

TEACHING PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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"Kids aren't the same anymore," a veteran physical education teacher recently lamented. He is right, of course. Changes in the diversity of student backgrounds, more varied family structure, and greater incidence of at-risk behaviors such as drug use, violence, and dropping out (or staying in school and "cruisin' in neutral") have created problems for teachers and students alike. Students have more unsupervised discretionary time, more access to guns and drugs, and more exposure to the electronic media (including the music industry), which bombards them with messages about dress, money, fame, and violence when they are perhaps most vulnerable, most interested in being "cool" and "looking good." These problems are exacerbated for kids who live in inner-city "war zones" (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1991; Walberg, Reyes, & Weissberg, 1997), face poverty and racism every day, and are not well served by bureaucratic, unresponsive schools (Weiner, 1993). Although the inner city has special needs, the problems this nation's children and youth face are now surfacing in all communities (Benson, 1997).

Children and youth today need more guidance, and criticism for failing to meet students' needs has spread beyond urban schools to schools in general (Des Dixon, 1994) as well as community agencies (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; McLaughlin & Heath, 1993).

WHAT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY?

The central question for us is this: To what extent and in what ways can physical education help meet the needs of today's kids? What is our responsibility, and how can we meet this challenge?

Toward a More Holistic Approach

In-school physical education has the potential to reach far more children and youth than any other kind of physical activity structure. This advantage, however, has to be

weighed against such disadvantages as large classes, large numbers of students assigned to teachers every day, and bureaucratic policies not always in the best interests of kids. To broaden and deepen our potential influence, physical education is better conceived as a community-wide undertaking with community youth organizations taking their place alongside schools in providing physical activity programs for children and youth (Ianni, 1989; Lawson, 1994; McLaughlin, 2000).

We need more than classroom management to address the problems that children and youth bring to school and community programs. To help today's kids, we need to deliver on our holistic rhetoric about such things as character development and the affective domain. Of course, physical activity is central to physical education, but the world today requires that teachers put kids ahead of physical activity, that they teach for personal and social development much more than teachers have in the past. Although many current social problems are rooted in social, economic, and political policy and are beyond the reach of most teachers and youth workers, each of us can investigate the possibility of introducing alternative physical activity models and structures into our programs. Margaret Mead (National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth, 1996, p. 22) offered us hope with this remark: "Never doubt that the efforts of one person can change the world. . . . Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Alternative Program Model

In this chapter I describe one such alternative program model along with applications to both in-school physical education and community extended-day programs and structures. Nearly 30 years of interplay among my beliefs and values, my fieldwork with underserved and so-called at-risk kids, and self-reflection support this approach. I have been joined by many teachers and youth workers who have applied these ideas in a variety of K-12 and community settings with students of all socioeconomic classes throughout the United States and in other countries.

TEACHING PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION: PROGRAM PRINCIPLES

What I learned in my early years of teaching was that although I could not change the experience of poverty, racism, and violence that my students brought to the gym, I could, through activity experiences and discussions, help them be more reflective about the personal and social-moral decisions they were making. I gradually came to understand that teaching personal and social responsibility in physical education meant helping children and youth become more personally responsible for their own well-being and more socially and morally responsible for contributing to the well-being of others.

Until recently (Hellison et al., 2000) the fundamental principles for teaching personal and social responsibility have been largely implicit. Unfortunately, this circumstance has led to some weak and even erroneous interpretations and applications by teachers.

Some general guidelines for teaching physical education help set the stage for a personal and social responsibility program. You can compare your beliefs and practices with these guidelines to determine to what extent teaching personal and social responsibility makes sense to you, as well as the changes you would need to make to use this approach (see also the questionnaire in Hellison et al., 2000, pp. 45-46):

- Because physical activity is central to physical education, the teacher must be competent in teaching physical activities.
- Physical education should not only be active but educational as well; it should put kids first and promote holistic development. Holistic development, however, needs to be focused. Following Sizer's (1992) less-is-more guideline, a few focused program goals will have greater effect on kids than many diffuse goals.
- Physical activity programs—because they involve action, interaction, and a range of emotional states—offer unique personal and social development opportunities, and people often make claims about these kinds of contributions. Personal and social development, however, is not an automatic outcome of participation in sport and exercise; such development requires specific goals, strategies, and teacher qualities.

These assumptions lead us to the essence of teaching personal and social responsibility:

First, a certain kind of teacher-student relationship is essential. Although terms such as *caring* and *empathy* dot the literature and are certainly important, the key to teaching responsibility is to be able to recognize and respect the following qualities in one's students:

- That they all have strengths, not just weaknesses
- That each is an individual and wants to be recognized as such, despite the uniformity of attire, slang, gestures, and so on
- That each knows things the teacher does not; each has a voice, a "side," that needs to be heard
- That each has the capacity, if not the experience, to make good decisions; often, they just need practice (as they do in learning a motor skill)

These last two, voice and decision-making capacity, are especially crucial if responsibility is to be put into practice.

Second, the teacher must integrate personal and social responsibility goals and strategies into the physical activity lesson rather than teach them separately. This requires the teacher to be competent not only in teaching physical activities but also in teaching students to become more personally and socially responsible. Further, the teacher must be able to integrate the two sets of content.

Third, teaching responsibility means empowering students—that is, gradually shifting power from the teacher to students (accompanied by self-reflection). Teaching responsibility means helping them learn to make wise personal and social-moral decisions and giving them opportunities to do so.

Fourth, transfer from the activity setting to other arenas of life—school, playground, street, home—is crucial if responsibility is to become an integral part of kids' lives.

GOALS AND GOAL MODIFICATIONS FOR TEACHING RESPONSIBILITY

The program goals shown in figure 14.1 give students a clearer, more specific sense of what they are to take responsibility for. These goals are often referred to as levels, because they represent a loose progression from one to five. The first two goals (or levels), respect and effort, are the beginning stage of responsibility development; both are essential to

