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# Physical Miseducation: How Public Schooling in the US is Harmful to Students' Bodily Well-Being

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# Physical Miseducation

How Public Schooling in the US is Harmful to Students' Bodily Well-Being

By

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Submitted to Scripps College

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Dance

Professor Kevin Williamson

Professor Ronnie Brosterman

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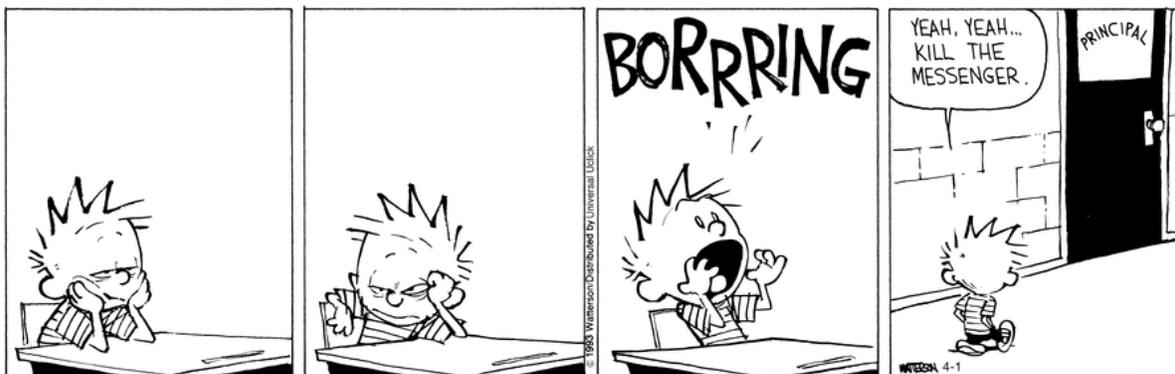
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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the history of physical education in the United States, as well as a general look into how public schooling affects how kids learn about and come to view their bodies.

Theory and research by Michel Foucault, Elias Norbert, and Katy Bowman form the theoretical framework for this essay, and accounts of visits to a local elementary school to observe PE also grounds the work in present-day experiences. The work concludes that public schools in the US improperly teach students about how to listen to and care for their bodies.



## **Introduction to Topic**

The initial idea for this thesis was to redesign physical education (PE) curriculum for elementary school students. It was inspired by the dominant narrative about PE classes today, which is that they are only accessible and enjoyable to athletic kids who enjoy competitive, win-lose games and who feel comfortable enough about their bodies to move athletically around their peers. It was to include anatomy and kinesiology education as well as physical activities that involved creative, cooperative movement where kids could use their whole bodies, be outside, learn about each other's bodies, and learn to listen to and honor their own bodies, as well as develop a general sense of respect for how people live and move in a variety of ways. Such goals have come from four years of Dance and Somatic classes at the Claremont Colleges. Two observations of PE classes at Mountain View Elementary School in Claremont, CA, however, as well as research into the history of PE in the United States and other methods of teaching students about their bodies in public schools, indicated that this goal was well-intentioned but misplaced. It became clear that although the problem with PE can sometimes be expressed through lack of care by teachers or of creative curricula designed to meet kids' needs, or perhaps another surface issue with a PE program, these are actually side effects of a bigger issue.

In order for the perceived goals of physical education to be met, certain structural components of support for such goals must be in place. This involves funding for PE programs and for the PE teachers running them, space for PE to take place, time in the schedule for PE to take place (not only once a week but enough to meet children's demonstrated needs), and a general sense of accordance between the lessons being taught in PE and in the rest of the child's classes. As it turns out, it is becoming increasingly rare for a school to meet all of these needs. A look at the way the rest of the public school is run reveals that there are in fact discrepancies

between lessons in PE and lessons in the child's "home" classroom. This is primarily expressed through a general discouragement of movement within the classroom and also through lack of funding and prioritization of movement by the state. Investigation into the history of public schooling further bolsters and contextualizes the impetus for schools to discourage children to move their bodies, based on a desire to promote docility and maintain order.

This essay will thus explore how the public school system in the United States eschews its responsibility to promote physical activity and well-being in children while in reality actively limiting, discouraging, and even punishing their bodily movement, physical autonomy, and self-expression. These actions are part of a fundamental structural problem that relates back to the formation of public schools by the state and a general misunderstanding of and lack of motivation to support bodily autonomy, physical fitness, and physical well-being in young people by.

### **Premises**

Several premises form the framework of this essay. First, physical activity is good for children. Physical activity promotes better physical and mental functioning and overall health (Hillman, Aerobic fitness and cognitive development) (Bencraft, 1999).

Specifically, physical activity reduces the risk for heart disease, diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, obesity, and metabolic syndrome; improves various other aspects of health and fitness, including aerobic capacity, muscle and bone strength, flexibility, insulin sensitivity, and lipid profiles; and reduces stress, anxiety, and depression" (Kohl & Cook, 2013, p 97).

