

PEDAGOGY

Assessment of Effort and Participation in Physical Education

Timothy Baghurst

Abstract

Within education, determining whether a student is progressing appropriately occurs through assessment. However, opinions regarding how physical education students should be assessed vary greatly. As a consequence, some physical education professionals encourage skills-driven measures of competency, and others believe that attributes such as attitude, effort, and participation are equally or even more important. Therefore, the purpose of this article was to provide an overview of the current literature surrounding effort and participation as a component of grading in physical education. In addition, discourse on the impact that varying methods for assessment have on the physical education profession is provided, followed by a best practice method for including effort and participation in assessment.

Unlike other subjects or disciplines in school, physical education requires students to be physically active during the lesson. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2009) suggests that school children be moderately or vigorously physically active for at least 50% of the class period. To adhere to this recommendation, students must put forth effort. Many physical educators include effort as a component of a student's assessment. However, state curriculums do not require effort to be measured. Instead, measurable components include physical health, knowledge, and psychomotor development.

Timothy Baghurst is an assistant professor, College of Education, Oklahoma State University. Please send author correspondence to tbaghurst@live.com.

According to Lund and Tannehill (2010), assessment is a process whereby information is gathered from several sources to make decisions about students from an educational perspective. Therefore, physical educators may include effort as a component of assessment. Thus, a disconnect appears between what state administrators expect and what physical educators do.

Physical educators that grade effort may do so to recognize the student who tries hard but struggles to master skills. For example, students are tested on their skills in archery shooting at a target. One student has exhibited enormous effort trying to master the skill, even spending time after school, but is simply unable to improve on his or her original performance. Thus, when assigning a grade, the teacher recognizes that although the outcome was subpar, the effort put forth was exemplary, and a higher grade is awarded than deserved by the skills demonstrated.

However, including effort as part of a grade adversely may affect the student who displays skill mastery. Considering the same example, the skilled student does not require much effort to demonstrate proficiency. Thus, when grading, the teacher notes the high skill performance, but lowers that grade because effort was not necessarily evident. The resulting outcome of these scenarios is that both students acquire similar grades. Thus, considering that state curriculums focus on performance outcomes over process, it could be argued that the student with high skill proficiency is unfairly graded. Melograno (2007) provided an excellent tabular example of how weighting participation and effort may distort grading for the highly skilled student.

Brief History of Assessment in Physical Education

Assessment has never been a simple issue, although in physical education prior to the 1970s it was relatively straightforward. López-Pastor, Kirk, Lorente-Catalan, MacPhail, and Macdonald (2013) described assessment pre-1970s as relatively simple: the teacher would observe the student performing an action and decide whether they could execute it correctly. Physically talented students were identified through observation. The purpose was not to create supreme athletes, but to develop a “busy, happy, good” (Placek, 1983) student.

During the 1980s, however, objective testing began to replace opinion and observation (López-Pastor et al., 2013). Such testing was designed to focus specifically on motor skills and fitness. How-

ever, these tests demonstrated that a student could perform a specific skill, but did not account for learning that may or should occur.

With these issues in mind, today's physical education assessments vary greatly. Some educators focus on learning, others on skill development, and others on enjoyment or effort. Many combine more than one of these foci to develop an assessment that is standardized and alternative. Physical fitness tests are extremely popular worldwide as a standardized measure and are often a requirement of a state or national curriculum. Such tests are not without their critics (e.g., Keating, 2003). Alternative assessments are also popular and include effort and participation (López-Pastor et al., 2013). In fact, Matanin and Tannehill (1994) found that wearing appropriate clothing, participation, effort, attitude, and behavior were common methods used for assessment in physical education.

Grading Effort and Participation

The literature on grading effort and participation is limited, particularly within physical education. However, Weiner (1994) suggested that teachers may be susceptible to grading effort based on feelings rather than an objective, standardized measure. For example, because effort is controllable, a teacher may feel anger at a student for not putting forth effort. However, the teacher also may feel pity if the student makes an effort but fails. As a consequence, grades are awarded based on feelings rather than identifying evidence of effort and therefore result in a subjective grade. Grading without an objective measure is particularly difficult when no obvious reference point for effort is available; a teacher may have difficulty determining whether a student is exerting 60% effort, for example.

Biddle and Goudas (1997) tried to determine the preference for grading effort with three groups of teachers. Group 1 members were student teachers specializing in physical education, Group 2 members were student teachers where physical education was an added "option" to their degree, and Group 3 members were current physical education teachers. Teachers were asked to rate on a scale their preference for grading procedures. All groups preferred to grade on effort and progress over items such as mastery, behavior, fitness scores, comparison to other students, and skill test scores. Furthermore, the current teachers preferred students that demonstrated high effort regardless of the performance outcome over students who put forth little effort. Effort, therefore, was seen as virtuous, and all groups valued it more than any other factor. According to Biddle and Goudas, participants had little desire to grade through norma-

tive or standardized measures. The desire to assess through effort raises an important question: How does this assessment philosophy mesh with an increasing emphasis in education on standardization?

