

**PARTNERS IN PLAY:  
Creating Community in the K-12 Physical Education Classroom and Beyond!**

**Presented by Paul Riggins, Ph.D.**

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**The Compelling Nature of Play**

Why is play such a compelling and powerful experience? Probably, the endorphins, right? Sort of... we all enjoy pleasurable experiences. However, it is something greater and more powerful! Those of us who are true PLAYERS might understand the power of play, yet few of us can fully describe the attraction. Yes, it is FUN to PLAY. Everyone loves fun things. Our connection is beyond fun. It is, most likely, genetic and primeval in nature. All creatures, large and small, predator or prey, love to play. Our connection with play is intimate and highly personal. So, why?

For some of us, the following quote may provide the insight needed to explain why PLAY is essential, meaningful and the essence of our being. Richard Schechner in his book *Play and Culture* quotes a fellow author, Victor Turner. Turner reflected on play in his work, *Body, Brain and Culture*:

“Playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength, in modes of simulation such as theater, and in controlled disorientation, from roller coasters to dervish dancing....Most definitions of play involve notions of disengagement, of free-wheeling, of being out of mesh with the serious “bread and butter,” let alone “life and death” processes of production, social control, “getting and spending” and raising the next generation...Play can be everywhere, and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing.”

Wow! PLAY is more than FUN. In fact, play is a revolutionary concept. Play escapes definition and it escapes tradition. It is free and it is a powerful force capable of impacting all thought and behavior. If you are a controlling, traditional thinking, in love with routine and structure, then PLAY could be dangerous to your health. Do we really love freedom? Then, PLAY on! Contrary to the above health warning, play is really healthy. It can, and does, improve the health of all living creatures. PLAY is a life-affirming experience. This is good! So, let the PLAY begin! Be a player!

PLAY is FUN!

Are you a skeptic or a believer? PLAY is not a bad word! Most play is fun and FUN is a good word! FUN is good! PLAY is the medium and FUN is the message. So, is play the end or the means? In an instructional setting, most of the time, play should be the means

to the end. In some cases, play can be and should be the end, the focus and the emphasis. It's OK to just play!

In a physical education instructional setting, this does not mean that students do whatever they wish and the teacher does little, if any, instruction. On the contrary, in a quality physical education program based on the principle of PLAY and FUN, learning activities are planned, organized and managed with intent of providing a playful environment where learning is fun. Optimum learning becomes a possibility and reality for all students.

Physical educators know that quality physical education programs are guided by the National Standards for Physical Education, as developed and defined by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). The outcomes identified by these standards and benchmarks are important to the mental, physical and emotional growth of all children and youth. So, is it possible to integrate these national standards, appropriate assessment and FUN. Without a doubt!

For reference purposes, the standards are provided in the appendix of this article. One of the standards has particular relevancy to the focus of this article. It is Standard Seven:

*A physically educated person:* **Understands that physical activity provides opportunities for enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and social interaction.**

This one standard could be considered the primary focus of this article. PLAY, however, is the real focus of the presentation. Play is a crucial (critical) element in the ability of the physical education teacher to successfully teach the important outcomes of a comprehensive physical education program. Because of the unique nature of the physical education instructional environment and the content to be taught, physical education programs must be grounded in FUN. PLAY and FUN are inextricably linked. Learning activities may be work yet they can be FUN.

However, physical educators need to focus on play rather than work. Regardless of the age, grade-level, curriculum or content of the class, play will result in FUN and FUN will result in the desire to learn and to keep learning. The emphasis of most every lesson should be on participation, effort and FUN. PLAY is the medium and FUN is the message!

Physical education programs make a unique contribution to the overall education of every student in the educational process. They can provide the foundation for all learning. They can provide the skills, the health, the desire, and the fitness of mind, body and spirit that will enable a child to reach his or her potential in the present moment and in the future as well. Therefore, a physical education program is an essential component of the overall educational program AND FUN is an essential component of the comprehensive physical education program.

The specific model being presented in this article is called “Partners in Play: Creating Community, Respect and Wellbeing.” It is *the* physical education program. It is not, a component of the program. It is the beginning and the end. It works!

It works at all levels of instruction, from kindergarten through college level classes. It works because it is based on something *every* student wants learning to be: FUN! It works because it is based on something highly personal and fundamental: the desire and ability to be playful.

