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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the attractive reputation of the physical education teacher and why many instructors lack job satisfaction. Long vacations, high job security, and a pleasant work environment are only several aspects of the profession which reinforce high expectations in students becoming gym teachers. However, little has been stressed in education classes concerning the mundane day-to-day routine of the elementary or secondary physical education teacher. According to the report, incidents that may lead to employment dissatisfaction are: (a) inadequate preparation for the daily routine of being a gym teacher, (b) lack of inservice training until internship, and (c) the discovery that only a small segment of time is devoted to instruction. The author then describes, through impressions of one observer, how physical education teachers feel about their work. The difficulties faced by teachers include (a) large classes, (b) diversity in students, (c) the nature of the subject matter, (d) time constraints, (e) lack of direct rewards of teaching, (f) psychological isolation from adults, and (g) bordeom with routine. The author concludes that good teachers will not be driven off by close examination of the teaching role. Rewards are genuine and powerful--but realistic expectations are a necessity. (JS)

THE ECOLOGY OF THE GYMNASIUM:

WHAT THE TOURISTS NEVER SEE.

by

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THE ECOLOGY OF THE GYMNASIUM: WHAT THE TOURISTS NEVER SEE.[1]

To be a physical education teacher is to play a particular social role. The role is defined by the expectations of people holding other significant roles within the social fabric of the school. When most of the expectations for behaviors in a vocational role are met, including those of the incumbent holds for the nature of the role, job satisfaction is the usual result.

Some physical education teachers describe themselves as happy with what they are and what their lives have become, while others do not. A major contributor to that global assessment is the fact that some physical education teachers find satisfaction in the performance of their work, while others do not.

There are many attractive things about being a physical education teacher. Long vacations, high job security, continued close association with sports, lack of strenuous physical or intellectual demands, plesant work environment, relative freedom from harassment by supervisors on the job, and the satisfactions of serving in a helping relationship with others (particularly children and youth) are all

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[1]The author's sincere appreciation is extended to Dorothy Lambdin and Mary Locke for their critical review of preliminary drafts for this manuscript.

perceived aspects of the role which (irrespective of the accuracy of the perceptions) attract thousands of people into physical education every year.

In reality, however, job satisfaction is not an absolute but a relative matter. People are happy with their lives when they have more satisfying than unsatisfying roles to play, and they are satisfied with any given role when their performance of the required behaviors more often goes right than it goes wrong. To paraphrase Mr. Micawber's sage analysis in Dickens' David Copperfield, misery is any annual wage for which annual expenditures exceed income, and happiness is any annual income which exceeds expenses--even by a single pound. Recent research evidence (1) confirms that Mr. Micawber's homily is in fact a general law of human behavior.

Happiness and misery are both found in teaching physical education. The determining balance is struck day by day, year by year, within that tight little society called the school, and that noisy microcosm called the gymnasium.

Many young teachers come to the school with expectations which doom them to disappointment. The fantastical notions about meeting every child's needs (inspired by four years of fantastical rhetoric by teacher educators) crash down so hard because they have so far to fall. Other young teachers simply find that good vacations, job security and

a love of sport and games are not enough to balance the books at the end of the day.

The question, however, is why should anyone find themselves really unhappy with a job that looks so attractive? Why do ordinary job descriptions seem to fall so short of correctly estimating the demands for life and survival in the gym? Why does our research literature and our body of conventional folk wisdom (passed on by textbooks and college professors) provide no more than a superficial and badly conducted nature-walk through the gym, rather than the exquisite detail of an ecology described in all of its interdependent parts?[2]

One answer is that researchers and professors too often have played the part of tourists in the gym. They visit a few hours to gather tidy little illustrations with which to spice their next lecture, or harass a helpless student teacher, or finish data collection for their next article in the Quarterly, and then quickly depart for more familiar ground. Like any social phenomenon complex enough to be interesting, teaching physical education is full of subtle paradoxes and misleading surface events. Only slow, patient study of daily routine yields a sense of who really does what to whom within the gym. Handing out locks, writing

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[2]Here the words are mine but the judgment is that of most veteran school inhabitants who find little that is recognizable in textbook descriptions of their world.

hall passes, puttin away equipment, standing bus duty, filling out grade cards, attending PTA meetings, marching out for fire drills, dealing with forgotten sneakers and locating lost basketballs, are just as much the reality of a teacher's daily experience as the act of instruction which appears so central to the visiting tourist. Visitors see the surface landmarks which tourists see, and learn the obvious surface facts which tourists learn (and are about as well regarded by local inhabitants as tourists gawking at life in any native village).

