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Integrating physical education and social studies

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Physical Education and Social Studies— The Natural Alliance



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Education should provide students with opportunities to develop skills, confidence, commitment to be the best they can be; and guide each child to become an integrated human being. Physical education addresses the needs of the whole child by integrating the physical, social, emotional, and mental dimensions of development (*Physical Education Framework*, 1992). Unfortunately, many educators have a limited knowledge of the field, and physical education is often viewed as an expendable aspect of the total curriculum.

Because physical education is itself multi-dimensional, integration with other parts of the curriculum can be a natural process. This article will provide some suggestions to stimulate thinking about how to integrate physical education and social studies in the implementation of the elementary curriculum, and a list of resources for the teacher and/or team interested in pursuing the holistic development of children.

WHY PHYSICAL EDUCATION?

Physical education and social studies each have at their core the theme of learning through human interaction. Certain themes of integration for physical education and social studies are obvious: games from around the world, the history of sports, sports pioneers (including women and minorities), folk dances from various countries, developing civic and democratic values, and the Olympic Games. Learning about the games, sports, and recreational activities of a region or country can also help children understand about the geography, the natural resources, the economics, the climate, and the customs of the people.

The grade level themes from the History-Social Science Framework and the Physical Education Framework, when addressed together, lend themselves to the creation of active learning experiences for children in all three framework domains. For example, in kindergarten, "*learning and working now and long ago*" from the History-Social Science Framework and "*children move in their environment*" can be coupled by teaching the children games from other countries and other times. Immigrant children in the 1700's played leap frog, blind man's bluff, and activities involving hoops (many simple, but long forgotten games today). Chinese children played Chinese jump rope. Children from all countries and cultures played some type of chasing/fleeing game. These are all games of low organization (little or no equipment and few rules) ideally suited for moving and learning at this level.

GRADE LEVEL SUGGESTIONS FOR INTEGRATION

THE PRIMARY GRADES

The grade one theme of "*A child's place in time and space*", together with its sub-theme of cultural diversity, can use physical education activities to excellent advantage. Borrowing from Rudolf Laban's themes of time, weight, space, and flow, teachers can create movement challenges that encourage children to respond with a vast range of different movements, contrasting movements, and combinations of movements. Walk, run, hop, jump, skip, high, low, forward, backward, side, slow, fast, sustained, staccato, heavy, and/or light, are examples of the movements and movement qualities that can be used to create the movement problems. Children enjoy the opportunity to be creative with movement, and the teacher needs only to use the voice, handclaps, and some ingenuity!

One suggestion is to have each child select a letter of the alphabet (name initial, for example) and show that letter with his/her body. Next, ask children to show you how their letters move. A letter 'C' might lie on its back and rock across the floor; a letter 'O' might roll. Noticing the variety of ways the letters are formed, and the ways the letters move, reinforces the idea that many different answers are okay.

Simple folk dances from around the world provide primary children with the chance to learn about costumes/dress, music, flags, and customs of diverse groups. Folk dances reinforce the idea that throughout history, all cultures have been physically active. Dance also requires children to work with others, and take responsibility for being part of a group.

THE MIDDLE ELEMENTARY GRADES

In grades three and four, older, first generation community members can be asked to teach students the games and physical activities in which they participated as children. The students can talk to the speakers about the climate and terrain of their country/region and then think about why certain games were played in some places but not others. For example, Takraw, a game played with the feet and a ball woven from reeds, is played in southeast Asia, but not in western Europe. Children can question why? How did the resources, the climate, and the economics in those two different parts of the world influence the kinds of games that children played.

Another example of physical activity that played an important role in a society would be the Tai Chi exercises of the Chinese. A grandparent could be invited to demonstrate and teach the exercises to the students. The grandchild might have to interpret, but this could be a wonderful opportunity to illustrate the important things that can be discovered when the generations share a learning experience.

Because play and sport mirror society, children can learn many things about a cultural or ethnic group by studying the way the group plays as well as the legends and stories passed down through generations. Grandparents can be invited to share those stories, especially the ones about legendary figures with sport prowess.

