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Overcoming Marginalization of Physical Education in America's Schools

with Professional Learning Communities

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As the educational landscape has inexorably moved toward standards- and outcomes-based education, measured and justified via high-stakes accountability measures, only those subjects deemed to be “academic” enough are receiving attention (e.g., math, science, reading). Unfortunately, physical education remains excluded as a core subject in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (Gambescia, 2006). This article will discuss how adopting a professional learning community (PLC) approach can help physical education to become recognized as a viable academic subject.

Physical Education Pushed Aside

The “academic” disciplines have undergone extensive restructuring with a focus on the creation of national standards and measurable outcomes. Although physical education has made similar attempts to establish legitimacy in public education (Richards & Wilson, 2012) and create valid student-learning assessment tools (Fisette & Franck, 2012), unfortunately it continues to be devalued. The mechanisms of marginalization of yesteryear continue today — perhaps, even, to a greater extent than ever.

James (2011) brought recent attention back to a doggedly persistent obstacle that has plagued physical education for the past 47 years — low academic regard (Henry, 1964). The marginal status of physical education has resulted from a host of nearly insurmountable barriers, including lack of administrative and collegial support, shortage of equipment, poor facilities, large class sizes, inadequate scheduling, philosophical and curricular differences, demotion of subject matter, isolation, and lack of opportunities for professional development (Barroso, McCullum-Gomez, &

Hoelscher, 2005). Further, the conditions physical education teachers have to face almost universally result in low teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993) and a “washout” of undergraduate training (i.e., the erosion of pedagogical skills learned in physical education teacher education programs; Blankenship & Coleman, 2009).

While, admittedly, there are shortcomings within the physical education ranks (e.g., indifference, resistance to change, lack of personal responsibility for professional growth; Prusak et al., 2011), most of these barriers are imposed on practitioners from without. Ironically, physical education is being overlooked at a time when the nation cannot afford to do so. One could easily

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argue that physical education teachers and physical education programs have been set up to fail. Perhaps the key to overcoming all of these barriers is for physical education teachers to no longer labor in isolation.

Reclaiming Physical Education in Schools

Siedentop and Locke (1997) used terms such as “gridlock” and “systemic failure” to describe the state of physical education while attributing many of its failings to the lack of collaborative efforts between public and higher education. Success, they argued, will be achieved only if practitioners and physical education teacher education (PETE) work together. Indeed, recent literature (McKenzie, 2006; Prusak, Pennington, Graser, Beighle, & Morgan, 2010) confirmed the effectiveness of collaborative efforts at all levels. Such reports on collaboration lend support to Henninger and Karlson’s (2011) assertions that there are four imperatives to improving the status of physical education in the schools: (1) a quality curriculum and lesson design, (2) accurate assessment tools for student-learning outcomes, (3) the provision of and participation in continued professional development, and (4) effective advocacy with administrators, students, parents, and the community. The reality, however, is that it is highly improbable that these imperatives can be accomplished by any *lone* teacher, thus underscoring the need for a collaborative approach.

Professional Learning Communities Defined. While the definitions of how exactly PLCs are structured and function may differ among various contemporary proponents, this article will operate

primarily within DuFour’s (2006) conceptual framework (for a more detailed description of PLCs, readers are encouraged to read the following works: DuFour, 2004, 2006; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; DuFour & Marzano, 2011). This framework is particularly applicable for physical education as it overlaps all four of Henninger and Karlson’s (2011) imperatives for ending the marginalization of physical education in public schools. Specifics of how a PLC approach can accomplish this will be covered later in this article. First, however, a brief description of PLCs is necessary.

According to DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), the principal characteristics of a PLC are that it has (a) a focus on learning rather than teaching, (b) members with a shared purpose and vision, and (c) members who engage in collective inquiry into best practices about teaching and learning, and that it is (d) action-oriented, (e) committed to continuous improvement, and (f) results-oriented. Lastly, a PLC systematically develops and deploys specific interventional strategies to ensure learning and measure students’ response to those interventions. Since a PLC approach has been less frequently discussed with a focus on physical education, the following brief description of these main components may be useful.