It is significant in understanding job satisfaction, that many pre-service trainees have been themselves no more than visitors to the gym when they reach their first internship. Their years as student residents in the gym yield surprisingly little insight into the teaching role. Instead of having given close and extended study to the microcosm of gymnasium life, they are left to discover, sometimes with delight and sometimes with horror, what being a physical education teacher means. Even then, as full-time actors in the play of roles that revolves around the gym, they often sense only the consequences of events without really discovering the social machinery that causes things to happen as they do.

The author has had the fortunate opportunity to spend significant periods as a full-time, resident observer of life in public school gymnasia. What follows is a

description of selected elements from that experience. The descriptions are based on the impressions of one observer and have been selected in this case because they seem to relate to how physical education teachers feel about their work.[3]

As a preface it is interesting to note that researchers perpetually are making the same discovery that thousands of novice physical educators make every fall. In many teaching jobs only a relatively small segment of total time is devoted to the act of instruction. A recent study noted in Phi Delta Kappan (9) set the figure barely above 30 percent. This is close to the 50 percent proportion of total time devoted to professional tasks found a generation ago in Gilmore's (3) investigation of secondary school

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[3]Readers familiar with the work of Philip Jackson, particularly Life in Classrooms (5), Semour Sarason, particularly The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (7), and Louis Smith, particularly Complexities of an Urban Classroom (8), will recognize the extent to which my impressions about life in the gymnasium parallel their conclusions about the classroom. It would be comforting to believe that this similarity arises because the world described in my field notes resembles the world captured in their data. Comforting or not, it probably is not completely true. What I perceived of reality in the gym inevitably was shaped by previous contact with their powerful analyses of classroom life. I can only acknowledge the intellectual debt and leave physical education teachers themselves to determine whether the descriptions here ring true or false.

physical educators.[4] This point may come as a surprise to the elementary school physical education teacher facing 5, 6 or even 7 back-to-back classes without a break, but across the profession that kind of role demand is the exception rather than the rule.

The instructional act itself has one pervasive quality -- complexity. In full swing a class of 35 4th graders doing a gymnastics unit is a seething mass of human interactions. Events happen at high speed, with high frequency, in multiple and simultaneous patterns and take subtle forms. In one recent clip from two minutes of that reality the following was observed.

> Teacher is working one-on-one with a student who has an obvious neurological deficit. She wants him to sit on a beam and lift his feet from the floor. Her verbal behaviors fall into categories of reinforcement, instruction, feedback and encouragement. She gives hands-on manual assistance. Nearby two boys perched on the uneven bars are keeping a group of girls off. Teacher visually monitors the situation but continues work on the beam. At the far end of the gym a large mat propped up so that students can roll down it from a table top, is slowly slipping nearer to the edge. Teacher visually monitors this but continues work on the beam. Teacher answers three individual inquiries addressed by passing students but continues as

[4] Obviously, the definition of such categories as "instruction" and "professional task" determines the result in studies such as these. Nevertheless, it is clear that a large proportion of the teacher's time and energy are expended on tasks which do not remotely resemble the role image held by outsiders.

> before. She glances at a group now playing follow-the-leader over the horse (this is off-task behavior) but as she does a student enters and indicates he left his milk money the previous period. Teacher nods him to the nearby office to retrieve the money and leaves the beam to stand near the uneven bars. The boys climb down at once. Teacher calls to a student to secure the slipping mat. Notes that the intruder, milk money now in hand, has paused to interact with two girls in the class and, monitoring him, moves quickly to the horse to begin a series of provocative questions designed to re-establish task focus.

