

Characteristics of an Effective Physical Education Teacher

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In the world of physical education, educators are faced with many challenges classroom teachers are not. They see multiple classes in a day, instruct multiple grades, transition quickly between groups, and work in an environment where children are encouraged to be active. All of these factors contribute to the importance of a physical educator to be on the top of their game. So what makes an effective physical education teacher? The answer is surprisingly simple; it all comes down to management. Physical educators have to manage children, the class space, and time. In addition, physical educators have to manage themselves to be effective teachers. Exploring each of these topics of management will uncover the specific characteristics of a highly effective and successful physical education teacher.

The first area of management is of the children. Each student that physical educators see for just a short time every day or every other day has to be their top priority. In order for this to be a reality, the physical educator has to be sure they are addressing every child's needs, whether skill related or behavioral. In the task of addressing the skill needs of every child, the physical educator has to have curriculum designed to help the teacher do this. There are several ways a teacher can modify their curriculum to support this. One way is to make sure that expectations and tasks are written out so students can read them and know what is happening. For the elementary physical educator, this means also providing pictures for students who cannot read (Everhart, 1996). Another way to make curriculum meet individual children's needs is to provide tasks that build upon themselves, so as a student masters a skill, they can move on to a task that is one step harder (Everhart, 1996). During instruction, managing children involves observing when they are ready to be more challenged. An instructor can prompt their students verbally to try something harder. Having a task system set in place can aid in making this verbal instruction

simplified. However, it still requires the instructor's observation of each student. Ultimately this system of individualizing instruction helps keep children engaged, challenged, and on task.

When students fail to stay on task, behavioral issues arise. A characteristic of an effective physical educator is their ability to manage behavior issues. Managing behavior issues comes right down to how the instructor interacts with their students. These interactions can include feedback, positive reinforcement, and redirection. An effective teacher knows when and how to use all of these interactions. Knowing the reasons for behavior problems can help teachers decide what to do. According to Downing, Keating, and Bennett (2005), "Elementary level students want and need the teacher's attention and will often solicit it any way they can, positively or negatively" (Downing, Keating, and Bennett, 2005 para 5). With this in mind a physical educator can work towards giving positive feedback for good behavior, thus showing these types of students that her attention is elicited by on-task behavior. Colvin (1998), in his article about student-teacher interaction, offers a direct solution for student working negatively for the instructor's attention. The "two cents worth plan" gives these identified students two pennies to spend during the class time (Colvin, 1998 para 9). Whenever the child tries to get your attention in a way other than being on-task, they spend a penny. When their pennies are gone, direct consequences follow off-task behaviors (Colvin, 1998). This system is one way effective teachers could manage their students with positive interactions.

Another interaction effective teachers use is a reward system to encourage good behavior. Rewards systems can be a great way to motivate and manage students. However, Clint and Amanda Waronsky warn in their article on motivation, that a reward system, if used improperly, can take away from a child's natural internal motivation (Waronsky and Waronsky, 2000). They address how to use a reward system that does not take away this motivation. In their reward

system, rubber bands are given out during the lesson and then counted at the end to award children with points. As children earn 100 points, they are promoted to “teacher helpers” who cannot earn more points but must get other students to complete the goal (Waronsky and Waronsky, 2000). Every student earning 100 points means the class gets a pizza party (Waronsky and Waronsky, 2000). This encourages children to be motivated to get other children to earn points and not just earning personal points. In this system, students are weaned off the direct reward system so that internal motivation is not lost. Reward systems like this help physical educators to effectively manage their students.

Managing class space uses many of the same skills required to manage time in a physical education setting. Classroom routines are one way to manage the classroom and time. Ineffective routines can create chaos and wasted time. Children need to know what to do in situations such as how to enter and exit physical education, how to go to the restroom, and how to put equipment away. Several strategies for tackling these issues are found in the article *Creating a Learning Environment: Classroom Management strategies for Elementary PE Teachers* (Ratliffe, Ratliffe, and Bie, 1991). For example, having a bathroom pass for students while also having the expectation that student use the restroom before they come to class is important to minimize disturbances caused by this issue (Ratliffe et al., 1991). Another suggestion offered addresses student’s behavior in a line. Sending misbehaving or disruptive children to the back of the line without question or excuse can quickly curb these issues (Ratliffe et al., 1991). Lastly, having a procedure for students to clean up can aid in quick closures and an orderly classroom before the next class walks in.

Organization of time is helped by these routines, but Rink and Hall (2008) also point out the importance of an effective teacher’s use of presentation. In the physical education classroom,

generally the goal is to get students moving. Spending too much time talking can hinder this goal. Rink and Hall (2008) point out that an effective teacher must “obtain the student’s attention” and “communicate tasks verbally” as well as use demonstration and example (Rink and Hall, 2008, Effective Communication para 3). For presentations to not take up more time than needed, Rink and Hall state “one of the most important skills of the physical education teacher is the ability to identify critical features of a skill” (Rink and Hall, 2008, Effective Communication para 4). They go on to say this skill is directly related to how well teachers know their content. Essentially, managing time spent talking boils down to knowing the essentials of what you are teaching and conveying that to your students.

One last area of management for physical educators is themselves. Managing oneself includes a wide range of things from what you are doing in the classroom to what you are doing outside of it. Effective teachers address themselves as an important part of their program and strive to make sure they are meeting expectations. One way this happens is assessing their program. Physical educators evaluate themselves and their program by asking questions like “Does this programs address national standards?” and “Are the goals and objectives clearly stated?” (Rink and Hall, 2008). This leads then to teachers asking themselves whether they are meeting their students’ needs and individualizing learning.

Another way teachers manage themselves is through continued education. In the article *What constitutes a Highly Qualified Physical Education Teacher?* the authors state that effective teachers know that “learning does not stop on the day they are hired as practicing professionals” (Napper-owen, Marston, Volkinburg Afeman, Brewer, 2008). Physical educators must continue learning. Effective physical education teachers understand new information, strategies, and

techniques from professional development opportunities and teacher interactions only help to create a successful program and teaching that is more effective.

One last way effective physical educators can manage themselves is beyond the classroom and teacher environment. Teaching is challenging and time consuming, but Martin (2004) points out that physical education teachers still need to take time to care for themselves. Martin (2004) argues that taking care of yourself is what “enables someone to be effective and productive” (Martin, 2004, Habit 7 para 1). This includes taking care of one’s personal fitness. Despite the time constraints of teaching, it is important that an effective physical education teacher sets a good model of physical fitness. This requires an educator to exercise and address his or her own fitness. Taking care of yourself also means addressing spiritual or emotional needs. Ratliffe and Bie (1991) point out that “it is easy to get frustrated and depressed” in a challenging physical education setting (Ratliff et al., 1991, Conclusion para 1). By knowing your personal mission statement and living by that, an effective educator can live at peace with themselves and do what they do best; teach (Martin 2004).

Overall, effective physical educators have many characteristics. When it comes to managing their students, effective physical educators have a curriculum that supports every student’s learning and keeps student engaged and on-task. They also implement positive reinforcement strategies and motivation systems. When managing time and the class environment, effective physical education teachers have established routines and expectations, as well as concise presentation styles to minimize talk time. Finally, effective physical educators manage their own learning through assessment and continuing education. They also address their personal needs and strive to be a good role model. In all of these ways, physical educators can strive to be effective and successful in their classroom, school, and community.

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