Technology and social change also can be studied by playing games as they were played by earlier generations and looking at the way the game has evolved today; for example, baseball. Children from many different cultures played stick and ball games. The equipment was made from available resources—in the rural areas from hardwood tree branches and horsehair or crude rubber balls or tree knots; in the cities, from broomsticks and rag balls. As technology improved so did the equipment used for games. Bats were massed-produced and with the creation of the sewing machine, ball weight and size became standardized. Sporting activities are an interesting way to trace industrialization and changes in technology.

Fourth grade children can choose an ethnic or cultural group represented in California, find a special game from that group, and teach it to the class. After children play the game, they can, for example, ask questions about the game's origin. Not only will children be actively involved in all learning domains, they will be enhancing critical thinking skills and their appreciation of diversity.

THE UPPER ELEMENTARY GRADES

As children in the fifth grade study United States history and the westward expansion, they learn that physical activity was mainly for survival. Children worked along side of their elders. Native American children developed the life-sustaining skills of their parents. Work and ceremony were the basis for social events. Music and dancing were important components of social or ceremonial gatherings. Children can be introduced to the dances of the western European pioneers as well as the ceremonial dances of the Native American.

Grade six specifically mentions learning about the Olympic games as part of "*world history and geography*." The United States Olympic Committee publishes a curriculum guide *The Olympics: An Educational Opportunity* prior to each Olympiad. This resource gives ideas about integrating all subjects with an Olympic theme. Movement ideas from the Olympics include experimenting with hand-held weights ('*halteres*' in ancient Greece) to see if children can jump further using them, as the Greeks believed.

Sprint races long ago were held up and back the length of a stadium, turning around a pole, unlike today's current track. Children of exactly the class 'age' in ancient Greece attended special physical activity schools, called palaestras. Students can research the origin of Olympic events or the games of ancient cultures and then participate in these activities as part of a class or school Olympics. After participating in the "games", children can compare and contrast the ancient and modern games.

Students can learn about the geography and climate of different regions or countries by determining in what events the athletes from particular countries excel in Olympic competition. Students can be given the challenge of finding the perfect location for either the summer or winter games, or both. To do this, the children would have to determine which events are included; what kind of facilities and resources are needed to accommodate the activities; how much and what kind of government support is needed; and how many and what type of workers and technology are needed to ready the Olympic site. Students could then plan a school Olympics. Each class or grade could be assigned a country. The sixth grade children could educate classes about the countries they represent and introduce them to the events that will be included. All children would actively participate in the "Olympics". This can be an effective problem solving/critical thinking activity as well as one that would enhance physical and social development.

Resources such as holiday calendars or holy day calendars can be a useful resource when identifying events important to an ethnic or culturally-diverse group. Any grade can use a world holiday calendar, and during a week when a specific country or group has a holiday (such as St. Patrick's Day or Chinese New Year), the special games or dances representative of that group could be the movement theme for physical education.

SUMMARY

Physical education is the one subject in the elementary school curriculum that, because of its interdisciplinary nature, can be easily integrated with all other subjects. A child who is confident and efficient in movement has learned not just how to move, but also why people choose to move, why different movement forms have special meaning for different groups of people, and the importance of active living to all cultures. The integration of physical education and social science is a natural alliance and can truly enhance the learning experiences of elementary children.

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The way to play: the illustrated encyclopedia of the games of the world. (1970). New York: Barton.

Twentieth Century Sport Champions. (1992). Pasadena: Salem Press.
Biographical sketches of American and international athletes; appropriate for grades 5 up.

U.S. Olympic Committee. (published prior to each Olympics).

The Olympics: an educational opportunity enrichment unit. 1750 East Boulder St., Colorado Springs, CO 80909.
Curriculum materials for all grade levels using Olympic theme

Vinton, Iris. (1970). *The folkways omnibus of children's games.* Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole.
Teacher's reference to history of children's games

Wallechinsky, David. (updated after each olympiad). *The complete book of the Olympics.* New York: Penquin Press.
Some Olympic history and all statistics.

Please write if you are interested in having a workshop from the Center for International Sport and Human Performance at your school: CISHP, Dr. Shirley Reekie, Department of Human Performance, San Jose State University, San Jose, Ca 95015-0054.

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