That was only 120 seconds out of the 17,000 the teacher spent that day in active instruction. A great deal of detail was unobserved or unrecorded over those two minutes, and nothing in the record reflected the invisible train of thought in the teacher's mind.

No description fits this picture of complexity so well as Smith's concept of the teacher as ringmaster (8). Surrounded by a flow of activity the ringmaster monitors, controls and orchestrates, accelerating some acts, terminating others, altering and adjusting progress through the program, always with an eye for the total result.

At the heart of complexity in the gym is <u>numbers</u>. That the teacher is one and the learners are many is a fact of life which shapes every aspect of the teacher's experience. What many outsiders fail to appreciate is that an average class contains a lot of kids for one person to handle <u>even if there were no intent to teach anything</u>. This failure particularly is true of parents who often feel qualified as

experts on child management because they deal more or less successfully with their own children -- in groups rarely exceeding 3 or 4.

Physical education teachers have subtle ways of quickly sorting all outsiders into two groups. There are those who have a sympathetic understanding for what large numbers of children mean, and these people are regarded as friends. There are outsiders who fail to display any appreciation for this matter, and they are regarded warily as potential enemies.

A second salient factor related to complexity is diversity. Kids look different, have different capacities, learn at different rates, respond differently to different teacher styles and require different forms of nurturance. Any casual visitor will see some of this at once. The longer students are watched, however, the more differences become apparent. Every new task, every new social grouping reveals new ways in which learners are not alike. Although some of these differences are unimportant as variables in the learning process, it is inevitable that in most classes there will be some students engaged in learning tasks which are not wholly appropriate to their needs. The degree to which the teacher attempts to respond to this fact is a reliable gauge of complexity in the class environment. The more adjustments are made to individuals, the less uniform the total social fabric becomes.

A third factor contributing to complexity is the nature of the subject matter. When movement is both the medium of instruction and an intrinsic element in the learning product, numbers and diversity take on a special meaning for the task of the teacher. In physical education, students may be scattered over an instructional space as large as several acres. Decibel levels for noise may run at averages which would be considered intolerable in classrooms possessing far superior acoustic characteristics. Typically high levels of student mobility make it common for substantial portions of the class to relocate their position in a matter of seconds and to do so throughout most of the instructional period. Such positional relocations often signal significant changes in the students' relationship to the learning task. Even the basic teacher task of monitoring this flow of action is a skill which vastly exceeds in complexity any comparable function the classroom teacher is called upon to perform.

A fourth factor in complexity is the constraint of time. What happens in a school is not determined by the actual events of learning as it occurs in the clientele population, but by the clock (the period ends at 11:50 even when learning is proceeding at a furious rate) or the calendar (the volleyball unit ends on Friday even when the class is on the brink of putting it all together and the basketball unit begins on January 8th even though nearly everyone would be

better off doing some other things at that particular time in the school year).

Whatever the teacher is to accomplish must be accomplished on given days at given hours. These are packages of time which can't be stretched, shortened, relocated, postponed or skipped. The hardest constraint of time, however, arises not from the fact that so little time is available to accomplish so much, but from the fact that normal human learning, if pursued in reasonable, efficient and humane ways, demands flexible rather than rigid uses of the time allocated for instruction and practice.

One consequence of the combination of large numbers, great diversity and time constraints is an implacable fact that every physical education teacher lives with every day. It is impossible to help every student to learn as well as that student might have learned, given optimum conditions. At the end of every day, at the end of every year, there are students whom the teacher knows "could have," with a little more help, a more challenging task, the remediation of an entry skill or just a little more time to work things out. Most teachers learn quickly to accept this fact and busy themselves at doing as well as they can with the givens of the situation. Few, however, are able to "adapt out" the fact from their awareness altogether. Physical education teachers live with the frustration of imperfections that are built into the system.

It is a salient fact of the teacher's experience that many of the crucial elements in the system lie outside the teachers direct control. All the machinery of schedule and class composition and size are controlled by others. Even simple requests for transfer of teachers or students between classes are greeted with raised eyebrows. Students and teachers assigned together are expected to stay together. It is inevitable that this leads to an occasional sense of helplessness for the teacher. When the fundamental ingredients of daily operation are beyond an individual's control, it is not easy to maintain a positive self-concept as an active agent in control of events.