Physical activity in children specifically is important: “Health-related behaviors and disease risk factors track from childhood to adulthood, indicating that early and ongoing opportunities for physical activity are needed for maximum health benefit” (98). Bowman articulates the importance of physical activity to young people: “Movement is a renewable resource, but unlike other commodities, it renews through use; your future movement is made possible by movements you’re doing today” (109). She extrapolates that information in relation to how much physical work kids do for their food: “And so, as we spend less and less of our movement on our personal food consumption, we are essentially spending tomorrow’s movement on the luxury of being still today” (109). Though the last part is about eating habits, it nonetheless articulates very clearly how decreasing movements when young leads to decreased capacity to do movement in the future. Thus there are clear reasons for encouraging children to develop healthy movement habits, specifically habits that will provide whole-body movement so that they can maintain a wide range of physical skills well into adulthood. There is scientific evidence to support these claims, but many of them can also be understood with common sense. That physical activity allows a child to release pent-up energy and sit more restfully afterwards is easy to watch happen in one’s own backyard.

Physical activity is a great opportunity for social growth. Kids engaging in physical activity together learn how to navigate the physical world and the other people within it. They learn literally how their bodies relate to other bodies in space, how to make space for others, how to respect personal boundaries, how to have fun together, how to engage freely with each other without the restraints of an academic classroom, and how they can use their bodies to be helpful to other people, in games and in general.

The second premise is that, because school takes up so much of a child's day in the US (on average, 6.7 hours), it makes sense for children to get some kind of physical activity during that time. This way children do not get stiff and bored from sitting still all day, and do not have to get all of their recommended movement in in one long period after school.

The final premise is the one that the rest of this paper will most fully examine: that the goals and effects of physical education (or PE) should (not necessarily be the same as, but) align with the goals and outcomes of the rest of what is taught in schools. That is to say, there ought to be little to no contradictions in PE material and other instructional material, whether the latter is explicitly or implicitly stated. Here is an example of what that might look like: a PE teacher teaches her students about the importance of drinking plenty of water. Then, in their other class(es), the students constantly ask to use the drinking fountain. The teacher might find this distracting and bothersome, but rather than set a limit on drinking fountain usage or chastising the students for interrupting academic time, the teacher could encourage students to bring in reusable water bottles so that they can drink plenty without disrupting the lesson.

### **Introduction to Research and Findings**

The basis for the research for this paper stems from Michel Foucault's analyses of how the state influences the growth of individuals through their participation in organized structures as they age, as well as Norbert Elias's look at how the concept of "civility" formed and still shapes our behaviors today. For these theorists, the public school is a place for the state to instill in youth the skills and qualities that would be most useful to it. In American PE training this has referred to the government wanting students to have both physical prowess and bodily docility,

so that subjects would be able to fight for the US during wartime and be able to follow orders well in so doing.

Of course, schools do not only affect students' bodies through PE classes. The very way a classroom is arranged, with individual desks at which kids are expected to sit for long hours, the instruction to students not to get up unless granted permission by an authority figure, the rewards and punishment for sitting still or moving one's body "too much;" these are all examples of the way a school setting can teach children about their bodies without explicitly stating the lesson that is implicated: that sitting still for long periods of time and denying one's own natural inclinations to move is not only normal, but objectively *good* and comes with approval, praise, and even reward, and, conversely, that moving one's body according to one's own natural inclinations (including to stand up to stretch one's legs, walking to the bathroom, getting water, etc.) is *not good*, and comes with disapproval, chastisement, and even punishment. It follows that children will learn that they as individuals do not have primary bodily autonomy over their own bodies—that status belongs to authority figures who act as gatekeepers who know best. They will also implicitly learn that stillness is fundamentally preferable to moving—not that it feels better, but that it leads to better outcomes for their advancement within the (school) system.

The lesson that stillness is preferable to movement carries over to the rest of one's life outside of school as well. Humans used to have to do a lot more physical labor in their daily lives, such as farm food, carry water, wash clothes by hand, walk to and from their school or work, make their own clothes, chop wood, and more, but Americans especially have come to view movement as something to be avoided at all costs (unless it is done for the purpose of working out or playing a sport), and so outsourcing this movement is generally chosen as often as possible. Doing more physical work for practical purposes is often considered inconvenient;

alternatively, things like washing machines, cars, and automatic heating or air conditioning units, as well as clothes, food, and other goods that are cheap and readily available are more convenient and therefore preferable. As biomechanist and author Katy Bowman notes, “convenience” often actually signifies “less movement.” Or, it means a person has outsourced their movement to someone else, oftentimes a poorly paid factory worker under terrible working conditions who makes the conveniently cheap clothes readily available in stores you can drive to.

