

Should physical education classes return to teaching males and females separately?

To answer the question of whether males and females should be taught separately, we must first examine our goals. If our highest priority is for students to achieve the highest possible level of skill and fitness, then it may be appropriate to organize classes according to gender.

However, if we make that decision, we must also acknowledge the other things that students may learn from such separation. They may learn that it is inappropriate for males and females to play together. In fact, they will not have the opportunity to develop an understanding of the way the other gender approaches competition and play. They will be denied an opportunity to learn to interact appropriately with members of the opposite sex in activity settings. In addition, they will not learn the group skills that are so necessary in life, where we must work with people of both genders who have a wide variety of skills and abilities. Finally, the societal belief that all boys are better than all girls will be subtly, yet firmly reinforced, along with gender stereotypes. Students will conclude that there are fundamental differences between males and females that preclude them from participating in activity with each other. The resulting inability to understand each other's games will have future ramifications in the workplace.

If helping students to avoid or even negate such harmful learnings is more important than achieving ultimate levels of skill and fitness, then classes need to be coeducational. Obviously, these goals are more difficult to teach and measure. Much more teaching has to be done over a far longer period of time. More than just skills and fitness are involved in

these lessons, and many of us do not think that we have been trained to teach these things. Yet, the physical education setting is the most realistic, and therefore the most appropriate, setting to address such learnings. Students behave in genuine and authentic ways in our classes, providing incredibly rich teachable moments involving lessons that will have a far greater impact on our students' lives than whether or not they can dribble a basketball with their non-dominant hand. We need to step up to the challenge.

—*Rosalie Hedlund, chair, Physical Education Department, Ottawa University, Ottawa, KS.*

Twenty years ago, it took an argument with my chairman to do what seemed to be required by Title IX, to teach coed gym classes. Now I am sorry. The realities have been horrendous. Valuable time is lost because instruction cannot take place until both groups arrive in a common area. Scheduling is extremely difficult. Classes are often grossly imbalanced in terms of gender. Sexually imbalanced teaching staffs (schools have replaced outgoing females with men) have been discriminating. The scarcity of female teachers seems to be directly related to the increased incidence of inactive, uninvolved girls who spend class time sitting out or walking the track aimlessly while their male classmates have their teacher's undivided attention. Curriculum choices focus on activities that are liked and well-known: football, basketball, volleyball, weight training, and softball. Girls don't fuss. Their good nature has worked against them. Activities they enjoy have disappeared. For in-

stance, they love moving to music. Guys who hear music think dance, and suddenly something happens to their desire to cooperate. It disappears. Dance class, a joy for girls of all ages and maturities, is a nightmare when it includes a captive audience of immature adolescent males. Unmotivated, they react aggressively, show their distaste in a variety of unpleasant ways, and cause discipline problems that even the most able teachers have no ability to correct and no desire to tolerate.

The sexes are motivated differently, and succeed with different approaches. Girls want to learn what to do before they get into games, while boys generate a game the instant they see equipment. Boys need to be convinced to settle down and work on skills. Generally that takes losing. The score is important to them. Girls do not need an opponent for motivation. Many do not pay attention to the score, nor do they get off on victory or jeer their opponents the way guys do. Uncompetitive females are more likely to improve because they want to please their teammates or teacher. Guys improve if they think the effort will lead to victory. Girls are not thrilled with getting dirty, messing up their hair, sweating, or going outdoors in variable weather. They try to avoid these things. Boys hardly notice torn shorts, dirty clothes, or bad weather. Girls want and need more locker room time. Guys just want to play. Size, speed, and power have a different meaning for sexually developing men and women. Guys consider aggressiveness, speed, power, and coping with danger a sign of masculinity. Girls perceive a threat. They are scared to death when they see someone twice

their size barreling down the court faster than they can react. What is good for one is paralyzing for the other. Girls, reluctant to sweat, lazy about changing, psychologically fearful about looking foolish in front of the boys, and uncomfortable during their "period," avoid participation.

While I am fully aware that there are exceptions, that every school district, every class, every grouping and child cannot be painted with the same brush, 31 years of experience with both approaches has convinced me. Mixed classes should be eliminated beyond eighth grade.

—Isobel Keinman, *physical education teacher, Sewanhaka Central High School District, Flushing, NY 11354.*

Absolutely not. Coeducational classes in physical education were mandated by Title IX in 1972 with the intent of providing equal opportunities in physical education for female and male students. Social justice was the goal of Title IX, just as it was for the civil rights legislation of the early 1960s.

Many who advocate single-gender classes use research on the prevalence of gender bias in the classroom as the reason to separate female and male students. The theory is that if students are placed in single-gender classes, there will be no bias in favor of one gender over the other in the learning process. First of all, the existence of gender bias in physical education classes has yet to be proven. Second, separating the genders in physical will eliminate the valuable social interactions that occur between female and male students every day. Females and males learn from each other in physical education classes. These interactions also lead toward a deeper understanding of the other's rights and feelings, and toward the social justice we proclaim as an important goal for this country.

I have personally seen many examples of single-gender physical education classes at the high school level this past year. These schools

"get away with it" with the excuse that the students are segregating themselves by choosing "elective" activities within the physical education curriculum that are more "appropriate" for female or male students. In reality, the teachers and administrators who have been charged with the responsibility of enforcing the Title IX legislation are choosing to ignore the law.

This issue is a matter of human rights for the next generation, and whether we, as physical educators, will teach our students about tolerance and equity. For those of you who advocate single-gender classes at your school, would you separate African Americans into one physical education class, and whites into another?