Numbers and the arrangement of work spaces produce another fact of gymnasium life. Kids are present nearly all of the time. Compared to other social environments the teacher's frequency of face-to-face exchanges with kids is high while the occurrence of such transactions with adults is low. Kids are omnipresent. Offices, corridors and even toilets offer no secure sanctuary. In some schools, particularly at the elementary level, the teacher faces a tidal wave of exchanges with students, a great part of those transactions involving messages which one or both parties would regard as significant.

The following four statements characterize life for many physical education teachers.

1. Little face to face exchange of significant conversation with other adults.

2. Little time for solitude, whether used for reflection, planning or just recuperating.

3. A high level of continuous vigilence involving conscious monitoring behaviors.

4. A high frequency of exchange with significant others who require (or demand) services in some form (advice, direction, information, encouragement, restriction), and a consequent low frequency of reciprocal interactions in which services provided are balanced by services returned.

To call the student/teacher dyad a helping relationship does not change the fact that students are in a taking role and teachers are in a giving role. That this one-way flow pervades the entire day and is inescapable, gives a special flavor to the teacher's experience.

Elementary school physical education teachers have been observed who clocked as little as three and a half minutes of significant face-to-face contact with other adults between the hours of 7:30 am and 4:30 pm. Even the suburban mother, so often held up as a model of the destructive consequences of isolation from normal adult contact and total immersion in the demands of children, has more daily contact with other adults (and vastly more time free from immediate contact with kids).

Much has been said about the rewards of teaching, particularly about the satisfactions of watching children learn and grow. Doubtless such indirect feedback is a key element in sustaining teacher satisfaction. To derive

satisfaction from such sources, however, requires a long view of things, a lot of sensitivity to small changes, and a capacity to take pleasure from the accomplishments of others when the nature and size of your own contribution is unknown. Those kinds of rewards can run a little thin on Thursday morning after it has become apparent that your new speedball unit is a pedagogic disaster area, evoking the same consumer enthusiasm as a slice of last week's pizza.

The more direct rewards for teachers, the strokes of human appreciation, encouragement and admiration which sustain most enterprises in social settings, are not as common as popular mythology about teaching would suggest. Students rarely say thank you for educational services,[5] rarely give encouragement when it is needed, and never express admiration for well conceived pedagogy -- no matter how elegantly it is executed by the teacher. The rewards dispensed directly by students are infrequent, irregular and indirect (often non-verbal). Even pigeons now know that is a poor schedule of reinforcement.

The omnipresence of kids leads to a strange paradox

[5]Teaching is not a simple service like radio repair which is sincerely sought by the client and honestly provided by the practitioner. Compulsory attendance makes teaching an intrusion, an uncomfortable fact which most teachers feel compelled to deny. Doubtless, maintaining the illusion that an intrusion is honest service adds much to the strain of playing the teacher's role.

about teaching physical education (one long recognized in the classroom). The teacher can be psychologically alone in a densely populated world (2, 4, 6). Only in prisons, hospitals and mental institutions are so many people found continuously confined in so small a space. Yet physical education teachers may have surprisingly little sustaining contact with people of their own kind. The physical (architectural) isolation of the gym located away from the political heartland of the school, the social isolation of the physical educator role which may make the teacher peripheral to the real business of the school, and the tradition (hedged with powerful sanctions) which makes each teacher's work area a castle to be penetrated by other adults only on rare and ceremonial occasions, all serve to sustain and intensify the feeling of isolation. Teaching physical education in some schools is a lonely job, awash in an endless sea of children.

Psychological isolation has many consequences. One of these is that teachers often are thrown on their own resources for processes which more commonly are social in nature. Physical education teachers must provide self-stimulation when their spirits flag, must generate their own suggestions for change when method is inadequate, must devise their own celebrations when difficult tasks are accomplished, and must mourn alone when their best effort has failed. Doing these things alone never is as

effective or satisfying as doing them with others.

