outcome that is regularly and formally assessed, allowing for maximum and safe participation, preserving the dignity and respect of every student, promoting continued participation in physical activity beyond the classroom, promoting positive social interactions among all students, stimulating cognitive decision-making, and modifying activities and equipment for the developmental level of students (NASPE, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

2. Align physical education grading practices with those followed by teachers of other academic subjects. Avoid the common pitfall of basing student grades in physical education on attitude, effort, and attire, because this signals to parents, teachers, and students that physical education is not to be taken seriously (Doolittle, 2007; Sheehy, 2006). Instead, highlight the uniqueness of physical education to broaden students' understanding in each of the three domains of learning (psychomotor, cognitive, and affective) by conducting ongoing assessments in these areas and using those assessments as the basis for the final grade.

3. Take pride in your program by regularly sharing information about it with others, including administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Emphasize the distinctiveness and instructional value of physical education as an important aspect of students' overall educational experience. Furthermore, use the examples provided in this article to involve parents in a manner that will positively influence their perceptions about physical education.

4. Physical educators need to be willing to communicate in a meaningful and ongoing manner with parents. Instead of physical educators trying to change parents, they should try to figure out where parents are coming from and what they currently understand about physical education, and then structure their communications with parents around these beliefs. This is important because it has been noted that quality physical educators who have chosen to educate and continually involve parents, have had positive results,

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answering questions from parents and prospective students in a classic setting.

While it is necessary to practice multiple strategies in the recruitment effort, what makes a real difference to a prospective PETE student is the personal experience, achieved by actual participation in a teaching event where the teaching method of a department is observed and the skills, confidence, and fun of existing students are demonstrated. Recruitment is a vital part of the future of the profession. There is good reason to demonstrate the positive qualities of the university curriculum, its faculty, and its students. Experiential learning is one of the best methods for delivering these attributes at an open-house recruitment event.

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in some cases even life-changing results for all involved (Collins, 2006; Jones, 2008).

5. Physical educators must continually take a stand for quality physical education, because if they do not believe in what they are doing, no one else will. It is important to develop a support network of other professionals who are delivering quality physical education and brainstorm new ideas about how to communicate with parents and positively influence parental perceptions toward physical education.

In closing, it is essential to remember that committed physical education teachers can certainly play a crucial role in improving parents' perceptions of physical education.

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