

The Aims of Physical Education

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Physical Education (PE) has always been a tricky subject to deal with. Although it is in the school curriculum in most senior secondary schools and there is a teacher for physical education, her job is mostly to check the length of the hair and nails or punishing students for not passing recommended standards of personal hygiene or discipline. She is in the forefront during the celebration of national days. Unlike other subjects, there are no assessments. It is often difficult to acknowledge the contribution of physical education in the teaching-learning practices of a school.

As an organisation, our pursuit in *Art of Play* is to enhance the contribution of physical education in the teaching-learning practices of schools. We work with eight government schools in Delhi and Haryana to build an understanding of PE for the learning process of teachers, teacher educators, education administrators and curriculum bodies. In this article, we shall explore PE's contribution to the larger aims of education.

The current state of PE in government schools

According to the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in 2015, 93.7% of India's youth do not have access to organised sports. While the NCF 2005 recommends that physical education be an essential part of the curriculum and the subject has also been made compulsory by all the boards in India, both the subject and the physical education teacher have been unable to receive the same amount of importance and respect as, for example, maths or science or the teachers who teach these subjects.

The status of PE in the school hierarchy

Most other subject teachers have a one-dimensional view of physical education. A physical education teacher is, more often than not, unsuccessful in getting her desired slot in the timetable during the school day. From our interaction with the teachers and administrators, we have gathered that physical education often suffers from the lack of articulated goals.

The philosophy of PE is very subjective and has

been a point of debate among educationists for quite some time, whereas at *Art of Play* we believe that PE revolves around the idea of awareness of one's body. The connection between body, mind and instincts is the focal point of our curriculum, which needs to allow each pupil to learn at her own pace and that naturally makes PE a medium of expression.

On the other hand, a conservative viewpoint aims for PE to teach only the time-honoured values of pride, determination, grit and validation of physical attributes. In certain government schools, often educators and teachers find themselves caught between these ideas. While they theoretically believe that PE is needed for all students, they actually push for excellence in sports. For this very reason, we often fail to have:

Grade-specific curriculum

From our experience in working in schools in Ambala, Faridabad and Delhi, we have seen some patterns emerge that could explain the current status of the subject in our schools. Physical education teachers do not have access to a grade-specific curriculum that highlights both physical and life skills that a child needs to learn according to his age.

Lack of teacher training in PE

In the last twelve years, Haryana physical education teachers have not had access to any form of teacher training programmes, to help them upgrade their knowledge or have access to peer-to-peer learning.

What are the aims of physical education?

These are some of the aims of education as stated by NCF 2005: 'Commitment to democracy and values of equality, justice, freedom, concern for others' well-being, secularism, respect for human dignity and rights; Independence of thought and action points to a capacity of carefully considered, value-based decision-making, independently and collectively; sensitivity to others' well-being and feelings; learning to learn and the willingness to unlearn and relearn.' (NCF 2005)

In the next few paragraphs we shall share our experience of learning these values through physical education.

Learning to unlearn and relearn through action

In sport, almost no skill can be learned without actually performing it. It is essential to note here that active participation is both a mental and a physical function. If you want to learn football, it is not enough to just watch or read through a football textbook. You will have to get on to the field, apply your mind and practise your kicking skills day in and day out. In our classes, students build their skills and knowledge through practical work and by gaining their own unique experience, at their own pace.

Sahil, a grade 3 student in one of our schools in New Delhi, loves to play the game *ankh micholi* (hide-and-peek). In this game the objective is to place six domes on three cones placed in a triangular formation. Two domes must be placed on each cone within three minutes. The only condition is that one member of the team will be blindfolded, while the other three give him proper instructions to help him achieve the end goal within the time limit.

In one of our *ankh micholi* sessions we played the game three times in succession. All three times Sahil chose to be the one blindfolded and he also took his team to victory each time in less than two minutes.

At the end of the session, however, while I collected all the equipment Sahil was waiting for me to finish even after his class had left. He came upto me and said, '*Didi*, I was cheating today. I could see everything from below. While I won all three times, I really did not enjoy myself as much and nor did winning feel that good. If I had won without cheating, I would have enjoyed the game much more!'

