

PHYSICAL TRAINING—A QUESTION OF JUDICIOUS SUPPORT

A DISCUSSION OF PHYSICAL TRAINING IN ITS LARGER ASPECTS, AS AFFECTING SCHOOL YOUTH

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Modern physical training as an operative and effective factor in education is unthinkable without the setting of an enlightened background. Its pedagogical-aesthetical and anatomical-physiological aspects involve more than mere disciplinary values and health-promoting influences—they represent the highest that is conceivable in art, and what has been achieved in the science of the modern doctrine of the human body as well.

So regarded, physical training depends for its best unfolding and maintenance on the attitude of the school, and on the exponents of its ideals. The school is the generative power and principal factor in the advancement of the universal interests to be subserved. Inquiry, therefore, reflecting the true function of physical training in a scheme of education, is necessarily of paramount importance in outlining a policy calculated to obviate unnecessary and unprofitable experimentation.

In the past, as in the present, inquiries into the merits of the multiform instructional procedures evolved and extant have been influenced by the character of the conceptions held with regard to it. Preconceptions, without the data of comprehensive experiences, have, in instances without number, been the rule in its organization. Declarations of mere intentional purport have availed naught, the most liberal provisions not unfrequently proving antidotal.

Uncritical conclusions have resulted in an overemphasis of extremes—huge effort on the one hand, and on the other the prominence accorded the ameliorative or remedial features of gymnastic treatment.

Wherever physical training was suffered to exist without the enthusiasm born of intelligent methods, and minus the co-operating factors of judicious support, its design became manifest in some tumbleform of gymnastics or in an emphasis of certain work-phases, curtailing the general and adequate concept of its import. Intelligently directed and supported, it became an ever-growing source of interest by virtue of its manifold aims and resources.

Conservatism and enthusiasm have until within recent times characterized the two phases of its development.

The status of physical training in some of the leading institutions of the country, not at all final, is the outcome of much thoughtful inquiry and consistent experiment. Psycho-physical in its modern aspect, its inherent quickening influences have become active and virile only since its advocates and expositors have persisted in reconciling the claims advanced in its behalf with those of the other interests included in educational pursuits. It was from this view-point that its demonstrable claims and relations advanced and became an integral part of educational work.

The question of a rationale of methods in physical training, as applied to the secondary school, was recently discussed by a small coterie of experts in educational work. The general argumentative trend of the following summary presents the attitude taken.

In an analysis of the present status of physical training, it was asserted that the popular concept with regard to it was directed principally toward the athletic features of physical activities. The public, as a rule, was influenced by what was presented in the burden of literature bearing on huge athletics, principally through the daily press. Systematic organization of reportorial staffs in the interests of universities, colleges, schools, and athletic clubs, devoted to field and track events, and to innumerable competitive sports, furnished the papers with the material at once welcome and necessary to sustain the large so-called sporting interests involved. The views concerning a rationale of physical

education expressed in the public press were rare indeed in a comparison with this propaganda.

It was conceded that, however the aptitudes and predilections of normally constituted youth were directed and utilized for educational ends, the use and wont of the physical powers, *per se*, in the untrammelled exploitation and freedom of natural activities remained a matter of impulse and necessity, as distinct from the conventional routine of home and school occupations as is school formalism from the freedom of the playground. Instinctive desire prompted this use and wont, and the motive, if one could speak of a motive, was discerned in the cultivation of the sense of pleasurable experiences. Motive might represent a growing realization of what seemed practicable, advantageous, or helpful in the ordinary course of life-routine. The instinctive impulse, on the other hand, represented the alternative for the formalism of the school, sustaining the natural gift of cheerfulness and mirth. Both served the gradual preparation of the young aspirant for the larger responsibilities of a maturer life, and their encouragement was absolutely desirable—the question of direction of activities in the most profitable ways and in concord with prudence constituting the problem of the school. Therefore the most profitable school curriculum was the one based on a recognition of the facts evidenced in the daily life of school youth.

The charm of robust activity, characteristic of the display of skill and sagacity, witnessed in the individual and concerted action of field athletics during the recurring seasons of each year, had exerted a tremendous influence on the rank and file of our school youth. Outdoor recreation had received a mighty impulse. This was as it should be. Not only, however, were the seasonal in- and outdoor sports and games more popular than ever before, but a glance beyond the school gymnasium disclosed our young people disporting themselves in many interesting ways. Even our ten- and twelve-year-olds hurdle-jumped and danced to the shot-put in the most approved style. Our grammar-school boys and those beyond emulated the methods and practices of the seasoned athlete of the organized training quarters in the

forms typical of the most successful record-breakers. The principles underlying proficiency were largely left to solution in interesting illustrations on the corner lot, back yard, and open-air playground. This was not as it should be.