These lessons come with a great deal of implications for US society, most of which are yet unrecognized in popular culture/ most of which are largely unrecognized. The most obvious connection is to the high sedentarism in this nation, which is correlated with “a large number of chronic diseases, impaired physical functioning, and decreased quality of life” (Ricciardi). Along with sedentarism has come a general sense of complacency. Being able to outsource movement so easily often comes with little understanding of both where that movement goes and how the lack of movement affects one’s own body. Becoming more disconnected from that physical movement makes it difficult to understand why moving one’s body might be important, not only for physical fitness but also for helping to contribute to a well-functioning society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theory and research by Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, and Katy Bowman establish a foundation for understanding how we have come to use our bodies today.

In 1530, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Dutch humanist and scholar, published a book whose title translates to *On Civility in Children*. This book includes instructions for readers on how to properly carry oneself in a variety of social situations—a treatise for “civil” behavior, or as

sociologist Norbert Elias cites, “outward bodily propriety” (qtd. in Elias 55). The book addresses so many different parts of human behavior and in such a wide range of situations that it soon became hugely impactful on the way people carried themselves in day-to-day life, and, significantly, on the way people expected others to carry themselves. It was the most popular book of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with over 30 reprintings in the first six years after it was published. Clearly, then, it resonated with a great deal of people, and at least touched many people’s lives. Many of Erasmus’s assertions are still very much a part of social norms today, such as wiping one’s nose in a cloth rather than one’s body or clothes or refraining from double-dipping one’s food in a communal dish (qtd. in Elias 57). Some of these instructions might seem obvious to those of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S., but others of them are already be so ingrained in this culture that it might be surprising to see them explained at all—for example, Erasmus discourages standing on one leg.

Erasmus’s instructions or suggestions for how one ought to behave can be very specific with regards to the placement and movement of the body. There is a section on sitting, which includes the following paragraph:

Sitting with your knees spread, or standing with your legs wide apart or crossed is the stance of a show-off [...]. Keep your knees together when you sit, and your feet together, or just slightly apart, when standing. Some people cross one leg over the knee while they are sitting; others stand with their legs crossed. The first indicates anxiety, the second is downright absurd. It was the custom of kings long ago to sit with their right foot resting on their left thigh, but that habit is no longer acceptable. Among Italians, some put one foot on top of the other, in a show of respect, almost standing, stork-like, on just the one leg. I don’t know that this style is suitable for children” (Desiderius).

The specificity and judgment with which Erasmus dictates bodily activity might seem surprisingly controlling or random, but then again, many of his instructions are taken for granted today. Standing with one's legs wide apart is not a common position in public spheres (or even private social spheres, probably), and would likely be considered strange by others in the space, even though the position itself is harmless enough. Perhaps it would be an imposition on others' ability to move freely if the space is small and the person with wide-apart legs is taking up extra room, but even the mere position is rare so its presence is also arguably disruptive. Could this strangeness somehow find its beginnings in the normalization of Erasmus's instruction to stand with one's feet close together? The same process could just as well have happened with the habit of standing on one leg, as mentioned in the previous paragraph.

As Elias says, "...we might reflect that many of the bizarre movements of walkers and dancers that we see in medieval paintings or statues not only represent the 'manner' of the painter or sculptor but also preserve actual gestures and movements that have grown strange to us, embodiments of a different mental and emotional structure" (56). This highlights how conditional and random "normative" physical behavior can be, and therefore also how arbitrary judgment on non-normative physical behavior can be. He also acknowledges that the present is never representative of the most-civilized point in humanity, because the development of civilization is constantly changing. What we consider appropriate behavior today might "arouse in our descendants feelings of embarrassment similar to those we sometimes feel concerning the behavior of our ancestors" (59). Thus we can note that the societal expectations for how individuals move their bodies is conditional, mutable, and not necessarily based in useful logic.

A further extrapolation on Elias's point about civility is the point that value judgments on the physical behavior of people in cultures originating from outside of the US are also often

groundless and even harmful. Squatting, for example, is a common bodily position in many places outside of the US, such as Asia. Some people find such a position comfortable and easy to relax in, though many Americans find it not only difficult to sit in (having not grown up with the movement as part of their vocabulary), but also strange and something to boggle at. Being aware of cultural differences not only expands one's perceptions of what kind of movement is possible, it also reiterates the idea that physical expectations are mutable and vary across time and geography. Additionally, learning a wider range of movement in physical education could expose children to physical behaviors of more cultures than just their own, encouraging greater cultural understanding. This kind of understanding is important because it is not just an intellectual acknowledgement but actual physical embodiment of a lesson.

Bowman has written and spoken about the idea that because this culture is considered sedentary, movement itself is a counterculture. She quotes a reader named Brooke:

One knows [movement] is counter-cultural when they start moving a lot and everyone around you gives you extra attention for it. You must be self-confident to deal.

Comments at the store because you're carrying heavy bags, cars stopping because you're carrying your child down the road on your back, comments from friends because you don't sit in chairs and squat [instead], comments from kids because you are stretching at the park, comments on your minimal shoes, people feeling uncomfortable when you don't sit in their furniture the way they expect you to. The list goes on. You don't just blend in anymore.