So, just exactly where does PLAY and FUN fit into a physical education curriculum? The answer is: EVERYWHERE! For example, there is a useful college textbook for physical education methods courses entitled, *Instructional Models for Physical Education*. It is both current and comprehensive. It cites eight specific instructional models for physical education. One of those models is called, “Cooperative Learning”; another is called, “Peer Teaching” and, another is called “Personal and Social Responsibility”. The concepts of PLAY and FUN appear to have been overlooked as a primary instructional model. This is understandable, they escape definition; they challenge tradition and they are, too often overlooked and misunderstood. PLAY is good!

The “Partners in Play: Creating Community, Respect and Wellbeing” model includes all three of the models mentioned above. In fact, it includes elements of all eight of the models cited. It is, however, unique. It is based on the concept of play and fun. Play and fun are the foundation for all learning activities. Students become partners in PLAY and have FUN learning together.

### **A Community of Learners**

All classrooms need to function as a community of learners. In his or her own unique way, each learner contributes to the classroom environment. A student can be a positive influence, a negative influence or a non-influence. A community functions best when everyone is contributing something positive. Key words here are *everyone* and *positive*.

Students need to be provided an environment where they feel comfortable making contributions. A classroom must be a safe physical and emotional environment for all students. As the primary creator of the learning environment, the teacher must take the lead and provide many opportunities to build a sense of community within the classroom. This is especially important in the dynamic learning environment found in the physical education classroom. Not only does the teacher plan and implement strategies that will build a productive community, he or she must constantly model those behaviors that are expected from the students. The physical educator must be encouraging, supporting and caring. The physical educator must be sensitive and kind. The physical educator must be friendly, polite and respectful, at all times.

These behaviors are the basis of a caring and productive community. In addition, a community is built on individual contributions, unity, respect, trust, and team effort.

A community has a common goal(s). It takes pride in being a productive group of individuals. The community members must be able to establish goals, make decisions, follow directions, solve problems, and make compromises. Individuals must be able to assume leadership, be followers, work independently and work well with others. The basis for all of this community-oriented behavior is *respect* and *trust* for each other. There will be elements of competition, yet *cooperation* is the spirit that drives all learning activity. Believe it or not, cooperation is an inherent part of competition. It is cooperative behavior that determines any outcome.

In order to function optimally, the physical education classroom must become a community. This sense of community must be created early in the term or semester. It must be constantly reinforced and revisited.

It is important that the first few weeks of every class is spent developing a sense of community. All activities should have this orientation. This early focus on cooperation, fun and getting to know each other, breaks down all pre-existing stereotypes about the class, the teacher, classmates and, most importantly, physical education.

The initial community building phase of the physical education program should be filled with team-building and cooperative learning activities. It will be filled with challenges, problem-solving initiatives and decision-making opportunities. It can include traditional physical education activities, such as running and jump roping AND it must include alternative or non-traditional physical activities involving innovative equipment, modified games and creativity. All activities will be designed with the intent to be FUN and to build a sense of community. All students will be involved and empowered.

Once a sense of community has been created, it will mature and express itself throughout the remainder of the term. The class will respect the teacher, each other and the level of participation and effort will be maximized. Every student will feel seen, heard and welcome. When students feel empowered, given the freedom to be themselves and feel respected, they become stake holders in the learning process. Instead of rebelling and resisting, they join in and they become learners and become healthier individuals at the same time. Inclusion will come naturally. Everyone becomes a winner. No one is eliminated and everyone is empowered. In terms of learning, this is a win-win! And guess what? Everyone has FUN and loves the class! For a physical educator, does it get any better than this? Be a PLAYER!

### **Playing With Heart: A Personal Statement About Play**

I am a consummate PLAYER. My life is about playing. My work is about playing. I live to play. I get paid to PLAY. I love to play. I always have. I love sports. I love games. Most likely, these are the factors that have most influenced my life and my personality. Most likely, these are the factors that have influenced my choice of vocation, my education and professional career. Without a doubt, my passion for PLAY has been the basis of my approach to life, day in and day out for the past sixty years. To be honest, I have always lived my life as though it was a game. My approach to work and living is

similar to the way I play games. I play to win and to have fun. I never give up. I play hard and I play fair. It has worked for me. My life has been challenging, rewarding and fun. Sounds like a good game to me!