—Kathryn L. Davis, *associate professor, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695.*

No. Nothing we have done in our profession over the last 50 years could compare with the progress we made when we put males and females together for physical education classes. Our world is not a sexist, separated world. Is there anyplace else, any subject or area in which we should separate by gender? The answer is no.

We have found that people of all ages learn well in co-educational settings, and have not identified a gender problem. In swimming, there are both male and female swimmers in each class whose skill ranges from beginner to advanced. The students in golf class show the same range of skill, and not specifically as it applies to gender. This holds true in all areas of the physical education curriculum.

In co-education classes, we observe a communicative, sharing, and assisting environment. Such classes provide opportunities for both young and old learners to appreciate the characteristics, abilities and motivations of the opposite gender.

I am surprised to see an educated profession even giving consideration to returning to the dark ages of teaching males and females separately.

—Thomas P. Colgate, *Dean, School of*

Education and Graduate Studies, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE 69337.

I have been teaching junior high physical education for twenty-five years. Over the course of those years, many trends in education have come and gone. One trend I wish would return is separate female and male physical education classes. During the span of my teaching career, I have taught co-ed classes and separate-gender classes. I prefer the separate-gender classes.

In separate physical education classes, girls can be girls without having to worry about the presence of boys. Activities like aerobic dance and gymnastics are more enjoyable to teach with an all-girl class. Girls who are tentative in some activities have more success in an all-girl class. Boys have a tendency to put win-win-win pressure on girls during an activity, instead of just doing the activity for enjoyment. Boys can also play rougher in an all-male class without the fear of hurting any girl.

Some people may think separate-gender classes are a step backward, but I believe it is a necessary step for the welfare of students.

—Jeanette Rhyan, *physical education teacher, Oulsey Junior High School, Arlington, TX 76018.*

At the risk of perhaps disappointing my exceptional former physical education professor at State University of New York at Cortland, I would strongly argue that physical education classes should return to teaching males and females separately, but only at the secondary level for most, but not all, units of instruction. I base this argument on practical experience under both styles of teaching.

Stellar pedagogical methods, developmentally appropriate practices, superlative motivational techniques, federal statutes, etc. notwithstanding, secondary co-educational classes adversely affect the participation and intensity of students—particularly female students. The physical, mental, emotional, and social characteristics

of teenagers are just too overpowering, and negatively affect participation and activity level. This goes against what physical education teachers should be promoting: health, fitness, and lifelong physical activity.

Simply put, males and females are different. Sometimes it makes more sense to separate the two and teach them separately. World sports culture separates the genders, and physical education is tied to sports culture. Sometimes one has to push psycho-social theory aside and do a reality-check. Virtually every other aspect of the public high school experience is co-educational. What proven detriment is there to separating the two for physical education class. The health and fitness benefits of greater, more intense participation surely outweigh any possible harm.

I would be willing to bet that, "deep down," most secondary-age boys, and especially secondary-age girls, would rather participate separately for the majority of the time. Sometimes, students really do know what is best for them.

—James P. Walsh, physical education instructor, Tioga Central High School, Tioga Center, NY 13845.

As far back as I can remember, I have always noticed a group of girls huddled in the corner of the gym during physical education classes, while the boys and a few of the girls were busy having fun playing various sports. To me, that is a problem.

I believe that physical education classes should return to teaching males and females separately. If girls are not having fun in class and not participating, then they are not going to learn anything. If we separate classes by gender, the girls will be able to play against children at or near the same skill level. If girls are constantly losing or not performing as well as the boys, their self-esteem may be decreased and they will not want to play anymore. Girls need a chance to realize that they are good at sports, maybe not compared to some of the boys, but definitely compared to the rest of the girls. This

is bound to lead to more participation in physical education classes.
—Derek Johnson, varsity football and baseball player, Winona State University, Winona, MN 55987.

Men are from Mars and women are from Venus in physical education. Actually, I do not think that there is a simple answer to such a complex question.

As a teacher and student, I have been involved with physical education for 50 years. Based on that experience, I have come to the following conclusions. I think that co-educational classes work well until the students reach puberty (K-6). I find that teaching males and females separately during middle and high school is more effective and enjoyable for both students and teachers. Significant hormonal changes occur that seem to result in different physical, social, emotional, and psychological needs for males and females. These needs can best be met by having males and females in separate classes from seventh to eleventh grade. Then, from the senior or junior year of high school, and on through university, it seems to work very well to have males and females in class together again.

—James Hesson, professor, Department of Physical Education and Health, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, SD 57799.

A resounding NO! Physical education programs should be based on fitness development, skill acquisition, and the joy of movement. The outcomes we strive to achieve are not dependent on the "maleness" or "femaleness" of the students we teach. There is no reason for physical education classes to be separated by gender.

Some argue that there may be a few instances where separation based on sex should occur within a physical education class. This might occur in a gymnastics class, where the apparatus used by males and females differs. However, even this is questionable. Although males and females utilize different apparatus in "formal" gymnastics, students in physical education classes should not be denied the opportunity to explore all events.

We must keep separatism out of education. Movement is not gender biased. Physical education can be shared by all—equally. The initiative that put males and females together in the same classes has made physical education better. We must continue to progress, ensuring that all people have a right to move without restriction. In physical education, we should consider ourselves lucky to advocate fitness, skill, and joy for all!

—Dennis Docheff, associate professor of pedagogy, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY 10996.

MARCH QUESTION

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