In the span of forty five minutes Sahil first learned that if he cheats, he would be able to win easily and get the prize. Towards the end of the session he unlearned his first lesson and relearned that cheating actually minimises the fun and also winning that way does not make him feel as good as winning honestly does.



Checking on Sahil's blindfold

Peer learning

Another important lesson is learning independence of thought and sensitivity towards others through peer-learning

A lot of children are comfortable asking their teachers for clarifications on a concept once, but they hesitate to ask the same question a second time. In such a scenario, they are more comfortable asking their classmates or their seniors in school. In our programme we encourage older children to teach the younger classes. This is a win-win situation for both sides. The younger children enjoy the sessions as they are more comfortable practising skills with their older peers, while the senior children learn to operate independently and take ownership of the learning of their younger schoolmates.

Sumit and Rahul, two grade 8 children in a school in Ambala, take sessions for the younger classes when their physical education teacher is busy or absent. Both Sumit and Rahul have encountered challenging situations in their mentoring. For example, a differently-abled grade 6 girl would not participate in their games sessions. After a week of seeing her just sitting and watching her classmates having fun, Sumit and Rahul decided that she had to be included in the games. Initially the children in her class would not choose her in their teams. Sumit or Rahul would then join the game and invariably make her their first choice in one of their teams. Slowly but steadily, the class accepted the girl's right to play and found constructive ways to accommodate her in their games.

Both Sumit and Rahul had to independently come up with their own solution to a unique problem they faced on the playground. Their decision was founded on the basis of both the sensitivity they felt towards the girl's feelings and the spirit of inclusion which is integral to sports.



Sumit and Rahul of Grade 8 taking a Grade 6 sports session

Learning democratic values through teamwork

The games we design for each session are based on one central principle- we only use team games. Playing team games sets up a very dynamic space for learning. The interactions, both within teams and with the opponents, gives children opportunities to learn justice, respect and equality. In a team game, a child is forced to think about the broader picture and not just her own self. For a team to win, it needs to operate in a democratic manner. If team members do not practice the values of treating each other equally and justly, respecting each other's opinions and giving each other the freedom to think and operate individually, they will not be able to be put a united front and will invariably lose. Each team member needs to play a constructive role and ensure that every other member of the team understands the importance and agrees to their role in the team.

An example is the game of frisbee. This is unique as it is gender-neutral, self-referred and focuses on the spirit of the game. In one of our school frisbee teams, we initially faced the challenge of the entire game being played by a select few (mostly boys) while the rest of the players (mostly girls) would never get a chance to hold the disc. Our educators encouraged the boys to integrate the girls in the game, but it just never worked. The team could never really trust each other.

As the team picked up the game and started playing it better, they learnt the importance of passing the disc to every player in the team. When the disc remained only with the boys, it became easier for opposing teams to just defend the boys and win the game. As the boys took on themselves the pressure of scoring the points, the tension caused them to lose the disc. After a series of sessions, the boys finally had to start trusting the girls to catch the disc and pass it to them. As soon as this happened, the girls played with more enthusiasm. They surprised themselves with their own game and the boys were surprised by how well the girls could play.

A school level frisbee game helped the boys realise that they were being disrespectful, unjust and curbing the freedom of the girl players to perform for the team. The urge to win forced them to rethink their behaviour and treat the girls as their equals. Right from the first pass they made to a girl, they showed a commitment towards practising these democratic values.



Our Delhi school team at a Frisbee tournament. The more they trusted each other, the better they played as a team.

From various such experiences on the field, we truly believe that a well-structured physical education curriculum, if pursued pro-actively in our government schools, will play a pivotal role in helping to accomplish the aims of education.

In conclusion, while our field experiences give us enough evidence of physical education as a distinct contributor to the aims of education, we also need

to think about the cultural context and the role it plays in defining a curriculum. Much like arts, sports and physical education comes alive when it has its roots in the community it serves. Involving local communities and playing more local games to learn long-lasting social values could be the key to establishing physical education in the school curriculum.

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