Breaking Out: Codependency of High School Physical Education

Mary O'Sullivan, Daryl Siedentop, and Deborah Tannehill
The Ohio State University

This project was an intensive study of 11 physical education teachers, their teaching, and their programs in contemporary high schools. The monograph attempted to describe, discuss, and understand perceptions and practices of these physical education teachers, their students, and parents in light of a contemporary analysis of physical education. The teachers in this study were chosen because they had good reputations among both their peers and the researchers as professionals who cared what happened in their programs and were teachers who tried to provide a quality experience for their students. The contexts of these teachers differed significantly. With the exception of facilities, differences among these teachers’ programs could not be described in terms of their suburban and urban locations. Nor were their differences based on whether they were male or female teachers or on whether they were coaches or noncoaches. Indeed, their concerns about teaching physical education, as well as their rewards from teaching, were more similar than different.

The purpose of this article is to draw a number of conclusions about these high school physical education teachers and their work based on our thinking and reflecting on the findings of the articles in this monograph. These conclusions are presented using the six overriding research questions set forth at the outset of the study. We then present some implications for high school physical education, staff development, and physical education teacher education.

Physical Educators’ Sense of Their Work

The 11 teachers in this study saw the major purpose of their high school physical education programs as exposing students to lifetime activities and fitness in the hope that they would continue these activities into their adult lives. Although the teachers clearly articulated this perspective to the researchers on several occasions, they never shared this view in any explicit way with students during their physical education lessons.

Students’ views of the purposes of physical education shared characteristics with their teacher’s views. For many students, the best part of physical education was that it provided an opportunity to play several different physical activities. While most students believed physical education was about learning how to play team games, almost half the students did not think they were being taught how to do that. Though parents and teachers viewed fitness as a goal of physical education, the students did not. In some ways, the students we observed seemed
to have negotiated less attention to fitness in the curriculum by wearing down the teachers. A number of teachers noted the constant struggle to get students to do fitness activities such as sit-ups, push-ups, and chin-ups and, as a consequence, they had changed their fitness focus. Molly recognized a change in her expectations for fitness for her students, and she felt she and her students were much happier since she moved toward a more recreational focus in exchange for greater student compliance and motivation.

The teachers' perspectives on fitness and fitness testing, together with our observations of fitness activities in their programs, presented a concept of fitness that might be operationally defined as the ability to do push-ups, sit-ups, and other such exercises, or what would have been labeled calisthenics in the 1950s. Siedentop (1980) noted that "there is no evidence that physical fitness tests such as these measure anything that has any valid connection to health-fitness, let alone motor performance fitness" (p. 58). While these teachers spoke of the importance of fitness for a healthy lifestyle, the activities they chose seemed more likely to make fitness a relatively unpleasant activity and may in fact be achieving results that were opposite to what they had intended. Tannehill and Zakrajevik (1993) suggested that physical education teachers need to address fitness in a way that demonstrates the outcomes and benefits of physical education. In other words, teachers need to help young people understand the association between fitness levels and success in sports. Also, providing alternative activities such as aerobics, step aerobics, weight training, jogging, orienteering and other such activities may increase students' desires to participate. While there are lessons and units that teachers can plan for students without the need of specialist equipment, it is becoming increasingly clear that modern technologically equipped gymnasia and gadgets can be helpful in gaining and sustaining the interest and even fascination of young adults in their own bodies and personal development (Kirkpatrick, 1987).

What was interesting from our perspective in this "negotiation" with students was that these teachers did not allow the managerial system to be modified to the extent they allowed the instructional system to be sidetracked. Teachers spent inordinate amounts of time establishing, monitoring, and maintaining the managerial task systems of their programs. There was a widely held assumption that if students came to class on time, dressed, and were willing to cooperate with the teacher and their classmates, they would gain most of the benefits their physical education programs had to offer. Westcott (1992) and Corbin (1987) suggested that if teachers are to gain and maintain students' interests in a healthy lifestyle, teachers must first get students to participate regularly in physical activity. One might argue that many of these teachers renegotiated the content of and expectations for their programs with the hope, perhaps even belief, that students would come and enjoy their time in physical education lessons and thus would voluntarily participate regularly in physical activity after school and later as young adults. While this may be a laudable hope, we are less sure that the strategy they have adopted is working.

