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The Physical Education Hall of Shame: A much-needed review

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Abstract

Neil Williams authored three articles in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* (JOPERD 1992, 1994, and 1996) which defined and discussed many games, activities, and teaching practices that, while common, were found on closer inspection to be quite problematic in terms of promoting skill, allowing adequate activity time, and in maintaining a physically and emotionally safe environment for students. He labeled these activities and practices as being worthy of inclusion in a so-called Physical Education Hall of Shame. This article reviews the first of Williams' writings, offering additional perspectives on his ideas.

The Physical Education Hall of Shame: A much-needed review

In 1992, Neil Williams published the first of three articles that identified games, activities, and teaching practices that should be eliminated from quality Physical Education programs. He labeled these as members of a fictional entity known as the Physical Education Hall of Shame (PEHOS). A play on words, these were activities which, instead of being worth honoring and remembering (as would be the case in a Hall of Fame), qualified them as activities that should be discontinued and even forgotten. In subsequent years (1994 and 1996) Williams added additional activities to the Hall. His writings provided a clear call for re-thinking our teaching practices.

At a state SHAPE conference in 2021 this author witnessed a presenter use two teaching practices listed in the Hall of Shame articles. Further, internet websites offer a variety of supposedly good ideas that may, or may not be, very good. One example is a website called Physedgames. The landing page advertises itself as a "site . . . used by professional physical education teachers as part of successful programs in school gyms – here you'll find amazing

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ideas for P.E. – tried, tested, and proven by physed teachers and coaches! (physedgames.com start page)”. Unfortunately, one finds several more examples of William’s PEHOS activities on this site including two that will be noted in this article. It seems clear that there is a need for a review of the principles Williams wrote about. If the issue of what defines quality Physical Education - and what exemplifies *non*-quality PE - is still relevant (and surely it is!) then Williams’ ideas need to be remembered and implemented. The purpose of this article is to review the first of the three Hall of Shame articles and comment on the activities and teaching practices discussed in it. The intention is to remind our colleagues of things that should, and more intently, should not be done in their Physical Education classes.

Williams (1992) identified seven “charter inductees” of the so-called Physical Education Hall of Shame. He wrote from the perspective of a professional with over 20 years of experience. His first article opens with the statement that we (as professional Physical Educators) are “attempting to assist our students in the development of unity of their minds and bodies to enable them to live as healthy and productive adults in our society” (Williams, 1992, p.57). Unfortunately, many popular activities he had witnessed over the years contained “many features and traits which are contrary to accepted practices of good physical education teaching” (Williams, 1992, p.57). In other words, although we are professionally bound to help kids grow and enjoy physical activity, many of the things we teach prevent those same kids from learning to enjoy physical activity! Here, then, are the first seven members of the Physical Education Hall of Shame: Dodgeball, Duck duck goose, Cranes and crows, Kickball, Musical chairs, Relay races, and Steal the bacon.

Reasons for inclusion in the PEHOS included many variant features. In summary, these activities have elements such as (1) Absence of the purported objective; (2) Potential to

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embarrass a student in front of the rest of the class; (3) Focus on eliminating students from participation; (4) Overemphasis and concern about the students having “fun”; (5) Lack of emphasis on teaching motor skills and lifetime physical fitness skills; (6) Extremely low participation time factors; (7) Organizing into large groups where getting a “turn” is based on luck or individual aggressiveness or competitiveness; and/or (8) Extremely high likelihood for danger, injury, or harm (Williams, 1992, p.59). Each of these activities will now be reviewed.

Dodgeball

Why is this game on the list? Although Williams acknowledges that it is a game that is enjoyed by some students (namely those who are highly skilled and physically dominant over their classmates) it is also a “litigation accident waiting to happen” (Williams 1992, p. 57). We can all imagine the physical and emotional injuries that would result from a student being hit in the face whose nose is broken, and the compounding problems (and lawsuits) should that student wear glasses and the glass cut into the students’ eye. Perhaps half of the students, but more likely a quarter of the students, actually “play” the game; the rest hide, hoping not to get hit too hard, and then readily accept sitting in the bleachers while the carnage continues. How can these students develop throwing skills, catching skills, or any other skill if they are eliminated from practicing those skills? Williams writes that we can find better ways to teach skills and promote teamwork without putting students into a high-injury risk environment.

Further, in 2017, SHAPE America released an official position statement on Dodgeball which very clearly and emphatically labels this game as an inappropriate activity. The position statement notes that even when teachers employ “modifications such as using softer balls and recycling eliminated players back into play” it remains “a game in which the goal is to hit other

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students with an object, and that promotes bullying behavior, which SHAPE America considers inappropriate teaching practice (SHAPE America, 2009). The concluding statement reads:

Dodgeball is an activity in which the sole purpose is to eliminate players by hitting them with an object. SHAPE America acknowledges that physical educators can make modifications to the traditional game of dodgeball in an effort to mitigate its negative effects. Even with such modifications, however, offering dodgeball in physical education class or other times during the school day serves only to alienate many students from physical activity. Instead, educators should choose to offer activities that help all students become physically literate individuals and that contribute to a positive school climate.