A Focus on Learning Rather Than Teaching. Acting as change agents, PLCs are tasked with the ongoing pursuit of the answers to four questions that lie at the heart of learning-focused education, namely: (1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when each student has learned it? (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning (DuFour, 2006)? and (4) How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient (Dufour & Marzano, 2011)?



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In a PLC-driven school, if a learner has not learned, a teacher has not taught — at least, not in a way that was effective. The PLC approach proposes that it is not enough for teachers to stand and deliver content to students — they must ensure that every student has learned the content. Further, student learning is no longer the sole responsibility of one teacher but is shared by all PLC members.

A Collection of PLCs with a Shared Purpose and Vision. Professional learning communities are formed at a school in a nested fashion (often by grade, subject, or however best suits the school's needs), which then become part of the whole-school PLC, which then become part of the district-wide PLC. However, most of the groundwork and discussions occurs within the school-based PLCs. This bottom-up structure is intended to entrust and empower teachers within a PLC with much of the decision-making required to answer the four main questions about student learning. Members of a PLC have a shared vision of the collective responsibility for student learning. Professional learning-community discussions center on establishing such things as member roles and responsibilities, group goals, and the development of a common curriculum and common assessments. Relationships between PLC members are caring and supported by open communication (Fawcett, 1996).

Collective Inquiry into Best Practices on Teaching and Learning. A PLC engages in systematic forms of inquiry (e.g., reviewing current literature, sharing personal or other's best practices, interpreting assessment results, conducting action research) into the effectiveness of current practices aligned with previously established goals. These discussions remain grounded in what they are doing, not doing, or could be doing to ensure that the overall goal — that every student will learn — is reached. At its core, a PLC is energized by member commitment to ongoing personal learning beyond their formal education.

Action Orientation. A PLC strives to move beyond dialogue to engage in an ongoing action cycle characterized by implementation, evaluation, revision, and reimplementation. Allowing even one student to fail without the provision of an appropriate and timely intervention would constitute inaction.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement. A PLC understands that complete success is unlikely without several iterations and refinements. Professional learning communities are never satisfied with “negative or even stagnant outcomes but have a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals” (DuFour, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, Deglau and O’Sullivan (2006) defined professional development as any opportunity for teachers to review, renew, and extend their commitments as change agents to teaching.

Results Orientation. The success of a PLC “must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions” (DuFour et al., 2005, p. 5). Thus, student learning is frequently assessed and analyzed, and then results inform future dialogue and practice. A PLC sets specific, measureable, attainable, results-oriented, and timely (SMART) goals (O’Neill, 2000) to accomplish the overall objective. A PLC frequently uses common, formative assessments, shares the results, compares practices that lead to them, and makes informed group decisions about how best to intervene in the learning process. Ultimately, it is how individual students respond to chosen interventions that guides practitioner decisions.

Response to Intervention. The phrase “response to intervention” (RTI) comes from work in the field of special education in the *Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act* (Protigal, 1999). Today, the practice of focusing on student RTI in order to inform and guide teaching has gained widespread acceptance in general

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education. Indeed, adopting one of several RTI approaches (Van Der Hayden, 2012) can inform and guide a PLC as to when and how to intervene in student learning.

The Value of PLCs in Physical Education. A PLC, in its most basic form and intent, is a collaboration of like-minded individuals who approach education from a learning rather than from a teaching perspective (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Philosophically speaking, PLC proponents are not satisfied with the “status quo” (DuFour, 2006) assertion that “if I taught it, they must have learned it!” but rather strive to shift the teaching/learning paradigm toward “If they did not learn it, I did not teach it!” Indeed, for much of the past 10 years, proponents for education reform ideas (both theoretical and practical) have turned to PLCs at the local, school, and district levels to implement this paradigm shift. Lacking, however, are writings specific to the functioning of PLCs in physical education. Therefore, the remainder of this article is dedicated to describing how forming a PLC might be the means for reclaiming a place for physical education by accomplishing Henninger and Karlson’s (2011) four imperatives.