Perhaps what is needed is not less or more demanding standards as a leverage for motivation but differently arranged and challenging curricula that allow informed student choice and that can seriously engage students in activities they view as exciting and challenging. We believe Westcott (1992) was correct when he noted that a quality program cannot be accomplished unless there is a
shared vision for physical education among a staff (regardless of whether this vision is a health related fitness, sport education, or a sociocultural perspective of physical education) and unless teachers “are willing to work patiently and progressively toward similar goals” (p. 348). It is also true that such a commitment to quality programming needs the support of the school administration to be successful.

The Context and Implications of the Workplace

Part of this willingness to negotiate with the students in the instructional system results from few people caring what goes on in the instructional space. Although these teachers may have greater substantive autonomy than most other teachers in high school, we suspect this autonomy derives from benign neglect. These teachers felt that few people cared about what they were doing or about their subject matter. Principals thought nothing of requesting many of these teachers to use their instructional time to set up or take down the bleachers for a school assembly. Such displacement often occurred with little or no input or notification to teachers. Without exception, these teachers felt the marginalization of their subject matter. One could argue that these physical educators suffered from multiple dosages of marginality: from society, from parents, from students, and from their colleagues. Differential time allowance for physical education (half a Carnegie unit for physical education for the same time allocation that other subjects receive a full Carnegie unit), class scheduling that showed little understanding or appreciation for quality instruction in the gymnasium, and lack of administrative support interfered with these teachers’ abilities to carry out the kind of job they thought was possible.

Teachers dealt with the marginality of their subject matter in various ways. It should not be surprising that most teachers did not communicate to students what they might expect to cover in physical education because in most instances students had little choice about when they could take physical education in their schedule. We got no inclination that much was different in physical education from semester to semester. In one sense it may be that these teachers felt that to have students, administrators, and parents take physical education more seriously would require an enormous effort and dedication on their part without any optimism that they would succeed, and it was therefore a hopeless task. The teachers knew that physical education was not challenging students but felt that it would be counterproductive to have tougher standards as they might, in the teachers’ view, alienate the less skilled student and have physical education perceived as a haven for elite athletes.

Rather than focus on the negative, perhaps these teachers were doing the best they could given what we would describe as their traditional notions of physical education programming (a physical-activity based system with team games and individual sports as curricular content). In one sense these teachers had a limited set of goals for physical education and limited goal achievement. In another sense these teachers appeared to be doing what their schools wanted, their programs seemed fully acceptable to their administrators, and as Rog (1986) noted, “everyone seems satisfied” (p. 53). During our time at the schools we found no evidence of any pressure whatever on teachers to improve their program or their teaching. Rog (1986) concluded, as we did, that there was “plenty of
time for social interactions and little pressure to meet challenges, exert great effort, or acquire new and unfamiliar subject matter. The system means that little time is needed for planning, evaluating, or disciplining” (p. 54).

The teachers we observed were not uncaring or lazy people. They were not bored by what we saw as the routine of their days. Indeed, in stark contrast to how we would have described their world (as boring and routine), they saw their professional lives as satisfying and challenging. In our view, their satisfaction did not come not from a challenging curriculum, the implementation of the subject matter of physical education, or a daily schedule of five lessons with a conference and lunch period. Instead their satisfaction and sense of accomplishment came from the relationships they sought to establish and foster with students. In addition we suggest that over time their busy lives outside the gymnasium were efforts to seek stimulation and challenge from their five lesson a day workload and the less than demanding instructional and programmatic role.

All the teachers had coached for several years at one point in their careers and 7 of the 11 still chose to coach. Our work with these teachers over the 12-month period suggested an alternate perspective on explanations for teacher–coach role conflict and the impact of the dual roles on physical educators. The lack of pressure to improve what is going on in the gymnasium and the lack of instructional challenges may provide some explanation why these teachers sought self-worth and challenge in other arenas, most notably the coaching and officiating settings, with graduate coursework a distant third. As the years went by, the energy originally used to design and teach lessons was diverted to outside interests because they could find stimulation, recognition, and self-worth while the contingencies of the physical education environment did not allow those needs to be satisfied in any meaningful way. The seemingly enormous investment of energy needed to break out of the dysfunctional ecology of the gymnasium and provide something that would challenge the students and themselves seems unattainable, and no real demand for such a breakout comes from teachers, parents, or students.

Rules, Routines, and Expectations

Given the above context, it is more understandable that a positive, well-ordered physical education class was the primary value for these teachers. The establishment of an ordered and predictable set of behaviors occupied an extremely important place in the curriculum at the start of each semester. In fact it was more clearly articulated and enforced than any of the substantive program content. Many of the teachers believed school discipline was a critical characteristic of an effective school, though most of the teachers felt their school discipline policy was not well adhered to by most of the teaching staff. Thus, they felt it was all the more important they had their own discipline policy in the gymnasium, policies that monitored everything from dress to attendance procedures to locker room behavior.