Laboring away in their private castle, the only mirror which physical education teachers have for their own behavior is comprised of students. Student feedback is a valuable tool in devising (and revising) effective instruction, but like fun-house mirrors it does tend to distort reflections in certain dimensions. Students are neither adults nor educators. If they enjoy what is happening they are just as likely to encourage a behavior which is dysfunctional for the purposes of education as they are to discourage one which is useful to those ends.

The degree to which it is students rather than teacher educators who teach novices how to teach, and the degree to which it is students who determine the real curriculum in terms of what actually gets taught, has never been determined. It is easy to believe, however, that student influence is both great and sometimes destructive to educational purposes. The absence of other adults with whom to consult makes student response more potent and potentially more dangerous for the teacher.

A final paradox of gymnasium life is that in the midst of complexity is routine, in the midst of change is repetition, and in the midst of challenge is boredom. While new students always mean new individual differences to be noted and accounted for, and new objectives mean fresh challenges to pedagogy, the total environment provides some remarkably

stable elements. There are only a finite number of learning problems for the handstand. While there are many approaches to teaching the handstand a junior high teacher who has been exploring the possibilities for 10 or 20 years has just about exhausted the genuine surprises. When people know too well what to expect, and too well how they will respond, over too large a segment of their daily experience, they get stale. This particularly is true of physical education settings where interesting alternative roles such as coaching or supervision are unavailable. When daily work becomes the execution of routine, teachers feel and respond like other humans. They get bored with their jobs.

How teachers feel about their jobs is not easy to assess. If you have a job which is not very exciting but which is likely to be the only job you ever will have, it is difficult to talk openly about the subject. Interviews with physical education teachers suggest that they are much like the classroom teachers studied by other investigators (7, 2). The older teachers (more than five years of experience) betray little honest enthusiasm for their work. They like what they are doing in a general way and certainly report feeling competent to do an effective job, but the sense of mission and the excitement of new challenges clearly is absent.

The one persisting theme which seems related to lowered

job satisfaction in older teachers is the comment that there is no reason to expect the future to be any different from the present. With the future predicted, hope for new growth declines and zest for the present struggle declines. This thematic pattern probably is related in a causal way to the significant number of older physical education teachers who seek career alternatives such as administration, pursue advanced study unrelated to salary, promotion or job competence, or begin to live the more significant part of their creative lives outside the school, in home projects, avocations or moonlighting enterprises.

It is easy to make the normative judgment that none of these escape behaviors needs to be a natural consequence of life in the gymnasium. The fact remains that some teachers do report boredom and low job satisfaction. Many are quietly resigned, some suffer a sense of loss and seem almost to mourn their lost dreams, some seem angry as though they were victims of an entrapment, and some are confused, wondering where things went wrong.

Younger teachers show real flashes of feisty enthusiasm, but it is clear that they become quickly aware of where the dangers lie. In interviews they literally point to older colleagues as examples of what they plan never to become. They are convinced that they can and will exit if the work proves unsatisfying.

Whatever the intentions of young teachers, time has a

way of making many of them into older teachers. It emphatically has been my experience that teachers do not evolve into irresponsibility or incompetence. Many teachers grow in their powers as the years pass. There is a negative trend, however, and it is all too clearly visible in some. When teaching becomes uninteresting to the teacher it invariably becomes less interesting to the students. Bored teachers teach dull classes.

Dull classes produce a circumstance in which the teacher is surrounded by people who mostly are uninterested in and unresponsive to what is happening. In this environment teachers tend to follow one of two scenarios. They drift toward the non-instructional role of supervisor/referee, or pursue a tight spiral into highly routinized, control-oriented class procedures which buffer them from student feedback. In either case, teaching dies and the position is filled with a functional zombi, one of the living dead who will haunt generations of students.

All of the foregoing may sound much too grim. It is a distortion, but only because it is a partial picture not because it is a false picture. In most gyms there is joy, and success, and fellowship, and reward, and excitement. Too often for the comfort of some observers, however, and certainly too often for the health of the profession, there are not enough of those satisfactions to balance the personal accounts of too many teachers.

