

## How Physical Education Teachers Undermine the Profession by Grading Effort and Participation

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### **Abstract**

Assessment in education is used as a means to determine whether a student is making progress. Historically within physical education, the components of assessment have varied and include measures of skill competency and improvement, but also other variables such as dressing out, participation, and effort. Unfortunately, many physical education teachers emphasize the importance of effort and participation which devalues the rigor of the discipline. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to consider the literature associated with assessment in physical education. An explanation of how current grading practices may negatively impact the profession is explained with a proposed alternative to including effort, participation, and other ancillary components into a physical education grade.

Physical education is dissimilar to other subjects within a school curriculum in that students are expected to be physically active during portions of the lesson. According to the National Association of Sport and Physical Education (2009), physical education participants are expected to be moderately or vigorously physically active for at least 50% of the lesson. Although there is no requirement to assess this level of activity, it is logical that teachers might assess how much effort a student is putting forth. However, whether this assessment should be considered as part of a grade is debatable.

Given that a large portion of a lesson's time is comprised of moderate to vigorous physical activity, it is not surprising that assessment of participation or effort is a component of many physical education grades. Because educational

assessment is acquired from several sources from which decisions can be made about students (Lund & Tannehill, 2010), and effort could serve as one of those sources. However, such a source is unlikely to appear in other subjects. Effort is not a requirement of state curriculums; measurable components that include knowledge, psychomotor development, and physical health care (Baghurst, in press). If both the state and national governing body do not require a measure of effort and participation, why do teachers assess them? There seems a disconnect between the expectations of decision makers and the actions of physical educators.

### **Providing Historical Context**

Although never a clear cut issue, prior to the 1970s what should be assessed in physical education was relatively well agreed upon (López-Pastor, Kirk, Lorente-Catalan, MacPhail, & Macdonald, 2013). During this period skills were most important. A student

was required to perform a skill and the teacher determined how well it was executed. The identification of talent was accrued through observation. According to Placek (1983), the objective of a physical educator was to encourage a “busy, happy, good” student, and not to focus on the development of supreme athletic prowess.

Objective testing began to replace both opinion and observation during the 1980s (López-Pastor et al., 2013). This testing replaced observation with the implementation of fitness and motor skill testing. Although this form of formal assessment removed some of the bias that might be experienced by a teacher merely “observing” a student perform, there was little assessment of learning. For example, a student was tested on whether skills could be performed, but a pre-post assessment did not always take place.

Some might say that assessment methods in physical education today are more rigorous and scientific. Yet, unfortunately many physical educators choose to assess in whatever manner they choose. While a standardized test might be used, it may be only a part of a student’s grade (Baghurst, in press). Effort, enjoyment, acquired knowledge, and skill development are all valued and assessed by teachers, but these components are weighted and assessed differently resulting in both standardized and alternative assessments that lack consistency (Baghurst).

### **Standardized Versus Alternative**

Often a requirement of a state or national curriculum, a physical fitness test is a standardized measure that is used worldwide. Recent findings suggest overwhelming support of such tests at all levels of physical education including physical education, teacher education (PETE) programs, and throughout a physical educator’s career (Baghurst & Mwavita, under review). However, fitness

testing has been questioned (e.g., Keating, 2003), and some teachers opt for alternative assessments such as measuring effort and participation (López-Pastor et al., 2013). It is interesting to note that participation, effort, behavior, attitude, and wearing proper physical activity attire (also referred to as dressing out) have all been reported as means for grading physical education students (Matanin & Tannehill, 1994).

Unfortunately, by grading ancillaries such as effort and participation, skill recognition can be lost. Here effort refers to an individual who exerts, whereas participation refers to an individual who merely follows instructions. For example, consider the student who puts forth enormous effort, yet struggles to demonstrate skills well. The teacher, recognizing the student’s willingness to try, scores the student poorly in execution but highly in effort. This results in an average grade. Consider then the student who is a master at the skill. Little effort is required to meet the skill requirements, and so little effort is put forth. As a consequence, the student receives a high grade for execution but a low one for effort which results in an average grade. Neither scenario is likely ideal, yet from a standardized perspective, the high skill student is disserved. Melograno (2007) provides a more detailed example of how, when performing an assessment, giving weight to effort and participation distorts grades for those students with high skill levels.

### **Effort and Participation**

Although there is limited research investigating the grading of effort and participation within physical education, Weiner (1994) indicates that grading effort subjectively is frequent, and objective and standardized measures are not considered. A teacher may grade a student lower, for example, if he or she is perceived by the teacher to not be putting forth appropriate effort. Conversely, a teacher may pity the student who tries yet fails. This results in grades by feelings rather than grades by

achievement. If effort is to be graded, how can it be done objectively? How does a teacher know whether a student is putting forth 80%, for example?