My computer desktop in my office has an image of a football surrounded with the words, “play with heart.” This symbolizes my approach to all things. I feel it is important to not only play with heart but to live with heart. Passion resides in the heart. Fear resides in the mind. Love resides in the heart. Hate resides in the mind.

I am a teacher. I believe it is important to teach with heart, at all times. As it should be in games, the score is not what matters. Skills and test scores are important but not as important as the fun, enjoyment and pleasure that a student derives from participating in the game, in the classroom and in the learning experience. Yes, I believe in assessment, it is important. It is the process rather than the score that I assess. Therefore, I do not support programs such as “No Child Left Behind.” The emphasis that this type of program places on scores, is leaving children behind! And, since this particular program does not include physical education as a core subject, it is, in fact, leaving children on their behinds. Childhood obesity is increasing at alarming rates. Educators, especially physical educators should not be motivated by scores!

To the contrary, motivation, passion, desire, and commitment are derived from a “fun” learning experience where scores are generated but are quickly forgotten and never emphasized. Learning, at all levels and in all subjects, must always be challenging and FUN. Goals must be achievable. Students must be engaged in the learning process. They must be fully involved in the game of learning and growing. Outcomes must be based on success rather failure, on enjoyment rather than frustration, and on intrinsic rather than extrinsic levels of motivation. There is no game without players and the game is not fun if the players do not play with heart giving everything they have to produce a rewarding outcome.

There are no opponents in this type of game. There are only partners. Players respect participants in a game who play fair, play friendly and who play hard. A partner, whether they be on the same team or not, can push us to achieve levels of performance that we never thought possible. As we push ourselves and are pushed by the partners who are playing with us, regardless of the game, we can achieve and perform at our highest levels. And the amazing thing about this “partners in play” process is that we always want more; we want to play again and again; we want to achieve more and more, and we learn we are capable of so much more than we thought we were capable of achieving. Learning becomes a synergistic experience involving all the players in a game of mutual respect and growth.

As an educator, I see this process as the true “win-win” scenario. Everybody wins when we are partners in play.

## **Appendix:**

### **National Standards for Physical Education**

*A physically educated person:*

*Standard One:* Demonstrates competency in many movement forms and proficiency in a few movement forms.

*Standard Two:* Applies movement concepts and principles to the learning and development of motor skills.

*Standard Three:* Exhibits a physically active lifestyle.

*Standard Four:* Achieves and maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness.

*Standard Five:* Demonstrates responsible personal and social behavior in physical activity settings.

*Standard Six:* Demonstrates understanding and respect for differences among people in physical activity settings.

*Standard Seven:* Understands that physical activity provides opportunities for enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and social interaction.

### **Thoughts about play**

“You don’t stop playing because you grow old, you grow old because you stop playing!”  
borrowed from Meg Griener’s website

“Play fair; play friendly and play hard!”

Paul Riggins

*Partners in Play*, a sports camp for children

“It is not running but running that is play that is necessary. Exercise that is not play accentuates rather than heals the split between body and spirit.”

George Sheehan

*Running and Being*

“The greatest mistake you can make in life is to be continuously fearing that you will make one.” Play on!

Elbert Hubbard

“It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness.”

Unknown

“Play has the power to deeply influence a child’s personality development.”

Frank Caplan

*The Power of Play*

“the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation.”

Johan Huizinga

*Homo Ludens*

“We have gradually become convinced that civilization is rooted in noble play and that, if it is to unfold in full dignity and style, it cannot afford to neglect the play-element. The observance of play-rules is nowhere more imperative than in the relations between countries and states. Once they are broken, society falls into barbarianism and chaos.”

Johan Huizinga

“Play is a mood, an attitude, a force.”

Richard Schechner

“Playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength, in modes of simulation such as theater, and in controlled disorientation, from roller coasters to dervish dancing....Most definitions of play involve notions of disengagement, of free-wheeling, of being out of mesh with the serious “bread and butter,” let alone “life and death” processes of production, social control, “getting and spending” and raising the next generation...Play can be everywhere, and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing.”

Victor Turner

*Body, Brain and Culture*