What to Expect When Forming a Physical Education PLC

Teaching in a PLC-driven environment represents a departure from teachers working in isolation (see Table 1). Teachers may view this as either a positive or a negative shift. One of the advantages of the PLC model for novice teachers is the opportunity to be mentored in their early months and years. New teachers can benefit from the experience and guidance of veteran teachers, particularly with respect to policies and procedures unique to their school, which are unlikely to be covered in their undergraduate coursework. A nurturing PLC environment will allow them to contribute to the PLC dialogue, sharing new ideas and the current research they bring with them from their preparation program. Inclusion of these new ideas could prevent much of the “washout” effects (Henninger & Karlson, 2011) commonly experienced by new physical education teachers. An effective PLC could be a powerful socializing agent (with established induction mechanisms) that is both supportive and informative for new and veteran teachers alike.

On the other hand, resistance on the part of veteran teachers to fully embrace a PLC approach has been reported (Fulton, Burns, & Goldenberg, 2005). Reasons for unwillingness to engage in PLCs include feelings of loss of autonomy, resistance to making personal

Table 1.
How to Form a Physical Education PLC

1. Discover if your school or district supports a PLC environment.
2. Contact like-minded professionals in your school and form a PLC. Consider who might or should be included in the school, district, and community such as:
 - a. School-based PE teachers, personnel, students, administrators
 - b. District-based administrators and PE coordinator(s), and district-wide PE teachers and students
 - c. Community-based university professors and PETE programs, parents, students, health professionals, parent–teacher organizations, media outlets, and advocacy groups
3. Determine backgrounds, philosophies, assumptions, and practices for each member of the group. Identify a common ground and differences.
 - a. Encourage and initiate open dialogue.
 - b. Create a common set of goals, objectives, and desired outcomes.
 - c. Form specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals.
 - d. Create a common language, methodologies, and curriculum.
 - e. Create and frequently review outcomes of common assessments.
 - f. Engage in an action cycle characterized by implementation, evaluation, revision, and reimplementation.

work public, or a lack of understanding of change processes (Cuban, 1992). Many physical educators may resent the implications of being held accountable for student-learning outcomes that may be unachievable or outside of their control as educators. For example, Pangrazi (2010) argued that many of the things physical education said it would deliver (e.g., increases in fitness, motor skills, and lifetime activity patterns) are actually unattainable. Consequently, he pointed out the gross injustice of teacher accountability based on learning outcomes that are out of the control of the teachers. Prusak et al. (2011) pointed to additional sources of resistance resulting from teacher–coach role conflicts, misaligned job expectations with shifting job descriptions (i.e., today’s physical education is not what they signed up for), or, for some, an extinguished personal or professional will. Others, maybe not a few, are suspicious of the “next educational buzzword” that they have seen come and go without making things better for physical education.

Even when new and veteran physical education teachers, either by choice or by mandate, actually form a PLC, coming together will most likely be a lengthy process fraught with difficulties (see Table 2). Guskey (1986, 2001) described teacher change as a process that happens slowly and is often initially fragmented as the group goals and dynamics are established. For those new to PLCs, each member should prepare for the inevitable conflicts that come when individual interests are at odds with the group vision and decisions (see Tuckman’s [1965] work on group forming, storming, norming, and performing).

With patience and persistence the group will come out of the process more united and with a collective influence that would otherwise be impossible. This collective influence could, for example, be used to accomplish Henninger and Karlson’s (2011) four imperatives (see Table 3) for ending the marginalization of physical education as follows.

