

Ten More Reasons for Quality Physical Education

R. Scott Kretchmar

In the August issue of *JOPERD*, Guy Le Masurier and Charles Corbin (2006) provided their top ten reasons for physical education programs. The article blurb suggested, "When [people] ask 'why,' this is what you tell them" (p. 44). Scientific evidence indicates that regular physical activity

1. helps to prevent disease;
2. promotes a sense of well being, self-esteem, and overall wellness;
3. aids in fighting obesity;
4. promotes lifelong physical fitness;
5. enhances the likelihood of activity persistence;
6. provides health-related self-management skills and motor capabilities;
7. does not detract from academic objectives and may actually promote them;
8. makes economic sense;
9. is widely supported by a variety of governmental, health, and academic organizations; and
10. fosters whole-child education.

They concluded by asking a rhetorical question and providing an answer. "Ask [any parents] what is important. Perhaps more than anything, they would wish for good health for their children and their loved ones" (p. 50).

Le Masurier and Corbin, I think, are right both about parents and reasons for quality physical education. Health is a high-priority concern for parents, and we need to do a better job of sharing the scientific information that ties human well-being to movement. Nevertheless, these authors stopped short of providing the full list of top reasons for quality physical education. I say this be-



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cause I have it on good philosophic authority that there are actually 20 reasons. The following 10 additions, therefore, are offered in the spirit of a friendly amendment.

Consequently, when anyone asks you why quality physical education is important, this is what you should add to the previous list.

11. Physical activity is fun.
12. It is also delightful.
13. It is personally meaningful.
14. It is a primary source of identity, of who one is.
15. It offers a refreshing playground, a respite, something to look forward to.

Physical activity also helps a person develop five fundamental human freedoms:

16. The freedom to express
 17. The freedom to explore
 18. The freedom to discover
 19. The freedom to invent
 20. The freedom to create
- One of the greatest things about physical activity and play is that they make our lives go better, not just longer. It is the quality of life, the joy of being alive, the

things we do with our good health that matter to us as much or more than health itself.

Of course, parents want their children to be healthy. When asked about preferences for a boy or girl, most expectant parents say, "We don't care. We just want our baby to be healthy." Nevertheless if and when a healthy child comes into the world, the focus shifts quickly beyond health. Parents then say that they also want their child to be happy, well-adjusted, and successful.

There is no question that health and happiness are closely connected. Obesity produces both health risks and adjustment problems. However, we also know that biological health alone does not guarantee a meaningful existence. Good health, by itself, does nothing to ennoble us. None of us wants our epitaph to read: "In his better days, he had a resting heart rate of 54!" And nobody ever won a citizenship award or a Nobel Peace Prize for having a body mass index of 22.

That is why those of us in physical education need to focus on two things at once—on health promotion and on quality-of-life education. I would like to believe that the greater tradition in physical education has always focused on developing people as much as organisms, meaning as much as muscles—all the while understanding that both sides of the equation are intertwined. In this regard, it is significant that Le Masurier and Corbin ended their top-ten list with whole-person education. This could well be interpreted as an indication of their support for this broader tradition and history.

These authors did not, however, get fully to the meaning part of our physical education story, an account that begins simply enough with positive affect or fun (reason #11). Fun is a fundamental asset of well-run physical education programs because we are the purveyors of one of the greatest playgrounds known to humankind. It includes grassy fields, challenging gymnasiums, dance floors, a variety of watery and snowy places, mountainous cliffs, biking trails, and running paths. It includes places that generate unique sensuous delights and locations in which we

must rely both on uncommon persistence and hard-won skills, the products of which, as we all know, can be deeply gratifying. Our playgrounds, in short, are places for special experiences—the kinds of experiences our students have difficulty encountering when confined by classroom walls and seated in a chair.

Armed with these kinds of playgrounds, making physical education fun should not be horribly difficult. In fact, we aim too low if we try to produce only moderate levels of fun for a majority of our kids. If we cannot get 80 percent or more of our students to say that physical education is absolutely the best part of the school day, then we are probably squandering our playground assets. But acts of squandering do not stop there. We also aim too low if we target fun alone (Kretchmar, 2005b).

One affective objective that lies beyond fun has been called delight (reason #12). Delight is different from fun, just as “love” is different from “like,” and “excellence” is not the same thing as “competence.” Delight is typically more durable than fun. It is the kind of feeling we encounter when we are carried away, enthralled, captivated. In the clutches of delight, we often forget what time

it is or how long we have been doing something. When physical education is merely fun, our students are, to be sure, entertained, pleased, more-or-less interested, and happy. On the other hand, when students experience delight, they are transported from

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the mundane to the memorable. They will want to tell their friends and parents about their experiences. Physical education will be changed from merely a good part of their school day to an unforgettable part of their educational experience.

With this in mind, we need to seek consistency. If we take pains to measure and monitor differences between caloric expenditures, heart rates, and time-on-task, should we not also measure and monitor the quality of experience we find written on the faces of our children and in their body language? Is anyone prepared to argue that the difference between fun and delight is less important than, say, the difference between 10 and 20 minutes of vigorous activity in a typical physical education class? I would not want to make this argument, and I base this both on my understanding of physiology and the significance of human encounters with delight.

For reasons 13 and 14, I put personal meaning and identity. We have all had the experience of watching children make the transition from moving for someone else's reasons to moving because they want to. Often this is marked by the shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. When the intrinsic

takes over, we know that we have done our job. Odds for adherence increase dramatically. The motivating carrot and other external structures that we provided can be taken away with a degree of safety. Activity has become personally interesting or otherwise meaningful.