All teachers established efficient and smoothly running lessons but unlike what Leinhardt and Smith (1985) found, the focus on these systems was predominantly managerial with minimal instructional demands in what might be described as a trade-off to maintain cooperation among students. Such a trade appeared incredibly successful in that few discipline problems were observed and no discipline incident of any serious nature was observed in our time at the schools.
Not only were there no discipline problems but instead their gymnasiums and offices were quite livable places where these teachers had established wonderful social relationships with students. It was common for several teachers to have small groups of smiling and happy students in their offices before and after physical education lessons who bantered with each other and the teachers. These were just as likely to be quiet students or students with disabilities as they were to be athletically able students. This is in stark contrast to what we read of the increasing violence in schools for teachers and students and the increasing fear and alienation of teachers from students in schools (Gallup, 1988; Hoerr & West, 1991).

The Curricula and Instructional Ecology

The curricula offered by these teachers were remarkably similar and traditional. The programs of study were sport oriented with a multiactivity format. While district syllabi highlighted increased capacity for skill and strategic play in sport activities such as fencing, badminton, volleyball, and basketball, the nature of the instructional ecologies of these programs could only allow for modest gains at best. While none of these teachers could be said to have thrown out the ball, we observed instructional ecologies that might best be described as casual rather than learning environments in which students engaged seriously with learning activities. While teachers achieved for the most part classrooms in which students respected each other and the teacher, these classes were less enjoyable and rewarding experiences for students who were less skillful in general and were least enjoyable for less skilled girls in particular. The competitive nature of some learning activities within this casual non-goal-oriented environment allowed more assertive students, who were predominantly male in most (though not all) cases, to act as the steering group and control the tempo or pace of the class.

Accountability Systems

Monitoring and interaction were the most frequent forms of accountability used by these teachers. The informal and casual nature of the instructional setting reflected a weak, informal accountability system, with teacher expectations focused almost exclusively on compliance with the managerial system. These teachers did not perceive assessment and evaluation as important to their programs, which was reflected in their lack of accountability, informal or formal. Student assessment and grading was not based on substantive performance. Instead, good grades were traded for compliance and were used as a leverage in motivating students to participate. Motivation to take part in and enjoy the physical education environment as it was became the major thrust of these programs.

Attitudes of Students and Parents

If, as we suspect, maintaining order and arranging the content and contingencies of the environment were the primary goals for students to enjoy physical education classes, then it seemed to us that these teachers were partly successful. Most of the students liked physical education, though more than half of them
liked it less and saw it as less important than most other subjects in the curriculum. They generally did not feel that they were learning what they perceived they should be learning. If, as Carlson (1994) suggested, student attitudes about the worth of physical education influences their behavior, this may be a partial explanation for their less than enthusiastic responses to these programs. Parents, while somewhat supportive of their children's physical education, did not see it as important as other subjects in the curriculum and believed a pass/fail accountability system was adequate. Like their children, these parents did not feel that the learning they perceived important was being taught. Teachers' perceptions of parental support were even more negative with the exception of Leigh and can partly explain their sarcasm and sense of pessimism about building a legitimacy for physical education in their schools.

Implications

What are the implications of these assertions for how we might approach innovation and change in secondary physical education? What have we learned from this project about the kinds of staff development that might serve teachers best who work in these settings? What might act as a catalyst for improving the quality of physical education programs in these high schools and ones like them? What are the implications of these findings for those of us who prepare prospective teachers to teach in settings like these? What kinds of knowledge and skills do such teachers need, not only to survive but to grow as professionals and develop challenging and exciting physical education in high school settings like these?

It seems clear that though much might be done to change the nature and quality of the curricular and instructional programs at high schools, we must first tackle several noninstructional phenomena that inhibit the kinds of quality programs that can challenge and excite young adolescents and place physical education as a less marginal component of their high school education. This is not something that any one teacher can do alone. Nor, we suspect, is there any one thing that can solve this malaise. It is a complex set of factors that requires long-term investment by teachers, administrators, and teacher educators to convince our teaching colleagues and the community of the potential of physical education in the education of young people. High school physical education is trapped in what might be described as the dysfunctional “family” of the American high school (Barth, 1990; Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Lightfoot, 1983). There is little in the literature on physical education that provides guideposts on how to successfully break out. Breaking out of the dysfunctionality of the American high school is difficult and is doubly so for high school physical education, which is already considered by some to be an endangered species (Siedentop, 1987; Taggart, 1988). Dysfunctionality is most often a two-way street in the sense that there is a codependence, in this case between the teacher and the institution. If the high school ecology marginalizes physical education and makes it difficult to change, certainly the manner in which physical education teachers and programs succumb to those contingencies makes it difficult for high school change agents to get physical education moving.

