The Social Values of Modern Physical Education

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Before one can discuss the social values of modern British physical education, I think it is necessary to consider briefly the stages of development which have led us to our present conception of this subject. These are:

a) the continental development;
b) the continental influence on our own system and,
c) our own or native development.

Probably the first nations to realise the developmental effect of physical education both on character and physique were Sparta and Athens. Though the systems developed by these two nations were concurrent, they were different in application.

Sparta was to all intents and purposes a highly organised military camp, and almost the sole purpose of its physical education was to prepare a man for war. In some respects the Spartan outlook was identical with the German one from 1933 onwards. From seven years of age the Spartan child came under the care of the state. His training was thoroughly methodical, but little or no attention was paid to the aesthetic side of his training.

In Athens, however, the training was a much more balanced type and due importance was given to the mental as well as the physical development. There was a much greater emphasis placed on music and games and the height of physical development and performance was participation in the Olympic Games.

Aristotle defined clearly the aims of the Greek system when he said, « The main aims of physical education are health, strength, agility and beauty ».

The Romans were also fully conscious of the value of physical education and though they despised the Greek athletics, they were fond of strenuous exercise as a means of recreation and like the Spartans realised its military value.

However, it should be mentioned at this point, that during the Roman occupation of Britain, the beginnings of what we consider to be essentially British sports, boxing and football, were introduced in their primitive forms. With the decline of the Mediterranean influence and power, interest in physical education was lost, for some centuries.

The so called « Dark Ages » were indeed ones on the Continent for the development of physical education and it was in a very few places that a spark of interest remained.

In the late fourteenth century an Italian, Da Feltre at Mantua in Italy, ran a school for the sons of noblemen in which physical activities took their part along with the more academic studies. This Italian was in fact the first man to call attention to the value of physical education after the lapse centuries. In his school he ran a daily exercise period regardless of weather, and he even had special teachers for riding, fencing running and archery.

In France, Locke wrote a book or treatise in the late 17th century called « Thoughts Concerning Education » in which he divided education into three aspects, physical, moral and intellectual, and Rousseau whom, as we played no small part in the French Revolution had many definite ideas about physical education and stressed continually the importance of the intimate relationship between mind and body.

In spite of all this talk by enlightened thinkers over some centuries it was not until the late 18th century that any real effort was made to develop interest and practice in physical education in schools. This was started in Germany by Bassedow who in 1774 opened a model school at Dessau. He was greatly influenced by Rousseau and taught Greek gymnastics, consisting of wrestling, running, throwing, and jumping, and at a later stage archery, swimming and skating were added to the list. From this school at Dessau there went out many disciples over the continent of Europe but it was still in Germany that the flame of interest burned most brightly.

In the first years of the 19th century, Guts Muths who was a practical teacher for a number of years wrote a book Gymnastics for the young and he was the first to introduce into gymnastics, long walks and excursions.

Jahn, a Prussian and the son of a clergyman, became interested in gymnastics and was the inventor of the first horizontal bar and the first outdoor gymnasium. He was also perhaps the first man to introduce a scientific outlook towards physical education and to form a society to do research work in the subject. Unfortunately, Jahn
mixed politics with teaching and in 1819
his gymnastic societies were forbidden and
he was put into prison. He was released some
six years later and carried on the work he
had been doing.

Between 1910 and 1858, another German,
Spiess, was intimately concerned with the
development of physical education, parti-
cularly in schools. Like Jahn, he too in his
early days, mixed politics with education and
was forced to leave Germany for some fifteen
years. During this time he went to Switzer-
land and became a teacherin Fребel's
school. He did a considerably amount of
writing and in 1847, produced a practical
manual for teachers, and in 1848 he returned
to Germany and began to organise physical
training in schools and run courses for
teachers. Perhaps his greatest contribu-
tion to the development of the subject was
his insistence that his teachers should have
academic status as well as a knowledge of
physical training. Incidentally this was
something not realised in our own country
until seventeen years ago.

