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Modifying Physical Education Activities for Success

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Introduction

As physical education teachers, it is our responsibility to teach activities that meet the needs of our students and achieve the goals and objectives of the curriculum. Articles have been written that take exception to some of the popular activities typically taught in physical education, particularly at the primary level. Activities have been deemed inappropriate for any or all of the following reasons:

- they are dangerous;
- they provide minimal participation levels for a the majority of the students;
- they are potentially embarrassing for singling students out;
- they eliminate some students from the activity;
- they promote limited physical activity; and/or
- they lack any goal orientation (Williams, 1992; 1994).

Activities such as dodge ball, relay races, kickball, and steal -the - bacon, have been singled out as being inappropriate for physical education classes.

This article takes the view that many of these activities may not necessarily be bad if improved to meet the needs of the student participants. Melograno (1996) stated that physical education activities should be structured so that students are able to build competence and confidence in their ability to perform a variety of motor skills, through frequent and meaningful practice opportunities. Further, he suggested that activities should be designed to develop student's self-concept and allow them to experience satisfaction and joy from their participation in physical activity.

Williams (1996) suggested that physical educators should make greater use of critical thinking skills to improve their planning and

teaching. Perhaps as part of the critical thinking approach, practitioners should be asked to reflect on the activities they presently teach and consider modifying them to further enhance the goals and objectives of their lessons.

Let us now examine a couple of activities that have been deemed inappropriate, the reasons they are in disfavour, possible ways of modifying them, and the implications of such modifications.

Relay Races

It has been pointed out that relay races have some positive aspects (student enjoyment, teamwork and skill practice), but all too often they are outweighed by negative results. These races often take a long time to organize and implement, yet students rarely get more than one turn. Also, as the races are very competitive in nature, the participating students often perform the activity under great stress, while the majority of students are merely watching. If students make a mistake, they are asked to do it again the correct way (Williams 1992).

Surely we all can picture the above scenario from a traditional standpoint. Typically, a class of 40 students might be divided into five teams of eight. Perhaps the task is to dribble a soccer ball from the end line to the mid-field line. Several cones may be placed strategically for each group of students to navigate around, in simulating a series of defenders. Students are asked to dribble the ball 'down and back' as quickly as possible while keeping the ball under control, and then pass the ball to the next student in line. Students are further instructed to sit down once they complete the task, so it is clear that they have finished. Potentially it could take about fifteen minutes to complete this race, from explaining it, picking teams, setting up the cones, and actually running the race. In this time, each student is physically active for at most only 60 seconds. The race is an exciting experience, with students screaming and yelling, and maybe laughing and crying as well. In the end it is clear who the winners and losers are. The winners are happy and excited. The losers are often unhappy, potentially embarrassed and/or angry. Accusations of cheating may be directed at the winners. There is usually only one winning team (unless there is a tie), which means 80% of the students have lost. Of course, the teacher can make this scenario more palpable or worse, depending on how they conduct the race and the emphasis they place on winning.

Relay Race Modifications

Let us now examine this relay race with a couple of subtle modifications. The organization of this race will depend on the amount of space and number of soccer balls available and the safety concerns, but assuming there is enough space, the class will be divided into 20 pairs. The students will dribble the soccer ball from sideline to sideline (width of the field), instead of from the end line to the mid-field line. This arrangement will give students even more room to complete the task. If there are not enough balls, then rubber balls could be used too. Instead of dodging cones the students could execute several re-direction dribbles per trip. Instead of completing the task once and then sitting down, they will go as often as possible within the allotted time, pausing to rest only as long as it takes their partner to complete the task. This type of relay race will also take about fifteen minutes to complete.

