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## **Legitimate Physical Education - Emphasis on the Education**

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### **Abstract**

Many educators and members of the lay public have differing definitions and understandings of school physical education. Based largely on personal experience or perception, many believe that school physical education should merely be a time during the day where children and adolescents are physically active in an effort to produce healthy outcomes. However, this is not only an improbable outcome; it greatly limits opportunities for children to become proficient within the psychomotor learning domain. Because school physical education is the only subject area where the physical domain is strictly addressed, the purpose of this essay is to define, affirm, and depict an alternative to merely providing a fun and active curriculum in physical education for students. This alternative is known as “legitimate physical education,” and provides children with a true learning experience that can produce physically educated adults who have the skills, knowledge, and desire to engage in healthy and active lifestyles.

State education policy makers consistently target issues related to physical education (Eyler et al., 2010; Eyler, Budd, Camberos, Yan, & Brownson, 2016); most of those policies support physical education in a positive way. Additionally, the media and many public interest groups (e.g., American Heart Association, U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Task Force on Community Preventive Disease) assert that physical and health advancements are byproducts of physical education participation. However, the perception is that such positive outcomes cannot simply result from participating in a regular school physical education program or class. An array of supporting variables such as teachers or the teaching context supplement physical education participation to form what is “legitimate physical education” (LPE), a distinctly different phenomenon than what many people experience or currently understand to be “school physical education.” Because rethinking physical education as LPE can be considered a noteworthy paradigm shift for education scholars, administrators,

practitioners, policy makers and education consumers, the primary goal of this article is to define, affirm, and depict LPE.

Recent support for school physical education is largely connected to the promotion of physical activity (PA), fitness, and other forms of exercise (Eyler et al., 2016; McGuire, 2014). The obesity epidemic has resulted in a concerned population hyper-focused on the health and unhealthiness of both children and adults. Indeed, Michelle Obama, the former first lady of the United States, made this her main social agenda item. One solution to the obesity problem involves increasing children’s PA participation, which may lead to healthier children and, subsequently, healthier adults over time (Karnik & Kanekar, 2012). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS, 2008), children and adolescents should be moderately to vigorously physically active at least 60 minutes every day. Those who meet these standards are expected to improve immediate and long-term health.

Consequently, a common belief among the lay public and policy makers is that more frequent and active school physical education classes will enhance the ability for children to meet these PA requirements (Gordon-Larsen, McMurray, & Popkin, 2000).

Although the attention to school physical education is a promising sign from policy makers to increase physical education opportunities for students, physical education teacher education scholars contend that this outlook may have resulted in changes to the ecology of school physical education; not all of which are desirable. Currently, school physical education appears to have transformed in response to the policy changes or proposals to merely being a class time devoted to students being physically active, exercising, increasing their fitness levels, and having fun detracting from an opportunity to provide a meaningful learning experience for children. The intent of these policy changes and practices in physical education has merit, but it conflicts with the paradigm of LPE.

### **LPE Defined**

To understand the term LPE as intended in this article, one must understand that it is a philosophical stance on what physical education should be rather than a term with a rigid definition. Physical education is defined in various ways by organizations that support and influence education practitioners in general as well as those that support and influence physical educators. Separately, these organizations provide no clear definition of quality physical education, but one can interpret a complete definition of physical education from the differing organizational position statements and published documents. As an example, the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America offers guidance for all levels of physical and health education. According to SHAPE America (2015),

physical education is and should be globally viewed as an academic subject and should receive the same educational focus as all other academic subject areas. Recent U.S. legislation, through the reauthorization of the Every Student Success Act, agreed with SHAPE America's position (Cooper et al., 2016). This act established physical education as a key component of students' well-rounded education. The term "key component" represents updated jargon for a core academic subject area. Education focuses on learning; therefore, physical education should be understood as a subject in which physical educators teach and students learn. Teaching for learning in the physical education subject area takes many forms. Good physical education teachers align lesson plans with established state and national standards for learning, design logical progressions for learning tasks, plan for experiences focused on learning, support learning beyond movement, and prepare students to be active outside of physical education classes (USDHHS, 2008).