Imperative 1: Develop a Common, Quality Curriculum and Consistent Lesson Design. In examining one successful district-wide physical education program, Prusak et al. (2010) discovered

that one key to its success was the use of a common mandated curriculum, instructional strategies, and a shared language. Essentially, all teachers and administrators were “on the same page.” Long before PLCs were envisioned as a means for elevating physical education in public schools, this district had, in fact, created its own version of a PLC. As a result, the district had been able to avoid or overcome all of the barriers common to physical education elsewhere. These teachers are not marginalized. Rather they are happy and fulfilled and are viewed as a valued and unique part of the children’s education. Others similarly have found that an essential step toward physical education legitimacy is to adopt or develop a standard curriculum (Prusak et al., 2010) and standardized learning-outcome assessments (Grissom, 2004; National

Table 2.
Challenges of Creating a Physical Education PLC

1. A preference for isolation over collaboration
2. Perceived loss of autonomy
3. Unwillingness to make private work public
4. Lack of understanding of and resistance toward the process of change
5. Resentment toward accountability for student outcomes not under teacher control
6. Teacher-role conflicts
7. Frustration due to shifting job descriptions and expectations (e.g., “This is not what I signed up for!”)
8. PLC viewed as just another burdensome educational buzzword — a trend to be endured rather than embraced

Table 3.
Benefits of a Physical Education PLC

1. Ending the isolation of physical educators. Teachers need not feel alone or helpless once others are involved in creating quality physical education.
2. Physical educators create a critical mass with a common voice to advocate for the valuable and unique contributions physical education makes to the education of the whole child.
3. Ending the marginalization of physical education in the educational landscape by accomplishing all four imperatives described by Henninger and Karlson (2011):
 - a. *Imperative 1:* Develop a common, quality curriculum and consistent lesson design to facilitate the sharing of best practices and create consistency of curricular offering and delivery.
 - b. *Imperative 2:* Inform practice with common assessments of student learning to make the measure of success what the students learn and not just what the teacher has taught.
 - c. *Imperative 3:* Provide ongoing professional development in a PLC-driven environment to ensure that inservicing specific to the unique nature of physical education can occur.
 - d. *Imperative 4:* Advocate in physical education to provide an opportunity for physical educators to tell their story and promote the value of quality physical education in the public schools.

Association for Physical Education and Sport, 2010; Ward, Doutis, & Evans, 1999). Therefore, the use of a common curriculum with clearly stated learning and teaching objectives (in that order) is recommended, and a PLC is believed to be a well suited mechanism for meeting this first imperative.

Imperative 2: Inform Practice with Common Assessments of Student Learning. A PLC designs and implements common assessments for student learning outcomes and then designs curriculum and instruction to achieve those outcomes. Learning outcomes should be evidenced in a clearly articulated set of desired knowledge, skill, and disposition competencies. Teaching strategies — or interventions — are then employed in a three-tier RTI approach: Tier 1 interventions will result in most students learning the intended outcomes, Tier 2 interventions are intended for those who were unsuccessful due to lack of ability or who lack volition to try, and Tier 3 interventions are designed to address the most challenging of learner needs (either due to learning disabilities or superior abilities and lack of challenge). Summative assessments are viewed to be “necessary but insufficient” because they would give information about student learning outcomes only after the fact, with no possibility of intervention toward remediation. Therefore, a PLC would design and employ a variety of formal, informal, and formative assessments that identify learning difficulties in a timely fashion, allowing for an intervention tailored to solving the specific learning difficulty.

Essentially, a PLC allows the collective mind to formulate a host of teaching and learning activities and strategies that no individual teacher is likely to concoct on his or her own. Further, when a

PLC brings clarity to what students are expected to learn and then gather evidence that they have learned it, the PLC can use that information to guide future decisions about both learning outcomes and instructional strategies to attain them.

Imperative 3: Ongoing Professional Development. A physical education-specific PLC within a school typically meets weekly. Effective PLCs quickly move beyond simple administrative tasks such as scheduling equipment and facilities to concentrate on the development of common curriculum and assessments. They share ideas with and mentor one another as needed to carry out their collective vision. They define roles, responsibilities, and share required tasks. Based on the outcomes of learning assessments, a physical education PLC makes necessary adjustments to instruction in order to ensure that learning occurs for all students. Districts that have demonstrated success on a large scale (Prusak et al., 2010; Ward et al., 1999) have engaged its teachers in frequent, ongoing, physical education-specific professional development. Rather than attending an annual teacher development training unrelated to physical education, the physical education teachers from these districts were provided with frequent (monthly) physical education-specific inservices. In essence, individual school-based PLCs engaged with teachers from across what is essentially a district-level PLC.