If incorporating body-nourishing movement into one's daily life is seen as out-of-the-ordinary, then clearly schools are not teaching kids in such a way that adequately encourages them to value movement. As mentioned earlier, doing less movement for the sake of convenience is very

normal in the US today. It is also the case that because we value convenience so much, many of us are willing to pay for the tools and labor that will do our movement for us. Thus, outsourcing one's movement finds a connection with affluence; those with more money will be able to afford the technology, tools, and/or labor that will do the movement for them. This potentially explains part of why Brooke found it so alienating to incorporate more physical movements back into her life—because doing more physical work has become conflated with having (ironically) less socioeconomic mobility.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes about how the state found a way to maintain power over people not through corporal punishment but through a slower, more process-based approach to people's bodies. As he notes, "It was a question...of exercising upon [the body] a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself—movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body" (136-137). Attention towards and punishment of individuals was taxing for a government that wanted obedience from a whole society. It makes sense, then, that such a government would implement infrastructure that would allow for the mass inculcation of its people. It is a dark thought, but one that gains support and clarity through an analysis of how public schooling fits into Foucault's descriptions of state-sponsored discipline.

Firstly, "[d]iscipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony" (141). A school building in this model will be closed off from the outside world and distinctly devoted to schooling alone. He argues that intentional "distribution of individuals in space" is what allows for discipline to occur in these places (141). Individuals in these spaces, he

says, must also have their own designated place to be at all times, and formation of groups of people are discouraged (143). When considered in the context of the public school, this calls to mind the assignment of each student to one's own desk in an enclosed classroom space, and the command for each student to remain in their seat until allowed to get up and move. The initial aim of this "was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits" (143). In other words, through this set-up teachers can easily track which students are in attendance and can monitor and engage with any one of them at any time. This sense of being monitored arguably puts more pressure on children to maintain behaviors that, as Elias discusses, will be seen as more civil and at least more acceptable. Foucault cites French education reformist Jean-Baptiste de La Salle's dream of a classroom in which each student has their own assigned place, from which they may move away only if the school inspector allows or decrees it (147).

The constructed reality thus appears as such: an enclosed space in which every individual has their own space unaccompanied by others, where authority figures can monitor them, and where they are to remain unless told to move by said authorities. These standards and ideals became prevalent in the 17th and 18th centuries, and such a description still very much describes public schooling in the United States today. This is easily seen in the lack of changes of classroom arrangements over the last 300 or so years: many or most classrooms still involve individual desks for the children arranged in rows facing the teacher's desk, and children are typically not allowed to move from their seats unless the teacher gives them permission.

## **A Brief History of Physical Education in the United States**

Physical Education in the US has been influenced by approaches to physicality from as far back as Ancient Greece, during which sports and games arose from warrior training (Demirel, Yildiran). More easily contextualized are the movement systems from Germany, Sweden, and England which shaped PE in the United States beginning in the 1700s. German movement programming involved gymnastics with elements like the parallel bars and the pommel horse. Swedish PE involved choreographed patterns of movement with elements like wands and the climbing rope. The English system of movement was more centered on sports and games, and how they could foster moral development (Boyce). Together these three influences helped shape PE in the US, but physical education itself did not become prevalent in public schools until the mid-1800s. The intended purpose of PE has changed numerous times over the years. It has certainly existed in schools to promote physical well-being in students, but there was a shift in its purpose after the advent of World War II, at which point programming focused much more on physical conditioning so that youth could be prepared to go to war (Boyce). Later, in the early 50s, it became clear that youth in the US had lower physical fitness than young people in the rest of the world. Again, partially fearing lack of wartime readiness, physical education efforts were revamped. The President's Council on Fitness was formed under President Eisenhower, and physical education got a lot of support and backing from the state during the 50s and 60s (Boyce). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century PE became heavily focused on games and sports, more so than PE programs in the rest of the world (Holzknecht). With this focus came an increased prioritization of competitive activities, which are adversarial in nature and only promote comradery among teammates. Such an emphasis is widely understood to be part of the stress that

comes along with gym class for many students. The idea of being picked last for a team sport can haunt a person for years with the trail of unworthiness and unacceptance it suggests.

## **Mountain View Elementary School Visits**

### **Background**

In order to gain some tangible context for this research, I attended two periods of PE at Mountain View Elementary School in Claremont, California. The first of these days happened in February in first, second, and third grade classrooms, and the second in April in fourth and fifth grade classes. Following is background information on the program as well as accounts and initial analyses of both experiences.