What are the implications of the modified relay race? It will take less time to organize, as the students will be asked to pair up instead of making teams. Time will also be reduced, as there will be no need to set out cones. It is reasonable to assume that the activity should begin within one minute, including time for the explanation. Student activity time will increase from approximately 60 seconds, to roughly seven minutes of the allotted fifteen minutes. Students will not know who is winning or losing because they will not be sitting down. No one will be on 'stage' because half the class will be busy dribbling and the other half will be catching their breath and preparing for their next opportunity to dribble. The emphasis will be on each student completing the task to the best of their ability and maximizing student activity time while decreasing waiting time. One interesting result of this modified relay race is that students are often more engrossed in their own activity than in winning. For more competition, each pair could count the number of trips they complete. This way, student activity time is increased while embarrassment is reduced. The key questions to ask as an educator are: what are the important objectives for this activity and how can I best structure it to meet my students' needs?

If space is a problem, or if the teacher has management concerns, relays can be organized into ten groups of four students each. Of course in this scenario, student activity time will decrease, with four students per group, as compared to only two students per group in the aforementioned relay. An example here could be running a basketball dribbling relay race similar to the soccer dribbling case described above.

The students could dribble the basketball from sideline to sideline. If an adjacent playing area is available, perhaps more groups can be formed to further increase student activity time.

One other activity that has been greatly criticized in physical education articles, is the dreaded dodge ball (other names for this activity include poison ball, killer ball or murder ball). This game will be examined next.

DODGE BALL

Williams (1992) rightly identified the potential problems involved when we divide a class into two groups and instruct each group to throw balls at the various body parts of their opponents. When we look at the traditional game objectively and critically, we see that it teaches most students to avoid, even fear the ball, as they may get injured when hit. Many students literally try to hide and avoid the experience but if they get hit they are quite happy to be eliminated, knowing that further injury or embarrassment can at least be temporarily avoided. An elimination game such as this not only forces students to sit out for potentially long stretches of time but inevitably the weaker students (who arguably need the most opportunities and encouragement) are eliminated first (Williams, 1994).

Dodge ball Modifications

Here are some modifications for this activity that can address some of the above concerns. The balls used should be of the soft foam or yarn-type variety and small enough to fit comfortably in the students' hand. Students should be instructed to aim 'below the waist' of their opponents. In a class of 40 students, two games could be played simultaneously. Ten students form an outside circle, with their opponents (another 10 students) in the middle. For a given period of time (say two minutes), students around the outside of the circle try to score points by hitting as many students inside the circle as they can. At the end of the allotted time, the teams switch places, whereby the throwers become the dodgers, and vice versa. Depending on the objectives of the activity, scoring could be done away with, or students could keep score individually, or as a team. Students could receive a point for each hit below the waist and lose a point each time they hit someone above the waist. Students (especially dominant ones) could be encouraged to work on their non-dominant side by scoring two

points for a hit thrown with their 'opposite' hand. Alternatively, instead of students throwing at their opponents, the game could be structured so that teammates pass to each other and tag an opponent out by touching them with the ball.

What are the implications of these modifications to the dodge ball activity? The safety issue has been addressed through the use of a soft ball. Students are also encouraged to aim at the legs and not the head or upper body. Students, particularly those who throw the hardest, are encouraged to use their non-dominant hand. For the most part, this will result in a somewhat weaker throw. Furthermore, this activity is no longer one of elimination.

As Williams (1992) pointed out, the game no matter how it is played involves "throwing, catching, running, thinking, teamwork and strategy" (p.57), not to mention dodging and faking. If the passing and tag technique is utilized as well, then the game becomes a cooperative one. Perhaps, with carefully thought out modifications, dodge ball is not such a bad activity after all.

Conclusion

These modifications are only suggestions. They are not unique, complex, or all encompassing. They are but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to modifying many of the physical education activities we teach. It is up to individual teachers to determine how best to structure activities to meet their programme goals and the needs of their students. Activities should focus on maximum student participation to allow for improvement in the area of motor skill development. Furthermore, student involvement in and enjoyment of physical activity may result in not only positive physical education experiences, but the potential for students to adopt an active lifestyle outside of school as well.

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