

## **Role Modeling: The Forgotten Part of Elementary School Physical Education**

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*Role modeling is a powerful teaching tool. With the skills, talents and attitudes teachers possess or lack, they are one of the key, perhaps the most important, building blocks of the educational system. Teachers who take pride in being physically active and demonstrate motor skills during physical education lessons can influence school children positively. The purpose of this article is to communicate the importance of “teacher as a role model” in physical education. It seems, however, that in our schools, role modeling can be a forgotten element of teaching. Hence, this is an issue that deserves further consideration and discussion.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Each experience influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had. (Dewey, 1938)*

The elementary school years are a crucial time period for a child’s physical development (Fishburne, 2005). A major aim of elementary school physical education programming is to help children become physically educated (Hickson & Fishburne, 2005) in order to choose physically active and healthy lifestyles (Rink & Hall, 2008). What teachers do to achieve this aim is a critical consideration.

In order for children to become physically educated, teachers need to create conducive learning environments. Therefore, teachers must use all the skills and resources at their disposal to develop a learning environment for children that supports the development of physically active and healthy lifestyles. Issues such as planning, lesson delivery (Rink, 2006), and the evaluation of learning (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2013) have continued to be constant themes of consideration and thought. However, although a teacher may be well-planned (e.g., lesson plans, assessment tools, etc.) when entering the learning environment, an area often overlooked is the importance of “teacher as a role model” in physical education.

*Role modeling is a powerful teaching tool.* (Cardinal & Cardinal, 2001)

With the skills, talents and attitudes teachers possess or lack, they are one of the key, perhaps the most important, building blocks of the educational system (Yilmaz, 2011). In fact, teachers have the opportunity to impact children in a positive manner every school day (Vidourek, King, Bernard, Murnan, & Nabors, 2011). For example, teachers who take pride in being physically active and demonstrate motor skills during physical education lessons can influence school children in a positive manner (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2013). Fishburne (2005) holds a similar view by contending that teachers of physical education should demonstrate motor skills and participate regularly in the physical activities with children during lessons.

## **PURPOSE**

*It is possible learners have a difficult time valuing knowledge when they perceive that the teacher does not model the information being presented.* (Dean, Adams, & Comeau, 2005)

The purpose of this article is to communicate the importance of “teacher as a role model” in physical education. When striving to enhance teaching effectiveness in physical education, role modeling is a teaching strategy that must be considered. However, it seems that in our schools, role modeling can be a forgotten element of teaching. This is an issue that deserves further consideration and discussion.

## **ROLE MODELING IN SCHOOLS**

### **Teachers as Role Models**

In a recent study, Vidourek, et al. (2011) reported that teachers who were enthusiastic toward children and the subject material created more positive, welcoming learning environments. Teachers who are consistently enthusiastic in the classroom act as an impetus for academic achievement whilst motivating learners to connect to others and the school as a whole (Vidourek, et al., 2011). Yilmaz (2011) supported this by contending that teachers who role model positively in the classroom through enthusiasm and excitement toward the learning outcomes contribute to academic success by encouraging learners to participate willingly in learning activities and to remain focused.

Enthusiasm for teaching is commonly defined as a teacher’s use of eye contact, facial expression, vocalization, gesturing and movement throughout the learning environment (Vidourek, et al., 2011). Teachers are in a unique position to role model a caring attitude through recognition of each child in the learning environment as well as modeling key behaviors of concern, support and understanding for all school children (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012; Vidourek, et al., 2011).

### **Teachers as Role Models in Physical Education**

*Whether they like it or not, teachers of physical education must view themselves as role models.*  
(Dean et al., 2005)

Understanding the relative contributions of role modeling physical activity and fitness-promoting behaviours towards children has been identified as an understudied and potentially powerful influence in promoting physically active lifestyles within society (Cardinal, 2001). In 2004, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) suggested that teachers of physical education should teach children what to do to be healthy and fit, how to do it, and why it is important. Therefore, the actions of teachers of physical education seem to be as important as the material being presented during lessons.

In addition to teacher actions, the appearance (i.e., clothing) of teachers of physical education has also been found to play an integral part in the learning environment. For example, what a teacher chooses to wear while teaching physical education can lead to children's perceptions towards the teacher and the subject area. Bradford and Hickson (2010) found that children do form perceptions of their teacher the moment the teacher enters the physical education environment. These perceptions formed by the children are primarily due to what the teacher is wearing (i.e., appearance). Hence, the actions and appearance of a teacher during a lesson is a form of role modeling (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2013).

### **How Can Teachers be Role Models in Physical Education?**

We believe that teachers can be role models in physical education by: CARING, USING, CHOOSING, GIVING, UNDERSTANDING and BEING.

#### *CARING Toward Learning and Learners*

*Students will advocate either for or against physical education, and that outcome is largely contingent on the caring education that teachers of physical education provide. (Rikard, 2009)*

Teachers can show children that they truly care about their learning by engaging in the learning process. Fostering interpersonal relationships with children based on a caring perspective requires teachers to interact with children, to develop mutual trust and respect, and to attend to children's needs (Rikard, 2009). A caring attitude toward children and their learning is a strategy that has been found to build rapport between teachers and learners (Bradford, Stanec, & Hickson, 2012). Such rapport can be most beneficial, as Rikard (2009) contended that care plays a part in the enhancement of children's learning.