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At about the same time as these develop-
ments in Germany a similar interest was
being shown in Sweden, where, in the early
years of the nineteenth century, P.-H. Ling
became interested in gymnastics; an interest
which had its origin in his taking up fencing
as a cure for rheumatism!

In 1805, he became a teacher of langua-
ges and fencing at Lund University, where,
during the next ten years he began to work
out his own system of gymnastics based
on the anatomical needs of the body. He
maintained that gymnastics had a place in
the education of children, in national de-
fence, and in medicine; and even to-day,
most of our remedial exercises are pure
Ling.

Ling passed on his interests to his son,
Hjalmar, who in 1848 became head teacher
of educational gymnastics at the Stockholm
Central Institute.

In Denmark, at this time, as much, if not
more progress was being made by Nachtigal,
professor of gymnastics at the University of
Copenhagen, who was responsible for making
his country the first in Europe to give physi-
cal training instruction in schools as part
of the curriculum, and to institute a teachers'
course in theory and practice.

Incidentally, Nachtigal was the source
of Ling’s inspiration, and it is rather inter-
esting to note that the Swedish system
devised by Ling, was adopted in 1884 by
Denmark for use in their own Folk High
Schools.

That briefly, traces the history of European
physical education almost to the end of
the nineteenth century, though, of course,
there were many others, whom there is not
time to mention, doing very fine work
elsewhere.

Let us now consider briefly the develop-
ment in our own country and the effects
that the continental systems have had on
that development. This again will have to
be only a brief consideration, because I
am anxious to deal a little more fully with
physical education as we know it to-day.

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As I have already said, some of our earliest
games were introduced during the Roman
Occupation of Britain. In later times, sports
such as archery and fencing were encouraged
but apart from that, except perhaps in a
few of the larger Public Schools, little or
nothing was done. In fact at one period of
our history, football in its more primitive form
was actually forbidden by law.

We have already seen how the needs of
military defence were ever in the minds of
many of the original workers in physical
education. Such was the case in this country,
for the first attempts at organised physical
training were made by our own army autho-
rities. In 1822, C.-H. Clias, a Swiss army
officer was appointed to introduce gymnas-
tics into the army, the navy and Chaterhouse
School. His methods werer entirely the
German ones of Guts Muths. Unfortunately
owing to illness he had to return home after
three years.

In 1858, Archibald Mc Laren opened a
fencing school and gymnasium at Oxford
with the idea of reforming gymnastics and
giving it its proper place in education. In
1860, the Army asked him to work out a
system for them, and a gymnasium was
opened at Aldershot. Like Clias, Mc Laren's
work was based on the German ideas of
Guts Muths and Jahn.

From 1860 onwards, however, more and
more interest was being shown in physical
education, though the Education Act of
1870 refers to « Drill » and suggests the
employment of Army drill instructors. In
1885, the Dartford Womens' Physical Trai-
nning College was opened, and in 1890 there
was evidence that an attempt was being
made to get away from « Drill » for the
term « Physical Exercise » was substituted.
Between 1890 and 1900 considerable inves-
tigation was being carried out, which cul-
minated in the first government publica-
tion on physical training, The Model Course
in 1902. Two years later the first official
syllabus was produced.

In 1905, there came a major change in
policy, for in that year the Army abandoned
completely the German system and intro-
duced Swedish gymnastics. In 1909 the
Board of Education followed the lead given
by the Army and produced a syllabus based
on the same system.

It was now becoming clear that educa-
tionalists were being converted to the idea
that some form of physical training was
perhaps necessary in a complete scheme of
education, though there was still a long
way to go.
The first world war naturally impeded progress of a practical nature, but nevertheless in 1919, for the very first time, an official government syllabus was published which stressed the recreative side of physical training, and I think one can safely say that this syllabus marked a new and entirely British conception of Physical Education, though there was still a strong tendency to cling to imported systems of gymnastics.