The Mountain View PE program is split up into different sections depending on grade level and day of the week. The whole school is involved in something called Project Champion, which means for an hour every week students walk or run around the football field and rack up miles in a yearlong attempt to cover 100 miles. Students get prizes for having completed 25, 50, 75, and the full 100 miles. This project certainly encourages movement, but because it is only ever one kind of movement there is extra pressure for the rest of the PE time to include a more varied curriculum. For the second hour in the same week (California standards require 200 minutes of physical activity every ten days, which averages out to two 50 minute periods each week (“Physical Education Model...”, iv)) first through third graders take part in PE activities run by Beth Coronado, a parent of children who attend the school and a fourth-grade teacher at the school. Beth took over the program after learning that the full-day academic teachers of first through third graders had the responsibility of facilitating physical education but felt unprepared and overburdened with the work, since it was added on top of their already-full schedules. Beth

has recruited student athletes from the CMS athletic team at the Claremont Colleges to come into the classrooms and facilitate PE every Friday afternoon.

Beth's work in taking over the PE program signals an effort towards reclaiming PE time for the children. She recognized that, while full-day teachers should not be expected to perform any more work than they already do, kids still deserve quality physical education. She has had to put in time and energy outside her full-time job demands as a fourth grade teacher in order to make reliable and consistent PE available to the first through third graders at Mountain View.

She and the CMS athlete coaches usually bring the kids outside, but during inclement weather they remain in the classrooms, meaning the "physical education" might happen without the children leaving their desks. The fourth through sixth graders have slightly more official PE classes, with coaches who lead games and activities. During inclement weather these classes take place in the cleared cafeteria space.

Account 1

February 17, 2017

On this day the rain prevented outside PE, so classes remained inside. Two CMS athletes were assigned to each first, second, and third grade classroom, and each pair facilitated the same two games. The first game was called Hide & Seek, which is like a mix of traditional Hide & Seek and the game of Hot & Cold. There is no talking in this game. First, the selected seeker goes into the corner and shields their eyes. The selected hider hides a ball about the size of a tennis ball somewhere in the room while the rest of the class watches. One of the facilitators asks, "Does everyone see where the hider hid the ball?" and the rest of the class nods or offers verbal

affirmation. The seeker then opens their eyes and starts walking around the room. The rest of the class, without talking, claps their hands in correlation with the seeker's proximity to the ball. If the seeker is far away, the clapping is slow. The closer the seeker gets, the faster the students clap, until the seeker finds the ball. Almost all of the kids in each class were very eager to be one of the two chosen students, and got very animated when it was time to select the next pair. In one class, the hider and seeker were chosen based on who was quietest and "best-behaved." The only physical movements involved in this activity were clapping, which one might be hard-pressed to consider very educational, and the walking around and probably bending that the hider and seeker did. Not every child got to be one or the other.

The second exercise was called "Silent Ball." The key to the game is to be completely silent. Kids stand up at their desks (1<sup>st</sup> grade) or spread out around the room (3<sup>rd</sup> grade). One student has a soft foam ball about the size of a dodgeball, and looks around until they make eye contact with a classmate. That classmate raises their hand to acknowledge the eye contact and the first student throws the ball to them. The process repeats itself. If a student drops the ball, throws it poorly, or speaks, they are out of the game and must sit down. The third graders, when told they were allowed to spread out around the room instead of staying at their desks, burst out of their seats. They were clearly excited to be allowed to get up and move around, even if it was just to walk 15 feet away from their desks. This game had more physical activity than the first because of the throwing, and in third grade the coaches implemented rapid-fire round when there were only three kids left, which meant the kids only had one second to hold the ball before they had to throw it to someone else. Still, there was relatively little movement besides the throwing, and only three kids got to practice the quick hand-eye coordination required in the rapid-fire

round. At one point the teacher in the first grade classroom told a student he was out and must sit down because he was not standing up straight at his desk.

Beth Coronado assured me that on most days the kids get to run around outside, and expressed regret that my visit was on a day when the kids' activities were limited because of weather. It felt useful, however, to witness some of the program's limitations, because it gave a glimpse into how delicate of a balance it can be. If it happens to rain on both days students are scheduled to have PE during a week, it is very possible that children will not get any physical activity in school besides tossing a foam ball around a room. While hand-eye coordination and responding to stimulus from classmates (speed of clapping) might be good skills to learn, it is still very concerning that they might not be getting to release pent-up physical energy. This is reiterated by the vigor with which kids burst from their chairs when they were told they could stand around the room rather than only at their desks. Their excitement reflected a larger hunger for moving their bodies more. The PE they did get is so limited it almost seems dishonest to call it physical education.

Additionally, the lesson that comes from telling a student they lost the game because they did not stand up straight is one based in arbitrary physical control. This is reiterated when one considers that the premise of the game was unrelated to how "straight" one's body is, and there was no reason given for why one should even stand up straight in the first place. A child might learn that the way to be able to get even a small amount of physical activity, which one naturally craves, is to stand or sit as straight and still as possible. Such a feedback loop is contradictory and harmful to children's capacity to feel autonomous and free in their own bodies. The added element of silence in Silent Ball further removes children's capacity for self-expression, and the

ideal child in PE thus becomes one who stands or sits as straight, still, and silent as possible, until a very specific and limited movement is deemed appropriate for a three-second period of time. The lack of capacity for the students to move their bodies in any way more significantly than their usual classroom time speaks to an unsettling lack of time for kids to get physical activity and release pent-up energy.