SHAPE America created and continuously updates national standards that guide most state physical education curricula. These physical education national standards influence state level standards and benchmarks in the same way other subject area organizations create their own standards to guide teaching and learning (SHAPE America, 2014). SHAPE America (2014) declares that physical education is committed to the development of "physically literate" individuals. The purpose of being "literate" in the physical realm, says SHAPE America, is that children gain skill, knowledge, and confidence for being physically active and healthy throughout one's full life. According to the SHAPE physical education national standard language, a child who is physically literate must demonstrate the following:

1. Motor skill competency

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2. Ability to apply cognitive learning to movement
3. Skill and knowledge to enhance health
4. Personal and social responsibility
5. Awareness of the many benefits of PA

Collectively, LPE provides a meaningful educational experience for students to further their overall development.

### **LPE Affirmed**

Perhaps surprisingly, scrutiny of all benchmarks associated with the five SHAPE America standards reveal an absence of language describing or any requirements for physical education teachers or students to spend their time during school physical education classes focusing on PA frequency or time spent engaged in PA. Neither the fitness level of children nor the amount of PA they participate in are mentioned in the benchmarks related to each standard described. The current physical education standards are the result of an update that enhanced the educational goals for physical education (SHAPE America, 2014) as, prior to 2014, the standards were problematic from an accountability perspective. These prior standards presented two particularly awkward focus areas for assessment, which asserted that students who were “physically educated” should 1) participate in regular PA, and 2) both achieve and maintain healthy fitness levels (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2004). The consensus among physical education scholars and practitioners regarding the SHAPE America standards is that they should be subject to observation, evaluation, and measurement (Ravitch, 1995); latent variables are problematic for practitioners or others to assess. Further, national learning standards for all educational subject areas are intended to be content standards indicating what a student should know and be able to do or demonstrate (Goertz, 2010; Stecher et al.,

2008). Removal of the two-problematic national physical education standards was then justified because they did not meet the definition of valid content standards.

LPE classes focus on student achievement and learning; merely engaging in physical activity during a physical education classes does not lend itself to measurable learning outcomes. The National Research Council (2013) recognized the importance of physical education for children’s health while also stating that participation could not be the sole source of children’s PA. The two 2004 standards featuring PA and fitness level requirements were deemed impractical; therefore, they were eliminated. SHAPE America published a restructured standard as a replacement. This new standard required teachers to educate toward health-enhancing skills and knowledge (SHAPE America, 2014).

Though the standards have changed, teachers continue to prioritize PA in the physical education curriculum (USDHHS, 2013). Research does not support the proposition that school-based PA achieves future health and PA (Parry, 2015), and there is little support connecting childhood PA to adult PA (Trost et al., 2002). Further, completed longitudinal research is minimal and studies are largely performed using adult reflections of their own childhood PA as predictors of adult PA (e.g., Haycock & Smith, 2014). Though this methodology presents severe limitations, results of those studies do suggest adults’ dominant PA influence comes from family and parent PA behaviors. In other words, children who are not naturally active, as supported by active families, are not likely to be PA adults. The long-term effects from placing children into required physically active environments, like physical education, are unknown. The effects seem, as the research implies, to

question an existing relationship between required PA and future PA intentions or behaviors. That said, the ability to physically move well and to competently perform a variety of movement skills provides opportunities for one to engage in a variety of health enhancing behaviors (Logan, Robinson, Williamson, & Lucas, 2012).

### **LPE Depicted**

The discrepancy between a PA-focused class and a LPE class is not as large as one might expect. Minor adjustments to “fun” physical activities can expose learning potential when they seemingly lack any educational intent. The National Research Council (2013) suggests that small changes can move physical education content lacking appropriate design toward greater quality. Though changes proposed in the subsequent sections can be perceived as major alterations, they are actually minimal. The minimalistic nature of these changes requires one important paradigm shift. A teacher must believe that practice does not automatically produce learning. Learning is the product of an effective blend between instruction (not to be confused with directions) and practice (National Research Council, 2013). Placek (1983) some time ago described a popular, unseemly physical education teaching philosophy known as “busy, happy, and good.” That is, rather than teach students with focused learning outcomes, physical education teachers sometimes choose to merely provide activities that keep children “busy, happy, and good.” Indeed, many school administrators, parents, and even children who experienced this environment rebel at the notion that physical education can and should be a demanding educational experience. Griffin, Chandler, and Sariscsany (1993) later warned that student learning was

improbable when tasks were planned around “busy, happy, and good” goals.