Imperative 4: Advocacy for Physical Education. A successfully functioning PLC, by definition, has put an end to teachers laboring in isolation. There becomes a collective voice with a collective dialogue. Wisdom would suggest that the dialogue should include not only fellow physical education teachers, but also administrators, classroom colleagues, parents, and perhaps even students (G. Graham, 1995). Beyond the subject-based PLC, teachers should also engage in the school-wide and district-level PLCs to ensure that physical education has a voice in all educational endeavors and decisions. Making a solid argument for the retention of physical education in the schools will largely be a result of the work and success of physical education PLCs within the schools and across the district. While most PLC proponents recognize the value of subject- or grade-level school-wide and district-level PLCs, few extend this approach to the purposeful inclusion of teacher preparation programs.

Expanding Advocacy to PETE Programs

Any physical education PLC would be wise to reach out and include the programs that prepare their future teachers. Physical

Beyond the subject-based PLC, teachers should also engage in the school-wide and district-level PLCs to ensure that physical education has a voice in all educational endeavors and decisions.

education teacher education programs can be of inestimable value to informing physical education PLCs within a district and its schools. Not only do they prepare teachers with the latest information about the field, but they are also a vital resource for the ongoing professional development of inservice teachers. This preparation should include frequent feedback, collaboration, and the introduction to key concepts (Howey & Zimpher, 1989). Such a relationship would also serve to inform teacher preparation programs of emerging needs in the public school setting. This article is a perfect example. It resulted from a request from nearby school districts to include PLC-specific course content in the PETE program so that newly graduated teachers could be prepared to function within a PLC-driven environment. The authors found very little information about physical education-specific PLCs, and this article was created to satisfy the districts' request; it may now serve as an introduction to PLCs for other PETE programs. Twenty-five years ago, Siedentop and Locke (1997)

indicated that if practitioners and PETE “do not soon begin a joint venture there may be little left that requires cooperation” (p. 27), but they stopped short of describing how this might be accomplished. K. Graham (1991) suggested that this may be accomplished by taking a critical approach to the curriculum during PETE training. Undergraduate programs should allow time for students to learn, reflect, and collaborate. Embracing the PLC approach provides a plausible means of facilitating effective collaboration between practitioners and PETE.

To provide further solidification for the need to foster success in physical education, Prusak et al. (2010) examined the nature of the district–university partnership. Benefits of this relationship included a seamless transition from undergraduate coursework and practicum experiences through student teaching into the early months and years of probationary teaching. The same curriculum, management, instruction, and discipline methods were learned and used at all stages of teacher development. This degree of alignment serves to identify and recruit promising young teachers and provides them with strong socialization and induction mechanisms to ensure their success. It also provides for frequent interaction between practitioners and professors, allowing both to be current on the latest trends and issues in the field. Last, this relationship provides access to research findings that buttress all advocacy efforts to battle the forces that would continue to marginalize physical education in public education.

Summary

This article identified the convergence of three important ideas, namely the PLC movement, overcoming the marginalization of physical education in the public schools, and the pursuit of systemic success in physical education. The PLC-driven environment represents a shift from a culture of isolation to one of collaboration, which can be challenging but effective. A PLC environment may also provide a systemic approach to accomplishing the four imperatives (Henninger & Karlson, 2011) to improving the status of physical education in the schools: (1) a quality curriculum and lesson design, (2) accurate assessment tools for student-learning outcomes, (3) provision of and participation in continued professional development, and (4) effective advocacy with administrators, students, parents, and the community. In addition, Prusak et al.'s (2010) structures promote frequent professional development and suggest that the PLC approach could be the means for accomplishing inservicing of physical education teachers. The inclusion of school and district administrators, parents, and students in their respective physical education PLCs would serve to inform and advocate for quality physical education. Extending the PLC to include nearby PETE programs would also facilitate a seamless transition from preservice to inservice teaching, keep practice abreast of research, and provide ongoing professional development.

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