Even the way a child at Mountain View was told to sit down to do her work rather than stand up at her desk exemplifies how moving more might indeed be counter-cultural, and that sedentary culture and stillness are instilled at a young age.

Account 2

April 17, 2017

On this day it was fairly hot day outside (perhaps around 80-85 degrees). There were two coaches, men ages ~30-40, and 8 lines of kids with over 55 students total.

Many of the kids were talking while the coaches dealt with individual kids coming up one by one asking to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water. Every so often a coach would yell, “Jumping jacks!” and most of the kids would half-heartedly do some version of jumping jacks. Then a little bit later a coach would yell “running in place!” or “hammer!” or “high knees!”—the latter of which involved what looked like zero kids whose knees could actually be considered “high.” Occasionally, mostly when the kids got particularly rowdy, the coaches would shout, “Lines 1-4 run to the swing-set and back!” or “Lines 5-8 run to the fence and back!” and the kids would (some happily, some begrudgingly) take off to opposite corners of the football field. The coaches were engaged with talking to students nearly 100% of the time, all for a variety of

reasons. The alleged kicking of one student by another took up a good 10 minutes of discussion between one coach and three or four students. The apparent end to the section of running and exercises-in-place was marked with a quad stretch, a hamstring stretch, and a shoulder stretch, all of which lasted fewer than 20 seconds each. There did not seem to be much concern for making sure that everyone was fully participating in the activities, nor that they understood the benefits. This is not to criticize the coaches; they clearly had their hands full dealing with kids the whole class.

After the stretching, one coach called over one of the classes to an area where tarp was laid out, and instructed the other class to do four laps around the football field, alternating walking and jogging. He enlisted the help of one of the boys to help him call names from an iPad, lining people up in order to complete their Physical Fitness Test activities. These activities included curl-ups and push-ups on this day, though he noted that further activities are necessary to complete the testing.

One of the coaches later told me they also often do games like dodgeball, soccer, lacrosse, and capture-the-flag (all very competitive, adversarial games). He said many of the girls just talked about boys and intentionally wore boots so they wouldn't have to participate. I suggested it might be difficult for girls to navigate gym class at such a time when it might be uncool to participate too intently, citing my own lack of participation at that age. Rather than acknowledge that difficulty, he just repeated that they just didn't try very hard. He said that there *were* some good kids, though—the athletes. He pointed out a few boys and acknowledged that a few of the girls were good athletes too. It is understandable that a gym coach would appreciate

the kids who love sports, but it was discouraging to hear his value judgement on children based on their level of athleticism.

The April 17<sup>th</sup> class had a lot of key elements that stand out. One is the lack of order. This is not to say that chaos is not sometimes a positive experience for kids to have, just that the coaches did not seem to have a good grasp on the class and seemed rather hindered from keeping the class moving forward because of all the commotion. The jumping jacks and other exercises the kids were told to do in their eight lines seemed like they could be part of a warm-up, except they lasted for at least 1/3 of the class time and the coaches seemed to call out exercises more to keep the kids occupied than to warm them up, per se. Another element is the fact that even when the kids do play organized games, they tend to be competitive sports games, which encourage adversarial physical activity rather than cooperative activities.

Extracurricular sports programmes are also influenced by these discourses and their relative perspectives in terms of how sport is perceived in schools. In this domain the discourse and focus tend to be “results orientated” rather than “individual orientated.”

The results orientated discourse places greatest value on winning or achieving a record at any cost (injury, cheating, insults, etc.) whilst the individual orientated discourse prioritises the all-round development of the sports woman or man and their dignity as a human being, even though this might mean they lose (Todaro).

The prioritization of the “individual orientated discourse” and the “all-round development” of the students sets them up for a PE experience that in turn prioritizes the well-being and development of individuals and communities rather than the advancement of athleticism. Certainly athleticism can be a part of an individual’s well-being and is important for young bodies, but it cannot exist on its own. Otherwise students will learn strength, speed, agility, etc. with no context for why

they might be useful and with no impetus to retain the skills and use them to improve their own and others' lives.

Lastly, it was very clear through both PE experiences that the kids at Mountain View are starved for physical movement. Even small physical activities such as getting out of their chairs were quite exciting for them. A gym class which many might consider boring or useless because it only involves running and basic exercises like jumping jacks was the highlight of many kids' day, because they got so little reprieve from their controlled stillness the rest of the time.

The accounts from Mountain View are by no means indicative of all elementary schools, nor are they even indicative of Mountain View's PE program, because of their limited scope. Still, there are key parts that stand out and do provide some insight into some of what kids are learning in their PE classes. Many of the elements in the account can be found in elementary schools around the nation: lack of a gymnasium, for example, (Saulny) as well as funding cuts leading to academic teachers having to lead PE with little to no guidance, unless concerned parents step in and try to lead or arrange some sort of alternative (Saulny, Long).