To be sure, objectives related to good health can be one source of a personally meaningful physical education experience. Exercise, stress reduction, good eating habits, and other healthful behaviors make good sense. Our students can enjoy being informed, living prudently,

and finding success in reducing their weight or increasing personal fitness levels. Nevertheless some research (e.g., Dishman, 1988 & 1994) suggests that good reasons, even health-based reasons, do not sustain activity long enough for new habits to replace older, less healthy behavior patterns. Particularly with children, who often feel that they are years away from chronic health problems, the prudential approach may not resonate. It does not rise to the level of that which is personally meaningful and becomes a part of one's very identity.

Thus, the promotion of a personally meaningful physical education experience, more often than not, lies in the direction of social interaction, challenge, increased motor competence, fun, and delight. Who our friends are, what we are good at, where we can go, and what we can do—these things often do more to produce personal meaning than does our health. If this is true, the key educational transition in physical education is not the move from health-uninformed to health-informed living. It is from other-directed, impersonal, reason-grounded duty to self-directed, personally meaningful, reason-transcending play.

This educational advance is captured by the following two kinds of reports given by our students. One 10th grader says,

From all the fitness activities available, I chose running. It provides a break in my day. Also, I know it is good for me. In phys ed we did it twice a week, and we are supposed to keep it up the rest of our lives.

The second student, who is more self-directed and reason-transcending, says,

I am a runner. Running is part of my life. My day is not complete unless I get in my run. Running, for me, is not a chore. It is just something I do. I guess it is part of who I am.

Reason 15 speaks to the rhythms of human living—our work and our play, our tending to predictable obligations balanced by our openness to serendipity. In duty-bound, workaholic cultures, this balance goes out of whack. People keep their noses too close to the grindstone and, pretty soon, exhaustion sets in. This may be followed by disillusionment. The world turns an unattractive shade of gray, and we lose our zest for living. Therefore we need “time off,” a time to re-create ourselves, to find meaning in places other than work.

If we make physical education something like work, we do not meet this important human need, and we miss this crucial pedagogical opportunity related to lifestyle balance. When we say or imply to our children that physical education is “good for you,” we are nudging it in the direction of duty and work. Too much education, I would argue, is put in these terms. “You *need* to learn to spell. You *need* to learn algebra. You *need* to exercise.”

Of course we and our students need to exercise, but activity does

not have to be organized around the themes of prudence, good reasons, and human needs. We can portray physical education as that part of the curriculum that is more a privilege than duty, a place where students *get* to move rather than *have* to exercise. This approach, if nothing else, better meets our educational responsibility to promote lifestyle balance.

Finally, I described reasons 16 through 20 as five great human freedoms—the capacities to express, explore, discover, invent, and create. I am not sure if they are the five most important ways in which we encounter liberty or that the list cannot be expanded. But I am certain that these five capabilities outline a good portion of what it means to be humanly competent and, thus, free in this sense.

The French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), argued that we misunderstand human freedom if we overemphasize theory, rationality, or book learning. The fundamental way in which human beings experience their educational growth, he said, is through an expanding array of “I cans,” not the possession of a longer and longer list of propositions or facts. On this view, quality of life hinges primarily on capabilities, skills, sensitivities, and knowing how to do any number of different things. The greater the array and depth of our “I cans,” the greater the confidence, freedom, and the opportunities we find in daily life. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty suggested that our intelligence is needed for each and every capability, whether mathematical, verbal, artistic, or motor-oriented. Freedom, he felt, is needed for embodied people, not just minds.

Thus, as I have written before (Kretchmar, 2005a), we need to remember that we live in only two places where “I cans” are important—in chairs and . . . everywhere else! We physical educators are responsible for a good portion of the

“everywhere else.” Through quality physical education programs, we can complement the in-chair freedom to write effectively and creatively with the out-of-chair freedom to dance gracefully and expressively; the in-chair freedom to use numbers and equations to explore relationships with the out-of-chair cross-country skiing freedom to explore what lies beyond the next snowy ridge.

We can choose, of course, to spend much of our life in chairs, in car seats, in front of our computers, and in bed, but we cannot choose to live disembodied. We cannot choose an existence that is devoid of sensations, colors, kinesthetic feels, basic motor skills, and a potentially meaningful world of moving about in space and time. Consequently, people who cannot move well for lack of skill, or individuals who are significantly unfit, lose something more than optimal health. They lose a good portion of their human freedom—all those delightful freedoms that are found away from chairs.

Therefore, with the list of ten amendments now before us, we can ask again, “What do we want out of life: good health alone or good quality of living?” Most of us would object to the question because we want both, and we know that the two are interrelated. But this acknowledgment speaks in favor of the amendments. When someone asks us why we need quality physical education, we should quickly reply that there are 20 good reasons, not just 10.

It may be true that when we are addressing school boards, we will want to emphasize the first 10. Health sells. The obesity epidemic has caught the attention of most everyone. Good health is the launching pad for all we want to do with our lives. Also, if any of the school board members sitting around the table have not had good physical education ex-

periences themselves, they may have a hard time understanding the quality-of-life argument. It is difficult to pitch fun, delight, and freedom to individuals who may associate physical education far more readily with discomfort, defeats, and showers.

This, however, does not require that we forget or underplay the remaining 10 reasons. Nor does it require that we organize our curricula around fitness and weight reduction. One of the smartest things we might do in physical education is aim for delight. If we are successful in that, we will surely get health too. This suggests that we not only need to be mindful of all 20 reasons when we develop our curricula, we may also want to reverse their order.

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