In one study, Biddle and Goudas (1997) asked three groups of teachers (PETE students, students with an option in physical education, and current physical education teachers) their preference for grading effort. It is concerning that all groups stated a preference to grade effort and progress over skill test scores, mastery, fitness scores, and comparisons to other students. In addition, the current teachers thought more favorably of high effort students regardless of outcome. Effort was perceived as “virtuous”, and it was deemed as more important than other factors. Normative and standardized measures were not perceived as important, and this desire to esteem effort above all is in direct contrast with the increasing efforts to standardize education.

Strand and Scantling (1994) investigated 958 junior high and high school student perceptions of physical education. From the survey responses, desired participation, effort, sportsmanship, and attitude were the preferred criteria for grading. Other attributes including attire, attendance, and behavior were also recommended means of assessment. This is in contrast to homework, written tests, skill tests, and fitness tests, which were all undesired.

Matanin and Tannehill (1994) asked 11 high school teachers from 10 different schools their perceptions on assessment, and found a general lack of perceived value in assessment. There was wide variation in assessment including both standardized and alternative assessments, but the overall consensus was that an active student was more important than assessing progress. Skills tests were thought to be a poor measure of student learning. Of further concern teachers

reported that getting a good grade in physical education was fairly easy, and could be achieved by putting forth minimal effort, coming to class, and wearing the proper attire for physical activity. In addition, physical education was perceived to be less challenging than most academic classes, and assessing was perceived to be disruptive to teaching and learning. Matanin and Tannehill (1994) summarized their findings by stating that:

*If physical education is to remain part of the high school curriculum, assessment is necessary to help ensure a quality physical education program for students, to provide feedback to teachers concerning their performance and the effect of their programs, to provide program justification, and to contribute to the accountability of our profession. (p.405)*

### **The Potential Damage**

Little appears to have changed over the past 20 years (Matanin & Tannehill, 1994; Strand & Scantling, 1994). According to Collier (2011), current assessment practices do little to counter negative perceptions of physical educators and the profession. Although the development of appropriate behavior, enjoyment, and participation are all important, they should support the learning of content in the psychomotor, affective, and cognitive domains rather than replace them. There are many reasons to advocate for physical education (Smith & Lousbery, 2009), but for any advocacy or change of perception to be effective, physical education assessment must be rigorous (Richards & Wilson, 2012). Assessment methods such as dressing out, merely attending the class, and putting forth effort are too common (Young, 2011).

When skill proficiency is included, grades are focused on improvement and mastery. Failing to assess skills results in the possibility that someone who is not as proficient may receive a higher grade than someone with the skill already mastered.

Young (2011) summarizes the issue well, “... it is time to collectively, as a profession, revisit the purpose of grading and seriously consider adopting assessment/evaluation methods that enable teachers to communicate, through grades, a student's achievement as it relates to curricular outcomes.” (p. 24) Currently, this is problematic, as criterion outcomes in physical education are not clear to students (Redelius & Hay, 2012).

### **Recommended Practices**

The physical education profession struggles to be recognized as a legitimate discipline by administrators and parents. LoBianco (2013) makes several recommendations for making physical education more visible. However, before doing so, it is important that the physical education program is worth advocating for, and includes standards-based assessments. Credibility for physical education is not a new problem, and is partly due to poor quality assessments (Matanin & Tannehill, 1994). It's unfortunate that Holyoak's (1984) synopsis still applies today. “We seem to be content with the past approaches using education arguments for our existence rather than being able to openly produce valid, reliable, and objective evidence that show we are change agents.” (p. 33)

Grading is used as a means of informing students, administrators, teachers, or others of progress, and allows the teacher to hold students accountable (Collier, 2011; Rink, 2010). Physical education's reputation is poor, and when students' grades are determined in part through wearing the correct attire or assessing effort and participation, how can we as physical educators complain (Young, 2011)?

In short, effort and participation along with similar ancillary expectations such as dressing out should not be included in a student's grade. They do not measure

learning outcomes even if they might be needed to achieve outcomes (Kelly & Melograno, 2004; Melograno, 2007). For example, when a student completes his or her SAT, does the test include a section where the student's effort, time spent studying, or practice scores can be considered? No, it is immaterial just as incorporating effort or participation into a grade is counter to most life situations, where productivity rules. It could be argued, in fact, that the student is being disserved.

Although such components should not be considered in a grade, they should not be ignored, and parents and others may wish to know whether a student is putting forth effort. Therefore, effort and participation should be at most minimally weighted in a grade (Melograno, 2007). Another possibility is to develop a separate assessment of these components that does not contribute to a grade point average. A formal grade could be given that assesses content knowledge and mastery, and a separate grade could be given in areas that are more subjective and content focused (Baghurst, in press).

### **Conclusion**

Grading effort and participation along with other subjective non-subject specific ancillaries have been used as assessment methods in physical education for many years. Young (2011) recently reported that components such as dressing out, participation, and effort account for over 50% of a student's grade. It is time to re-evaluate. This practice devalues the discipline by directly contrasting mandates requiring assessments that are standard-based (LoBianco, 2013). Although administrative factors are important for learning (Kelly & Melograno, 2004), they should not be part of a student's official grade. Making this adjustment will transfer focus to performance and mastery standards that are measurable thereby improving the image and credibility of physical education.

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