Appendix A displays inappropriate and appropriate objectives within common physical education activities. Inappropriate objectives are listed as traditional objectives that identify merely active and fun goals. The primary problem for the featured inappropriate objectives include the lack of assess-ability and a connection with established learning benchmarks. The suggested appropriate learning objectives, labeled as benchmark-aligned objectives that identify assessable criteria, are examples from SHAPE America benchmarks for student learning (2014). Depending on a teacher’s curricular needs or grade level responsibilities, one or more of the benchmarks can be utilized to transition PE to LPE. However, the appropriate objectives recognized are only examples, as there are many SHAPE America benchmarks that can be found for each featured activity.

### **Let’s Get Busy?**

PA is a wonderful part of physical education and remains so in LPE. Though the benefits of being physically active are obvious, PA and busyness cannot be the primary focus in physical education because standards and benchmark require different objectives. Hobbs, Daly-Smith, McKenna, Quarmby, and Morley (2017) acknowledge PA as an important part of physical education but warn that PA-heavy lessons may reduce motivation toward future PA endeavors. Targeting active students in physical education must not detract from overall objectives that include developing physical literacy, lifelong PA participation, and long-term health. Roetert and MacDonald (2015) reported appropriate physical education objectives and tasks targeting physical literacy learning are integrally connected with national standards and grade level

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outcomes. Setting up quality tasks begins with planning. Normally, tasks are formed after objectives are established; however, existing tasks that lack appropriate rationale can be altered to support standards and benchmarks. A teacher may have presented a task in the past because students merely enjoyed it and remained active for much of the task time. To improve the quality of the lesson, that task can still be presented as LPE, but must target credible objectives that align with appropriate content.

Fundamental motor skill development and skill application in games, sports, and activities should provide a framework for all movement goals in LPE (National Research Council, 2013). As a result, children will learn the skills that can be applied to a variety of movement contexts, which will give them more options to engage in physical activity as adults. For example, a child with underdeveloped striking skills will become an adult who is not likely to enjoy in physical activities that include striking such as golf or tennis. This leaves the adult with fewer options to engage in or enjoy physical activity. When students are moving, teachers should offer instruction before, during, and after movement tasks that is relevant to specific motor skill development. Other features, as demonstrated in physical education standards, should be clearly integrated into LPE objectives (Hobbs et al., 2017). In addition to skill mastery, physical education standards prioritize confidence building and group support “for advancing student learning and well-being in many educational domains in the school setting and apply equally to school physical education” (National Research Council, 2013, p. 131). On a final note, teachers often believe they are providing instructional feedback when they are merely managing student behavior (e.g., rules, score, misbehavior). Support for motor skill development should specifically

attend to actual skill performance expectations.

### **All Fun and Games?**

Williams (1992) professed “fun” to be both a blessing and a curse in physical education. A blessing thanks to the innate enjoyment of movement and a curse because fun often supersedes knowledge and skill learning. Research reports that enjoyment, interest, and fun are important in LPE when they are combined with learning and skill development (Abildsnes, Rohde, Berntsen, & Stea, 2017; Abildsnes, Stea, Berntsen, Omfjord, & Rohde, 2015). However, tasks should not be formed for the only purpose of fun. Physical education tasks known primarily or only for their “fun” attributes are often considered inappropriate or shameful (Williams, 2015). LPE lessons should be designed based on learning objectives first and foremost. Then and only then can teachers shape learning tasks toward an ecology in which students have fun learning. Ultimately, teachers should “not be overly worried that [students] are not enjoying themselves in [physical education] class” (Williams, 1992, p. 59).

Many examples of activities exist that are selected by physical educators as content because they are “fun.” Appendix A lists many of these activities and associated inappropriate and appropriate objectives. For example, parachute activities are popular in elementary school physical education and are often adopted for their fun factor. Official objectives are often not established beyond fun and teachers use the parachute popularly for the provision of organizational structure, full class activity, and non-competitive environments. Though these attributes are important, they do not satisfy the requirements for quality and justifiable LPE and are simply characteristics of the game.

The examples of appropriate objectives in Appendix A displays options for enhancing lesson content by modifying “busy and happy” objectives to accentuate learning in LPE. These objective changes provide teachers with opportunities for teaching, and validate physical education programs.