### **Physical Education in the Present-Day United States**

Of course, these lessons are not what the government or school districts claim to promote. There are numerous initiatives working towards getting kids to move more, in engaging and creative ways, led by the likes of Michelle Obama, the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, and the Center for Disease Control. Yet such rhetoric is belied by massive budget cuts to physical education across the country and the amount of actual physical education classes children attend each week (Long). The New York Times cited a study by the Center for Disease Control in which nearly half of high schoolers surveyed across the United States reported that

they did not have any physical education classes in an average week of school (Baker). The current administration has also proposed a \$9.2 billion budget cut to education, including a \$47 million program that supports physical education programs with grants (Stratford). These actions, suggested actions, and lack thereof underscore the fundamental lack of support for the promotion of physical autonomy and well-being in education, not only institutionally but in our core national value systems. This contradiction is visible in other ways. For example, the standing desk has become almost a symbol for combating sedentarism and reclaiming autonomy in the work-sphere, and yet kids at a school in Claremont were chastised for standing up at their desks to work, even when doing so peacefully and quietly.

Many schools cite pressures to meet testing standards for areas considered more vital than PE as the reason why programs like PE, arts education, and drama are cut (Saulny, Baker). The remaining funds after budget cuts go towards preparing for standardized tests, which have been taking up more and more time and resources within school districts nationwide (Layton). This pressure for schools to do well in these large numbers of tests every year can be attributed in part to the No Child Left Behind act and new Common Core standards, for which the tests acted as a measure of accountability (Strauss). In 2015 it was determined that a student in the US takes an average of eight standardized tests per year (Layton). There has been significant enough backlash from parents, teachers, and schools themselves about the redundancy and waste of time of so much testing that even those most in favor of testing have admitted there may be too much (Layton) Still, though, what with recent proposed budget cuts to education, it is unlikely Physical Education will be gaining any more prioritization than it currently has (Boyd).

## Synthesis of Visits and Framework

As stated earlier, the two days of observation at Mountain View Elementary are not fully representative of anything other than themselves. However, they certainly include and exclude elements described in Foucault's and Elias's works, and it would be useful to examine them to explore real-world examples of the theory.

The actual building structure of Mountain View, as well as the classrooms, do not reflect very strongly Foucault's description of an institution of control—the school itself is not one singular building but rather a mecca of structures joined together through sidewalks and courtyards. Some classrooms are connected together in one building; others are singular trailer units. The main office is its own small building with attached bathrooms. One impression upon first arriving at the school and seeing the hodgepodge structures is that it must not be particularly well-endowed, partially because it lacks a strong image of singularity. It is not cut off from the rest of the world; classrooms are easily accessible from the street, and kids are visible from the outside as they change classes. Here it becomes clear that the act of enclosure that Foucault describes goes hand-in-hand with a perception of privacy—the more closed-off a structure is and the more students are completely enclosed in it, the more that institution can claim that the students inside are protected from the outside. This is particularly relevant when one considers increased concerns for school intruders and school shootings in recent years (Richinick). In this way something Foucault described as a method of control can be reconfigured or redefined as increasing safety, thereby conferring a status of “unsafe” to structures that are open and inviting. The structures themselves are simple and do not have the same imposing feel as one single large, multi-story building might have. The open floor plan allows for more outdoor time when moving about the school, and likely prevents feeling closed-off like one might feel inside. In a similar

vein, the desks in the first, second, and third grade classrooms were set up in groups rather than as individual units separated in rows. This distinctly defies the idea that students should be separated into individual places within the classroom. Both the school and classroom structures seem to oppose Foucault's assertions, but there are still elements that do find parallels in the theory. The teacher's chastising of the student who was not standing up straight, for example, readily illustrates the desire for and power of authority figures to control students' bodies. Because it is done rather arbitrarily, it suggests that control is what is important, not the benefit for the student.

These (lack of) movement habits remain with us far into adulthood; why wouldn't they, unless our foundations for how to address movement and our bodies drastically shift? Even with an impending degree in Movement Studies, the process of writing this paper and not getting stuck in caved-in, stiff writing positions for hours on end has taken a great deal of conscious effort. Those who do not specifically focus in movement studies do not get the "privilege" of learning how their body works, how to listen to it, and how to take care of it unless they actively seek out guidance. Even that falls short, though, when institutional infrastructure necessarily relegates bodily autonomy and well-being to a role secondary to academic achievement. Conflicting messages about working one's hardest in school and taking care of one's body can begin in grade school and continue through higher education. This is not to say that it is impossible to succeed academically and maintain one's physical health. It is arguably the case, though, that grade schools often encourage children to attend the most rigorous and prestigious places of higher education they can reach, and those schools require a large amount of intellectual work that can be hard to manage amidst meeting the rest of one's needs.