#### *USING a Variety of Teaching Styles*

*Different teaching styles promote different types of student learning. (Fishburne, 2005)*

Teachers can use a variety of teaching styles throughout their physical education programs. Using different teaching styles can provide children with opportunities to reproduce and produce knowledge (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002). Teaching styles differ from one another depending on the level of control a teacher chooses to retain. Numerous authors have identified different styles available to educators (Fishburne, 2005; Grasha, 1996; Mawer, 1999; Siedentop, 1991). Although several of these styles are similar, there are also significant differences. For example, providing learners with opportunities to discover the proper way to kick a soccer ball is much different from a teacher directly showing the proper way of doing so. Using different teaching styles can offer learners with different opportunities to obtain knowledge. For example, the use of a variety of teaching styles throughout the school year can support the learning of the foundations of movement (i.e., basic fundamental motor skills) required for all types of physical activity (e.g., soccer, skipping, taekwondo) (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002; Na, 2009).

#### *CHOOSING to Wear Appropriate Clothing for the Learning Environment*

*Wearing appropriate clothing is a sign that an individual is responding to situational demands. (Workman & Freeburg, 2009)*

What a person chooses to wear is a powerful communicator (Damhorst, Miller-Spillman, & Michelman, 2005; Roach, 1997). Therefore, first impressions, which lead to firmly held perceptions by children at the beginning of a class, are affected by a combination of teacher characteristics including the teacher's clothing (Workman & Freeburg, 2009). For example, the clothing being worn by a teacher in

physical education must fit that of a person who is prepared to engage in physical activity or children may perceive the teacher as uncaring toward the subject area, not prepared to demonstrate the skills, and/or disinterested in engaging in physical activities (Bradford & Hickson, 2010). The selection of professional attire enhances occupational attributes of teachers (Gordon, 2010). Therefore, in physical education, teacher clothing that is associated with physical activity should be recognized as a teacher's choice of attire.

#### *GIVING Proper Attention Toward Curriculum Outcomes*

*Teachers of physical education have the responsibility to develop and teach programs that physically educate elementary school children. (Hickson & Fishburne, 2005)*

Through innovative teaching approaches, teachers can offer breadth and variety in quality physical education programs. By attending to children's learning needs, the use of different resources can assist in the learning process. For example, bulletin boards, DVDs, task cards, music, an array of developmentally appropriate equipment, etc. can be included throughout a quality physical education program. Special guests, such as physical education consultants can join the class to introduce new activities that can assist learning. Attention to lesson plan delivery, assessment strategies and facility choice can become a regular part of a teacher's planning. Moreover, a teacher who is well planned and organized with long-, mid-, and short-term plans, assessment strategies, etc. in place would afford him/herself the flexibility throughout the year to create, modify and reflect on children's overall learning.

#### *UNDERSTANDING the Impact of Demonstrations*

*Presenting a motor task by role modeling is one of the most powerful forms of communicating to children during a physical education lesson. (Vogler, 2003)*

An underlining basis for modeling is that it becomes easier to perform a motor task more proficiently after watching the task being modeled (Vogler, 2003). The use of demonstration is part of a larger issue related to presenting information clearly to learners and is better understood as part of the process of communication. The combination of verbal and visual information and rehearsal are most effective when the objective is to provide the learner with a clear idea of how to perform a motor task (Rink, 2010). When teachers of physical education demonstrate motor skills, participate in physical activities with children, and display enthusiasm consistently during lessons can help children reach higher levels of motivation (Vidourek et al., 2011).

#### *BEING Willing to Send Proper Active, Healthy Lifestyle Messages*

*It is essential that, as role models, teachers of physical education exhibit healthy lifestyle practices to optimize teaching effectiveness. (Cardinal & Cardinal, 2001)*

It would not be difficult to argue that, on a daily basis, teachers are constantly sending messages to children (Hickson & Bradford, 2010). For example, when teaching the importance of nutrition and active, healthy living, teachers can role model behaviors that they want children to learn from. Hence, teachers can either show their children that they believe in what they are teaching, or not. If a teacher stresses to his/her children that healthy eating is an important part of healthy living, then mixed messages will be communicated if the teacher chooses to eat an unhealthy lunch in front of them. In addition to eating habits, lifestyle choices can also be communicated to children. Ideally, effective teachers model, and thus teach, the most current information in their field. Since the promotion of "healthy, active lifestyles" appears to be a primary goal of physical education, effective teachers of physical education should teach

and role model the most favored behaviors and processes for improving their health and physical fitness (Dean et al., 2005).

## **IDEAS FOR FUTURE THINKING AND RESEARCH**

*Teachers possess the unique opportunity to impact children in a positive manner every school day. (Vidourek, et al., 2011)*

This area of research on “teacher as a role model in physical education” has the potential to make a significant contribution to the field, especially at a time when there is so much emphasis on obesity rates, sedentary lifestyles and low levels of self-efficacy. If teachers of physical education become more aware of the importance of “teacher as a role model,” children’s learning may be enhanced leading to greater levels of self-efficacy. This, in itself, may play an instrumental part in helping children increase their potential to live active, healthy lifestyles through quality physical education programs during their elementary school years.

Based upon the literature that is available, it is evident that role modeling has a substantial impact on children’s learning. It is, therefore, essential that we, as researchers in education, continue to identify effective strategies to help teachers understand the importance of role modeling, and investigate this phenomenon in order to develop conducive learning environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

*Elementary school physical education programs should provide breadth, variety and educational experiences that assist in the development of “whole” children. (Hickson, 2003)*

In order to physically educate “whole” children, role modeling is an essential part of teaching that requires greater attention. There are several ways that teachers of physical education can be role models to their children, including: caring, using, choosing, giving, understanding and being. For example, role modeling active, healthy behaviors is one method that children will observe during the school day. Hence, mixed messages will occur when teachers say one thing, and do another in front of children. By reading this article, it is hoped that a deeper level of understanding toward the importance of “teacher as a role model in physical education” has been reached.

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