Though the introduction to this new system stressed the value of recreation, much of the work given was dull and static in nature. One would hardly call foot opening and closing, or feet placing sideways to numbers either interesting or by any stretch of imagination, recreative. A glance at typical illustrations from the syllabus will clearly indicate the still dominant influence of Ling.

For fourteen years, until 1933, this book was used for the instruction of children up to eleven years of age, but behind the scenes the germ of recreation was growing rapidly.

In about 1930, Professor Jacks or Manchester University had published his book, The Education of the Whole Man which stressed, as never before had been done, the indivisibility of academic education and physical education. This was indeed progress, and even more was made with the publication in 1933 of the new Syllabus of Physical Training for Schools.

This book, which is still the official syllabus to this day, swept aside the static work of its predecessor and offered freedom and movement. Therein lay its danger, for to many teachers, movement and more movement became the be-all and end-all of their physical training lessons. They failed completely to realise that the intention was purposeful movement, and without purpose the movement was lost.

However, as time went on, the pendulum swung and a balanced outlook prevailed generally throughout our schools.

Round about the years 1935 and 1936 a new system of gymnastics, Primary Gymnastics, evolved by Neils Buch of Denmark began to creep into the physical education schemes for older children. In this system, rhythm and rhythmic exercises played a prominent part, with the inevitable result that, as had happened in 1933, many teachers forgot everything else but rhythm, until the importance of movement, purpose and control were almost completely forgotten in the insistent clamour for rhythm and still more rhythm.

Thus in 1939, we had in this country, the rather peculiar situation of having our Primary School work based still on a Swedish system, and our Senior School work based mainly on a Danish system.

Then came the war, and with it violent changes in our mode of life, and in the conduct of our education, particularly in large cities. Many thousands of children lost the control of fathers, and many thousands more, lost the influence of both parents because of evacuation; though in lots of cases, the value of living in rural surroundings, or by the sea, offset to some extent, the loss of parental influence. Those children who remained behind were subjected to the mental and physical strain of, not only the dangers of bombing, but the complete lack of recreational facilities.

In schools, many boys were never taught by men at all and others not until they were thirteen or fourteen years of age.

During this war period, owing, I feel to this lack of control many of the seeds of juvenile delinquency were sown — seeds which have grown and come to horrible fruition to-day.

Again, before and during the war years, one school of educational thought began to preach « self expression » for children, which is excellent in conception and idea, but when it becomes interpreted as meaning that a child should do just what he wants when and how he wants, then it is open to obvious and far-reaching dangers.

Most teachers to-day and particularly those concerned with physical education at some time or another during the education of the child, realise, or are beginning to realise that discipline must be enforced, if necessary, in order that the child may perhaps better realise the social values of such discipline. He must be led, gently whenever possible, but forcibly if necessary into the paths of self discipline — and this can never be done if he or she is allowed absolute and unrestrained freedom of expression all the time.

Consider for a moment, the environment of the average child of to-day. Most of the children of this country live in the heart of, or more generally in the suburbs of great cities. In greater London alone there is nearly a quarter of the population of this country.

Whilst at school, the child is usually fully occupied by being at school, but the moment he leaves, and when he is in the throes of the adolescent period, his home tends to become a mere dormitory or boarding house to which he returns at the end of a day for food and sleep — and which he leaves each morning to start another day in the eternal five-day week routine. During the week his recreations, if any, are the cinema and the speedway. At weekends he may go to watch a game of football — and on Sunday he probably goes to the cinema again.

Generally speaking, the average adolescent is a spectator, and not a performer. In fairness to him one must say that he is not entirely to blame.

During the way years, many physical educationalists, who perhaps for the first time for many years, were able to sit back and view the problem as a whole, came to certain conclusions, which we having an enormous influence on our British system, and
influence so great, that since the way our physical education has been, and still largely is, for that matter, in a state of flux, though it is slowly, but surely beginning to crystallise out.