The popular idea of our physical renaissance had become as distinct in its outward form from what it represented a decade or so ago as the onetime calisthenic drill, so variously provided for in innumerable manuals, appeared in a contrast with the huge athletics of today. Mere pleasurable activity for the sake of health and ample recreation had been augmented in a remarkable way by the enthusiasm for contests and competitions, the legitimacy of which was unquestioned in the acclaim of the interested multitudes.

The recognition of this very large factor in the life of our school youth had, with all educators who have thought of the matter, become imperative. Wherever, therefore, it assumed the proportions characteristic of organized competitions, we met with a pronounced demand for a better organization of physical training.

It was only reasonable under the conditions to assume that the opinions of a large and interested body of teachers must ultimately crystallize toward some definite and practical plan regarding such organization, since it was evident from past experiences that an effective organization of physical training without this general co-operation must fall short of its import.

These and other demands, wherever thoughtful inquiry had prevailed, indicated, if anything at all, that students should undergo a preparation for whatever specialization in athletics they might wish to engage in, and that there should be the fullest recognition of the regularly constituted authorities of physical training in determining the order of procedures for such training.

It was recognized that certain knowledge affecting the welfare of youth, which should be common possession, was not sufficiently emphasized in the school curriculum. There was felt to be much erring in matters pertaining to wholesome education. The mere stimulus of competition was deplorable, because pernicious. From the standpoint of the teacher, it was not

enough to encourage the youth to exercise, and it was hazardous to encourage him to excel in athletics. With the superior boy this encouragement might, or it might not, lead to a proper regard for self. Many factors were constantly at play in strenuous, rather than in pleasurable, activities. The elements of time and energy in action were not merely estimated, but also generally considered—and unhappily for many boys—on the do-or-die side. It was not always a considerate estimate in the sense of prudence that characterized the sports of youth. Behind this demand for an appreciation of, and necessity for, the care of the body should stand the teacher. An intimate acquaintance with the structure of the human organism and its wonderful mechanism begets the appreciative faculty. This knowledge alone instils motives of the right sort into the aspiring student, and begets with the pedagogue concern for those he loves or should love well enough to guide aright in this very important and practical matter of the care of the body and its functions.

All educative pursuits involved certain fundamental considerations—the initial premise, the purpose and procedure, or, the principles, aims or problems, and methods. Principles as aims must always be based on pedagogy and aesthetics, the appreciation of the beautiful in nature and art. The emphasis of the aims under discussion is found principally in anatomical, physiological, and hygienic considerations.

To attain the “best estate,” the inherent forces of the organism demand the cultivation of a robust physique through appropriate activities—healthy, strong, alert and enduring, beautiful in bearing and carriage—governed by a determining faculty, subserving these qualities. The question of conduct, of ethics in general, is an aim of education. That this executive faculty, the will, may become effective, in as far as the physical being can be considered, is the special aim of physical culture, implying physical education, training, gymnastics, and athletics, in the order of their importance. It must be regarded as nothing less than a perversion of aims to characterize physical training in its demonstrable scope and effects solely as a physical development, or as a purely hygienic procedure in the interest of health exclu-

sively, or as a recreation, or as athletics pure and simple. Health should always be the incidental outcome. Athletics should be governed in accord with the principle which demands the prerequisites, not of special but of prolonged all-sided preparation, entailing a due regard for the factors of skill, strength, and endurance, based on a carefully nurtured vitality.

The larger aspect of the question, as it affects school youth, must deal with the psycho-physical phases of a large and interesting subject, based on the data furnished in the investigations available in the related sciences. Indeed, mere physical training does not include the whole scope of work in question. It is the emphasis of a preparation that will enable youth to live the most useful life, which is needed in our day. The hygiene of living involves so much that a school course which does not impart a knowledge of some of the fundamental laws involving nervous activities, often jeopardized in athletics, cannot be regarded as fulfilling its purpose.

Can this be denied in the face of what we see and hear in the contrasts of pure athletic competition—the uncouth and rude behavior, the slang witticisms as they re-echo, not only from our park commons, but also from our school halls? Are these accompaniments in concord with the dignity of the school? Should not these clamorous outbursts make way for a richer enjoyment, the result of a rational procedure more in line with the aims of educative pursuits? Form of character is always the result of preceding causes. The concept of a strong character must be ideally, if not the immediate, the remote outcome of such training. If we can fill our athletic fields with the school youth at hand, through proper methods, should not the results outweigh by far the results now advocated through our competitive methods?