## **Brief Discussion of Traits in a Positive Physical Education Program**

The following section will discuss elements that comprise a successful Physical Education program, based on somatic principles and research.

Successful PE will:

1. Be accessible to every student. Not every child will have the same abilities or body types, but each student should learn that their own and their classmates' bodies are all important, interesting, and part of a larger community through which they are all united.
2. Teach students about the physiological makeup and function of their bodies, including major bones, muscles, and organ systems and how they contribute to alignment and well-being.
3. Teach students how to care for their bodies physically. This includes via nutrition, learning warm-up and stretching techniques, general injury prevention and care, and learning to be attuned to their bodies' needs and desires.
4. Encourage awareness of the mind-body connection.
5. Teach students positive lifelong movement habits "The mechanical nature of our society deprives children and adults of the need to perform the kinds of physical activities which in a former age helped keep people in a desirable state of physical fitness"
6. Facilitate creative movement.

While one might argue that prioritizing physical well-being in grade school and thereby forgoing higher test scores might underprepare kids for higher education, a large enough shift in priorities at the grade school level could very well shift the entire educational paradigm. Without drastic changes in the way children learn to use their bodies, this society will continue to become more

and more sedentary, physically un-autonomous, and disconnected from the power of our bodies to be creative, strong, and resourceful.

## **Conclusion**

This paper offers an introduction to some of the forces that have influenced physical education and the general structure of public school in the United States. As is probably clear, there are an incredible number of factors that have gone into the particular financial, spatial, theoretical, and literally physical values that comprise schools today. For example, a PE class might have a brilliant, caring, experienced teacher, but the amount of PE per week, the allotted space for PE classes, and the allotted funding for materials and salary can drastically change the PE experience for students. Or a PE class might foster creative empowerment, but if the academic classroom discourages such expression then children will have to suffer the cognitive dissonance between what they are being taught in two separate locations. The theoretical framework that explains some of the lack of resources and support for physical education also relates to other aspects of the PE experience that expand beyond the breadth of this paper. The factors affecting PE also affect many other parts of children's experience with school and with their bodies. For example, schools in lower income communities often get less funding than average, and kids in these communities are often people of color, and so it is easy to see how some people are disproportionately affected by this broad institutional problem. People with disabilities also deserve extra care and attention from policy makers and teachers so that they do not feel isolated and othered. Gym class is a wonderful opportunity to foster connections and understanding about different kinds of bodily experiences, based on the potential for it to be a

safe, explorative, appreciative space. However, a lack of support for PE in general points to an even greater loss for people with disabilities.

Capitalism in the US is also implicated in how the system fails children because it operates on the idea (at least in the present day) that we need material goods outside of ourselves to feel complete and satisfied. The capitalist approach in the US discourages self-reliance and valuing labor and physical capability more than the money or tools that can facilitate them. It moves us away from feelings that we are capable, powerful, and connected to each other and the earth and therefore responsible to be aware of and care for each of those things. It also goes along with a win-lose mentality and especially a winning-is-most-important mentality, rather than cooperative, community-building games. Thus, because the state is invested in maintaining a capitalist structure, it is also necessarily unmotivated to foster the development of self-reliant, self-empowered individuals who might decide to participate in communities where creativity and physical labor are more valuable than financial gain.

The power of money in the US also arises when one considers the enormous investment major corporations have in the unhealthiness of US citizens. Large pharmaceutical companies have a great deal of lobbying power and they necessarily profit from poor health; therefore there certainly may be opportunities for improved health that are discouraged and even prevented by entities that stand to majorly gain from treating, rather than preventing or curing certain pathological issues like obesity and other health issues sedentarism creates.

It is nearly impossible to acknowledge and address all of the elements that go into the way we experience our bodies in this culture. However, it is incredibly important to begin the process of analyzing and discussing the factors that affect us. Arguably the first step is simply more bodily awareness. It is unreasonable to expect sudden massive changes to the infrastructure

of this nation such that children will have all the necessary resources for healthy, happy bodies. Of course, such changes are vital, and can only happen with a great deal of work towards properly allocating funding and government support in the right places. First, though, the way to encourage more support and awareness for how our bodies are affected by our schools and state infrastructure is to first facilitate more awareness in oneself. Developing self-awareness and prioritizing physical well-being, as well as simply moving more for the sake of it will help to make up for that which is lost in structural faults. I will end with a last quote from Katy Bowman, who succinctly addresses both the issue and (at least one) solution:

If sedentary behavior is actually institutionalized in many ways...then movement is COUNTER-CULTURE. We often don't take kindly to those engaging in counter-culture behavior. So, is there a way to not only publish a National Physical Activity Plan, but to acknowledge where and when society depends on suppressed movement--just to keep the larger issue at hand at the forefront of our minds, even if addressing this aspect of the issue feels insurmountable at this time? Until then, move more yourself and support the Movement Movement. Movement can be a form of activism.

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