What will cheer and impress any careful observer is the fact that some teachers not only survive, but seem to flourish and thrive on the very adversities which destroy others. These teachers at once fascinate and puzzle those who make teacher watching a profession. Patient scrutiny has revealed little dependable information about the common qualities of these singularly uncommon teachers. Although they report a steady stream of concerns and frustrations they seem not to be bored, overwhelmed or lonely. Although their teaching is anything but tidy and predictable, as models of pedagogy, they are uniformly (if sometimes grudgingly) recognized by all in the school society as exceptional teachers. Although they seem perpetually dissatisfied with how they are doing things (if changing and constant tinkering are any indication) they seem deeply satisfied by their teaching role.

The following list contains items which somehow are related to successful survival as a satisfied and lively physical education teacher.

1. These teachers seem to have achieved a permanent and comfortable status as perpetual students in which the object of study is teaching. They talk a great deal about their job and seem to sustain a genuine sense of change through learning. They describe themselves as different today from what they were yesterday and they obviously anticipate being different tomorrow. They lack completely the usual notion that they know how to teach (or have been taught how to teach). They give the impression of being engaged in an endless, fascinating

struggle (contest?) against an adversary who never is completely defeated.

2. These teachers sustain lines of communication which are more open to exchange with other adults than is characteristic of teachers in general. They more freely seek and receive criticism and advice from others. Paradoxically, although constantly struggling with the teaching task they seem remarkably undefensive about what they are doing.

3. These teachers were recognized as different (though not necessarily as superior) from the start of their careers. The quality which has marked them so indelibly may be called autonomy. They are not rebels (some conform quite closely to whatever local norms govern the company image), but they possess a peculiar quirk of mind. They do not expect to be told what to do. They assume they will control events, that the system will be bent to serve their vision of rational ends, and that no one will make major decisions without their consent. In general, they act as though they were in control and thereby uniquely accountable for whatever physical education is in their gyms. Even a casual understanding of school sociology will suggest that some of this is illusion, but by the simple act of not expecting to be told what they must do, these teachers seem to have increased both their sense of freedom and the reality of that freedom.

4. Although these teachers are profoundly (even agonizingly) sensitive to the processes of teaching, their deepest interest and most pervasive attention is given to the products (consequences) of teaching. Their intention to make a change in students is a benchmark to which they return and return. This strong sense of intentionality has two corralaries. They have no particular concern about "being a teacher" (for example, doing things or looking like a conventional model) and they are habitual and expert student watchers. They constantly judge their own instructional behaviors in terms of consequences displayed in students. They seem sometimes to be spectators for their own instructional performances.

5. These teachers have a strongly developed sense of reality about the job, about schools and about physical education as a content area. They can recite all of the difficulties and seem to have few illusions about what is possible. More importantly, if one is interested in the development of these teachers, they rarely report the disenchantment experienced by other teachers in their first year. They may not have been any tougher or even more skillful in professional practice, but apparently they had few illusions about what teaching would be like when they arrived in the school. Somehow being spared the destruction of dreams is related to the capacity to survive intact.

Were these teachers born? Do they represent the authentic geniuses who turn up from time to time in any field of endeavor? Absolutely not! There is no scrap of evidence to suggest that these are anything other than ordinary people who became good teachers because they struggled with the task, and who became inclined to do so because of the accumulation of particular experiences (probably before and during the period of professional training and initiation).

The task of the teacher educator is to recognize and manipulate those experiences which produce teachers who survive with their zest and intentionality intact. If autonomy is an essential ingredient then passivism becomes the enemy and both selection and the training environment must be adjusted accordingly. If free interaction with other teachers appears to be a sustaining factor, then the skills and habits of mutual criticism and interpersonal support

must be encouraged at every step. If avoiding disillusion seems an important prophylaxis then pre-service teachers should have their noses rubbed in hard realities rather than the fantasies of teaching. Surely an accurate picture of the teaching role will be a better preparation for life in the gymnasium. Such knowledge may even be the first step in altering the realities which presently exist.

We need have no fear that good teachers will be driven off by close examination of the teaching role. The attractions are genuine and powerful. So long as they have not been promised a rosegarden, most people can be happy with a plot of wild pasture -- just so long as the annual crop of roses outnumbers the annual crop of brambles, even by only one.

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