There are examples illustrating how physical education teachers and teacher education programs have broken out and established themselves as integral components of the education of adolescents. We are convinced such reform needs
to be more comprehensive and radical, not incremental. A dramatic change from
business as usual is, in our view, what is required to have the teachers themselves
revisit what they do and challenge current practice and perspectives on the goals
of physical education. A radical change of the program, rather than incremental
changes by units of instruction, is needed to substantively alter the views of co­
workers, students, administrators, and parents toward physical educators and their
subject matter.

Acting locally on a school-by-school and district-by-district level, we, as
physical educators, must encourage and support those teachers and departments
seeking to establish quality physical education programs that can then be show­
cased as models of what is possible in our communities. We must take an active
role in developing sound programs and promoting them within the educational
community and among the public. Political and economic changes, along with
current trends, will determine how physical education will be defined and per­
ceived within the total education curriculum. The future depends in part on the
role we define for ourselves. Educating administrators and the public about what
is taking place in physical education and its potential in the educational growth
of young adults is critical and will ultimately impact the decisions made both
locally and at the state and national levels. This suggests that we develop educa­
tional materials and promote the goals and outcomes of our programs and the
achievements and successes we have achieved. This can be presented to parents,
administrators, and the public to assist in coming to appreciate what and who
we are and to provide support for our endeavors.

Acting nationally we must recognize that there is no one best program, but
we must work hard to identify, verify, and disseminate good physical education
programs (for example Placek’s and Locke’s current efforts to identify and
provide case studies of outstanding secondary physical education programs). We
also need to research how alternative program models are developed and sus­
tained, as Dyson (1994) attempted to do in his doctoral dissertation with a case
study approach of two alternative elementary physical education programs. State
and local organizations have to become involved in more and different ways.
The middle and high school physical education conference in Florida in 1991
and the resulting JOPERD feature (Rink, 1992) is a typical national level response.
While these efforts are to be applauded, there is no evidence they act as the kind
of change agent required to restructure high school physical education. We must
seek to be better informed from the literature about how best to disseminate
quality programs and encourage new ones.

The restructuring of physical education at the national level in Australia
and New Zealand has provided evidence that dramatic changes in the focus and
content of physical education can occur with positive outcomes. The reform
efforts in both countries have been of two types. The first has been the introduction
of a substantive cognitive component to high school physical education accompa­
nied by a state (Australia) or national (New Zealand) assessment component of
that material. Although this monograph is not the forum to discuss the merits of
the cognitive content of such syllabi (Kirk & Tinning, 1990) or the validity of
the assessments used in these programs of study (Fitz Clarence & Tinning, 1990),
there is a small but important collection of literature to suggest that the shift has
dramatically affected the lives of teachers who teach this new content. A growing
number of teachers perceive that they are viewed as legitimate professionals by
their colleagues and that they have been more successful in their arguments to school administration for more time and financial allocations than ever before. The standardization of assessment and the cognitive emphases of these new courses of study have provided a "certain legitimacy" for physical education in schools that had been lacking for most teachers during their careers. A second national effort has been the efforts by Grant (1992) and Alexander (1994) in New Zealand and Australia, respectively, to initiate sport education as a new curriculum model at the secondary level. Grant wrote how teachers using the sport education model noted it had captured the imagination and interest of students in ways not observed in our schools, such as "students' ownership and responsibility for what occurred at different stages of the program. . . . [Students] were valued members of a team . . . [and had] an opportunity to share responsibility for and fully participate in all aspects of sport" (p. 311).

Although we know of no high schools in the United States that have taken on either of these specific approaches to restructuring high school physical education, we hope Placek's and Locke's efforts will not only highlight quality physical education programs and disseminate them to a larger audience but also help us better understand the factors necessary to help teachers break out of the dysfunctional cycle of high school physical education and what it takes to sustain those efforts. In the meantime, we hope this project can bring the crisis of secondary physical education into better focus and act as another catalyst for change.