The takeaway? Dodgeball can't be defended among fellow professionals, school colleagues, PTA's, or in a court of law.

Duck Duck Goose

Kids sit in a circle; one kid walks around and eventually taps another who tries to get up and tag the tagger before the tagger sits down. It is a task that is practically impossible to achieve. Further, it is an activity that severely limits any actual activity. One kid walks around a bit, another gets up, and everyone else remains seated. Imagine a math class in which one kid works a problem on a task sheet, then passes the task sheet to a friend to work another problem, while everyone else sits doing nothing. Perhaps five or six students each work one problem during a 10-minute period of time while the rest of the classes watches this less-than-interesting thing. Bad teaching? No doubt.

Cranes and crows (AKA Giants, elves, wizards)

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Two teams line up near a dividing line. The teacher calls out one team or another (“Crows!”). The called team chases the other team back towards a line some distance behind that acts as a safe zone. Any player tagged before getting to the line is “captured” and becomes part of the other team. The process repeats until one side has captured all or most of the other. The “Giants” etc. variation has students assuming the role of magical being with some set of superpowers. Given the teacher’s call, one side or subset of a side may become the chaser or the one being chased. Explaining the rules and their variations takes an inordinate amount of time, and this is compounded when students get to choose which mythical creature they want to be. In terms of actual activity time, as much as 90% may be spent in setting up the game, explaining the rules, and dividing the teams. That leaves less than 10% of the allotted time being spent in active movement.

Kickball

This is a game we teach kids in kindergarten and/or first grade. It mimics baseball, our “national pastime”, thus reinforcing understanding of and appreciation for our cultural heritage. That’s great, right? Maybe, but Williams notes several major drawbacks in this game. Obviously, it is a “stand around” game. One kid rolls a ball and one kid kicks it while the majority of the class just stands there (or sits if they’re on the batting team). It’s a situation in which Physical Education lacks physical activity. Furthermore, it’s a game that kids can and do organize and play by themselves. Why spend time teaching the game when they can play on their own (and make up their own rule variations) during recess times?

Musical chairs

The PE variation usually uses hula hoops on the floor instead of chairs, but this makes little difference. Like Dodgeball, this is an elimination game. Williams reminds us that

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elimination activities are “self-defeating, because the students who are in the greatest need of skill development are immediately banished, embarrassed, or punished, and then given no opportunity to improve.” (Williams, 1992, p. 58). Even if teachers have students move using various locomotor skills (“OK everyone, this time I want you to skip around the hoops when the music starts.”) this activity still affords more standing/waiting than actual moving. We can and should practice movement skills without eliminating students.

Relay races

Think about this one: how long does it take to divide kids into teams, explain the rules, set up the relay stations, get everyone set in their places, and, in general “get ready” to do this activity? Compare that with the actual few seconds of frenzied activity each student participates in. It would not be uncommon for the organizational time to last 5 or more minutes while the activity time, per student, lasts 10 seconds. That’s a ratio of, at best, 300 stationary seconds to 10 seconds of movement. Using our math class example again, it would be akin to asking students to solve one problem on a worksheet and then wait 5 minutes (doing nothing) until they attempted to solve another problem. This is NOT a good use of time.

Steal the bacon

Variations of this activity abound, each of which have the students divided into two teams standing on opposite sides of a court area. Students are numbered from 1-X. If the teacher yells out, “Number 3”, then the student who is number 3 on each team runs out to the center of the playing area in an attempt to “steal the bacon”, which is a bean bag or similar item placed in the middle of the court. One student steals it and attempts to return to his/her team line before being tagged by the opposite player who didn’t quite get there in time to steal the bacon. Isn’t the problem obvious? Two students move for 6-8 seconds while the rest of the class stands still.

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Doing the math: when a game lasts 10 minutes (i.e., 600 seconds) – and it will take that long for all numbers to be called – it means that any individual student moves those 6-8 seconds out of 600 seconds, which in turn means the student is active a mere 0.01 percent of the time.

Conclusion

Williams notes that it is “incumbent on us . . . to structure and teach our classes with the intention and purpose of achieving our ultimate goals (p. 59).” Being the only academic discipline that actively promotes both physical skill and physical fitness while being an environment that allows students the opportunity to develop in those areas places great responsibility on us as Physical Educators. SHAPE/NASPE National Standards (2013) provide a framework from which to operate, and with which we can foster both skill and fitness development while promoting a lifelong valuation of physical activity for the physical, emotional, and social benefits it provides to every individual. When we incorporate activities which deprive kids of activity time, which potentially embarrass students, and which do not develop the skills which the activity purports to develop we do those students a grave disservice. Thus, every Physical Educator must evaluate his/her teaching practices and the activities of their curriculum. If a “shameful” activity is found, no matter how much we think our students may “like” the activity, we must relegate that activity to the proverbial dustbin, i.e., the Physical Education Hall of Shame.

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