### Conclusion

Physical educators need not end a curriculum that is focused on PA and fun. Fun tasks and physically active games are an important part of LPE but minor changes must occur. Goals and objectives must be created that move existing tasks and activities toward a focus on education and alignment with standards and benchmarks. Curriculum that primarily involves PA and fun is not always the “fault” of the teacher. Parents, other teachers, and administrators often propose busy, happy, and even good as beneficial to the school’s educational system and acceptable physical education curriculum. A busy task, for example, can tire students out and prepare them for intensified classroom learning. Moreover, fun activities can promote student happiness and positivity, which conceptually improve school culture and image. These feelings are common but not aligned to LPE content. Teachers are often asked and being led toward curriculum, which minimizes education and maximizes movement and fun. The reality is that LPE should be vastly different from the “busy, happy, and good” curricula that the ignorant often advocate for in their schools. The transformation that would occur if significant individuals in schools (e.g., principals, teachers) embrace the potential and dramatic positive learning [emphasis added] outcomes of LPE for today’s children and adolescents is truly noteworthy. Indeed, the difference can be seen by comparing the terms PE and

legitimate physical education; one lacks education and the other embraces it.

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## Appendix A

Examples of physical education benchmark-aligned objectives that provide teachers with the ability to teach and assess content during active and fun activities.		
Activities that are traditionally active and fun:	Traditional objectives that identify active and fun goals AND are not assessable:	Benchmark-aligned objectives that identify assessable criteria:
TAG GAMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students maintain MVPA using an interval training technique</li> <li>• Students have fun being PA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applies the concept of open spaces to combination skills involving traveling (Elementary)</li> <li>• Identifies and participates in an enjoyable activity that prompts self-expression (Middle School)</li> </ul>
FITNESS STATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students work on fitness levels</li> <li>• Students participate in MVPA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates mature patterns of locomotor skills in dynamic small-sided practice tasks (Elementary)</li> <li>• Adjusts pacing to keep heart rate in the target zone to self-monitor aerobic intensity (High School)</li> </ul>
SCOOTER GAMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students work on leg strength</li> <li>• Students have fun being PA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works independently with others in a variety of class environments (Elementary)</li> <li>• Balances on different bases of support using locomotor and manipulative skills (Elementary)</li> </ul>
SKILL STATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are active while working on skills</li> <li>• Students remain PA in transitions between stations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practices skills with minimal teacher prompting (Elementary)</li> <li>• Demonstrates correct technique for basic skills in self-selected outdoor activity (Middle School)</li> </ul>
SHARKS AND MINNOWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students select activity levels in an interval training environment</li> <li>• Students have fun and are competitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepts players of all skill levels into the physical activity (Elementary)</li> <li>• Recognizes the concept of varying skill levels within physical activities and games (Elementary)</li> </ul>
PARACHUTE GAMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are organized and work in a group</li> <li>• Students participate actively in fun games</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follows rules and takes turns in group settings (Elementary)</li> <li>• Exhibits the established protocols for class activity (Elementary)</li> </ul>
CAPTURE THE FLAG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students maintain MVPA using an interval training technique</li> <li>• Students have fun being PA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combines spatial concepts with locomotor and non-locomotor movements in game environments (Elementary)</li> <li>• Identifies sacrifice situations and attempts to advance a teammate (Middle School)</li> </ul>
FOUR SQUARE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students move quickly during an active group game</li> <li>• Students have fun and are competitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combines traveling with striking in a small-sided practice environment (Elementary)</li> <li>• Recognizes the type of striking motion needed for offensive and defensive strategies and tactics (Elementary)</li> </ul>
RELAY RACES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students move quickly during active interval method activities</li> <li>• Students have fun and are competitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses various locomotor skills in a variety of small-sided practice tasks (Elementary)</li> <li>• Accepts players of all skill level into the physical activity (Elementary)</li> </ul>
SOCCER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are active while working on skills in a game</li> <li>• Students have fun and compete in a team sport game</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works independently for extended periods of time (Elementary)</li> <li>• Creates open space by staying spread on offense, using cutting skills, and passing to teammates (Elementary)</li> </ul>
VOLLEYBALL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students move quickly during an active group game</li> <li>• Students have fun and are competitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volleys a ball using a two-hand over-head pattern, sending it upward toward a target (Elementary)</li> <li>• Transitions from offense to defense or defense to offense by recovering quickly and communicating with teammates (Middle School)</li> </ul>