The conclusion they reached, I think can best be summed up as follows:

1. It is wrong to try to inflict upon British people formalised continental systems of physical education.

2. As we already have a games tradition, which incidentally has profoundly influenced American Physical Education, why not build up our own system on this game's basis.

3. There is a vital necessity to enlarge and widen the scope of activities to be included in Physical Education.

It is this third point, I think which is of most social importance.

I referred a moment ago to the spectator.

Why is he a spectator?

Surely, the main reason is his limited sports experience. In school, he may or may not have been taught the fundamentals of our many national games of Rugby, Association Football and Cricket — but every child does not automatically develop a liking for, or become proficient in them. If he did, the present facilities would be totally inadequate to cater for all those wishing to play. If, on the other hand, he showed neither aptitude nor liking for these games, little or nothing was provided to take their place.

Many children who may be hopeless at ball games, may for instance be potential internationals in Fencing, Skating or Canoeing.

What then is the limit of development?

The answer, I think, is that there is in theory no limit to what may be included in the Physical Education Curriculum, and in practice the only present limits are the available facilities.

The strongest possible emphasis is now being placed on the carry-over value of school physical education to post school life.

The physical training lesson is no longer a matter of Swedish gymnastics and vaulting and agility, though they still have their place for those that like them; we must now think in terms of camping, walking, canoeing, of dancing, not only classical dancing and folk dancing, but ballroom dancing as well. We must think in terms of table-tennis, bicycle polo, badminton and perhaps even of ice hockey, climbing and cycle speedways.

In other words, we have to give basic training in all the social activities of the twentieth century, in activities which are going to turn the child from a dormitory dweller to a member of the community who mixes with other members with similar interests, and by so doing leads a fuller life than hitherto.

In some respects also, the wheel has turned a full circle. What we call « Modern » is almost a reversion to the original ideas of a « natural » system of physical education in which we try to lead the child into recreational activities through their basic and fundamental actions of walking, climbing and running and all other forms of play which know no international boundaries. We are trying also to lead the child out into the open air and away from the artificialities of our suburban and city life.

For some years now, admirable and most successful pioneer work has been done by the Central Council of Physical Recreation for the adult. They are providing instruction and facilities for every type of recreational activity all over the country. I think one can safely say that because of the work they are doing it is now possible for anyone to take part in any recreational activity of his or her choice.

It is up to the modern school to provide the basic instruction and interest which will make a child desire to continue his experiences in after school life.

There has now appeared, more than ever before, a sense of adventure and a desire to experiment.

Even ten years ago most teachers would have been horrified at the thought of providing climbing apparatus for infants, yet we now have such things as Jungle Gyms, the Scrambling Net and the Essex Agility Apparatus, which not only provide excellent physical exercise, but create an enormous interest and enthusiasm, encourage initiative and give a child a sense of independence and adventurous achievement.

Experiments are being made in a certain authority in the north of England with what is known as « Adventure Physical Education » where children are given a task such as finding their way across country with the aid of a map, and en-route are confronted with problems involving physical and mental effort, such as a crossing streams, climbing steep hillsides, or covering pieces of difficult country within a given time, but perhaps the best example of this kind of work is being done at the Outward Bound School in Wales, which is not only providing adventure in physical living, but is bringing intimately together boys from all walks of life.

In short, our modern conception of Physical Education for this country is based on our native games and recreations, and reserves continental formal gymnastics almost entirely to the field of remedial work. It is endeavouring to prepare the child for a fuller physical and emotional life; to make him a more responsible member of the community and to develop his social life by educating him in a wider range of recreational activities. It is trying to encourage initiative and a desire for adventurous and decent living; to inculcate to the utmost the British sense of fairplay and sportsmanship and to take the child away from the cities and dormitory suburbs into the open fields and on the rivers of our still wonderful island.
Never before, has the child, the adolescent, and the adult had so much leisure time. Never before have the opportunities been so great for educating them how best to use that leisure, not only physically, but mentally and morally as well.