Matanin and Tannehill (1994) also investigated assessment and grading in physical education by asking 11 high school teachers in 10 schools their perceptions on assessment. They found that teachers valued assessment and believed a letter grade should be assigned in physical education. Measures used for assessment varied greatly and included standardized and alternative assessments. However, teachers reported that keeping students active was more important than assessing student progress and that skills tests were perceived as a poor measure of student learning. Of further concern, Matanin and Tannehill found that

teacher comments indicated it was fairly easy to achieve a good grade in physical education by coming to class, dressing, and putting forth minimal effort. Many teachers agreed that physical education was not as challenging as most academic classes. (p. 401)

Assessment “got in the way” (p. 401) of teaching and learning. Of the 11 teachers, only two mentioned the importance of skill development in assessment, but all teachers included dress, participation, and effort. Assessment was based on participation first, knowledge second, and skills third. Other factors included attire, effort, behavior, and fitness level. Matanin and Tannehill summed up their findings succinctly:

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)

Strand and Scantling (1994) investigated the perspectives of physical education students. Using survey responses from 958 junior high and high school students, the authors found that all categories (male, female, junior high, and high school) desired participation, effort, sportsmanship, and attitude as their preferred criteria for grading. Second, other attributes such as attire, attendance, and behavior should be considered. The least preferred attributes for

grading were homework, written tests, skill tests, fitness tests, and potential.

Standards and External Perceptions

Little has changed since the findings of Matanin and Tannehill (1994) and Strand and Scantling (1994). Collier (2011) remained concerned with the manner in which physical educators assess and suggested that current assessment practices merely reinforce negative perceptions of physical education and its teachers. Assessments that focus on behavior, enjoyment, and participation, although important for a successful physical education program, should not replace the learning of content in the psychomotor, affective, and cognitive domains. Physical education assessment must be rigorous for physical education advocacy to be effective (Richards & Wilson, 2012), and many positive reasons exist why physical education should be advocated (Smith & Lounsbery, 2009). However, without quality physical education programs that have clear, measurable means of assessment, physical education is likely to remain irrelevant and not be taken seriously.

These arguments for revising assessment in physical education are further supported by Young (2011), who notes that assessment methods including dressing out, attendance, and participation are too common. In addition, although skill proficiency is sometimes used as an assessment, grading is based on improvement as opposed to competency. Thus, a student who improves more than another may receive a superior grade. This may be unfair to the student who has mastered the skill already and has little upon which to improve. Young stated, "...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). This remains a relevant problem, with recent research suggesting that criterion outcomes in physical education are not clear to students (Redelius & Hay, 2012).

This is important, as physical education as a profession struggles to be recognized by administrators and parents (LoBianco, 2013). LoBianco suggested several methods for making physical education more visible, among them the need to have a physical education program worth advocating for and the need to have standards-based physical education.

Recommended Practices

Credibility for physical education is a long-standing problem and in part stems from a lack of quality assessment (Matanin & Tannehill, 1994). Holyoak (1984) summarized the problem well, and it could be argued such a summary still applies 30 years later:

We [physical educators] have struggled to find success in terms of national acceptance because we have been unable to produce the volume of data on a proactive basis that we demonstrate a major impact on the entire society. 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 a mark or standard used to inform students and others concerning progress (Collier, 2011). A grade informs administrators whether a student has been successful and allows the teacher to hold students accountable (Rink, 2010). Physical education has a poor reputation academically, and how is this surprising if students' grades are determined by the clothing they wear or their effort and participation (Young, 2011)?

It is recommended that when determining a student's grade, which in turn signifies a standard of achievement, effort and participation not be included. Although they are important for learning to occur, they are prerequisites to learning outcomes, not the outcomes themselves (Kelly & Melograno, 2004; Melograno, 2007). When a student completes the ACT, for example, his or her score is the only important aspect; the amount of time spent studying is immaterial to the outcome, as is the case in many situations. Thus, building effort or participation into a grade is counter to most life situations, where productivity rules.

However, the teacher should not ignore effort and participation completely. Although parents want to know where their child stands with respect to proficiencies, they also are likely to desire an indication of how he or she behaves during class and whether the child demonstrates effort. Thus, instead of being included in a formal grade indicating proficiency, effort and participation should be minimally weighted (Melograno, 2007) or included as a separate grade or level.

For example, on a typical assessment form for a kindergarten student, several motor skills (e.g., hopping, galloping) likely will be

included whereby the physical education teacher indicates a level of proficiency for each skill ranging from *work needed* to *proficient*. Additional components could be included on this assessment that allow for consideration of factors other than proficiency such as effort and attitude. Such a process could be included at other academic levels where a specific grade is assigned (e.g., *A* to *F*) rather than a target level. A formal grade could be provided for content knowledge and mastery of skill, and an additional but separate grade could be given for areas that are more subjective and not content related. Melograno (2007) referred to this as distinguishing between grading variables and reporting variables. This allows the parents, student, and teacher to recognize standards-based proficiencies and note other areas that may be important to report. After all, character traits that lead to effort and participation are the prerequisites for learning to occur (Collier, 2011), not the outcome itself.

Conclusion

Although effort and participation have long been an established measure for determining outcomes in physical education, their use has a detrimental impact on the profession. In a recent survey of 617 schools, administrative duties such as dressing out, participation, and effort accounted for over 50% of the achievable grade (Young, 2011). This is in direct contrast to state and professional mandates for standards-based assessments (LoBianco, 2013). Thus, physical educators need to reevaluate how and why participation and effort are included in grading. Although such administrative factors are important for learning (Kelly & Melograno, 2004), it is recommended that any grade given should be separate to the learning outcome assessment (Melograno, 2007). Removing administrative components from a student's grade focuses outcomes on measurable standards and will serve to increase the credibility of the physical education profession.

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