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Goal Displacement in Junior High School Physical Education after the PE Examination Reform: Manifestations, Mechanisms, and Correction

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Abstract: When physical education is assigned a score in the senior high school entrance examination, the subject gains a standing it did not previously hold. It also acquires a measurable output that is not the same as its educational purpose. This paper treats the gap between the two as goal displacement, that is, a process in which the indicator adopted for accountability gradually takes the place of the aim it was meant to serve. Taking junior high school physical education in Huanggang as the context of observation, three manifestations are described: narrowing of content to the examined events, reorganisation of practice intensity around score thresholds, and reduction of classroom assessment to timing and counting. They are traced to three mechanisms: accountability transmitted through a comparable score, a measurement technique that admits only what is easy to count, and a contraction of the space in which teachers decide what and how to teach. Correction is argued to lie at two ends rather than in a rejection of the examination, namely rebuilding the teaching unit around a learnable sport so that examined events become material rather than the whole content, and redesigning process assessment so that it records progress, participation quality, and understanding of rules. The analysis is theoretical and its proposals are stated as designs to be tested rather than as established effects.

Keywords: Junior High School Physical Education; Physical Education Examination; Goal Displacement; Curriculum Narrowing; Process Assessment

1. Introduction

The inclusion of physical education in the scored subjects of the senior high school entrance examination was intended to raise the standing of the subject and, through it, the amount and quality of student activity. Evaluations of the policy have reported gains in health related indicators [1], and public attention to the examination has grown to the point where physical education is planned for rather than merely attended [2]. For teachers the change is not only one of status. It reorganises what a lesson is for.

A scored subject produces a number, and a number is easier to manage than a purpose. Once the score exists it is compared between classes, schools, and years, and the comparison is acted upon. The aims of physical education, which include movement competence, the willingness to remain active, and the capacity to take part in organised play with others, are not comparable in this way. They have to be translated into something countable before they can enter the comparison, and the translation loses something. This paper is concerned with what is lost and with how the loss becomes visible in ordinary lessons.

The problem is not that teachers have abandoned their aims. It is that the arrangement of accountability rewards one reading of those aims and makes other readings costly to defend. A teacher who spends three weeks on invasion games is accountable for the time in a way that a teacher who spends three weeks on the examined event is not, even when the first three weeks contribute more to a student who will still be moving at thirty. The asymmetry is produced by the assessment arrangement, not by any decision of the teacher.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 The Layered Structure of Physical Education Aims

The aims of school physical education form three layers rather than a list of equal items. The outer layer consists of observable performances, such as running a set distance in a given time.

The middle layer consists of competences, that is, the capacity to play, to select an action suited to a situation, and to improve through practice. The inner layer consists of dispositions, including the willingness to take part, the habit of being active, and the readiness to cooperate in rule governed activity.

The layers do not reduce to one another. Performance can be produced without competence, since a student can be trained to pass a test without being able to play, and competence can be present without a favourable score on a given day. Dispositions are the slowest to form and the easiest to damage, and they are the reason the subject is in the curriculum at all. A teaching arrangement that addresses only the outer layer is not teaching a reduced version of the subject; it is teaching something else under the same name. The vulnerability of the subject when it was unexamined, documented as curricular impoverishment in several systems [10], came from exactly this property: what cannot be scored is difficult to defend in a competition for timetable space.

2.2 Goal Displacement and Its Identification

Goal displacement describes a process in which an indicator adopted to serve a goal comes to be treated as the goal itself. The concept was developed in the study of organisations whose stated purposes are intangible, where the intangible aim is gradually replaced by the measurable proxy introduced to stand for it [7]. The mechanism does not require bad faith. It requires only that the proxy be available, comparable, and consequential while the original aim stays difficult to observe.

A related line of work shows that once the proxy becomes the object of judgement, effort is redirected toward improving its appearance, sometimes at the cost of the activity it represents [8]. In education the same pattern has been documented as a narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy under accountability, where what is examined expands, what is not examined recedes, and the form of the test shapes the form of the lesson [9].

Identification therefore requires a comparison rather than a judgement of intention. The question is not whether a teacher endorses the broader aims, since most do, but whether the arrangement of content, time, feedback, and assessment leaves those aims with any force over the next lesson.

3. Manifestations of Goal Displacement

3.1 Narrowing of Content to the Examined Events

The first manifestation appears in the distribution of content across the year. Where an examination specifies a small number of events, those events come to occupy a disproportionate share of teaching time while ball games, gymnastics, and activities that develop spatial awareness are compressed. The difference between the examined list and the written curriculum is where narrowing occurs.

Narrowing also moves downward through the grades. Because the score is awarded at the end of grade 9, preparation starts earlier than the point at which the content would otherwise be taught, and grade 7 students meet the examined events before they meet the movement forms that would ordinarily precede them. The sequence of the curriculum is then set by the examination calendar rather than by the order in which competences are most readily acquired. The cost is the loss of variety, and variety is the mechanism by which a student finds the activity that will keep them active: a student who will never be fast may be reliable in a team.

3.2 Reorganisation of Practice Intensity Around Score Thresholds

The second manifestation concerns how practice is organised. Where a score is attached to a standard, the working unit shifts from the class to each student's distance from the threshold. Students near the threshold receive the most attention and the most carefully calibrated load, students above it are left to maintain, and students far below it are set aside because the return on effort looks small.

The arrangement is rational within the logic of the score and costly within the logic of the subject. Load calibrated to a threshold is load calibrated to a test date, and it tends to take the form of repeating the tested action rather than working through the movement problem the action solves. How students experience testing is shaped less by the effort than by the meaning attached to the result and by how public the comparison is [12][13], and what teachers do with lesson time predicts student activity within the lesson [6]. Both point the same way: the organisation of practice, not its volume, decides

whether a lesson teaches. Both extreme groups are then left with time rather than teaching, and they are the groups for whom the disposition layer matters most.

3.3 Reduction of Classroom Assessment to Timing and Counting

The third manifestation follows from the first two. When content is set by the examination and practice by the threshold, the natural classroom record is the stopwatch and the count. They are reliable, quick, and directly comparable with the external test, and they crowd out everything else. What they cannot record is what the middle and inner layers consist of: whether a student understands why a defensive shape works, whether a student can be trusted to keep a partner safe in a landing, whether a student has started to choose activity without being told. None of this appears on a timed sheet. Work on fitness assessment has argued that what a test does not measure is not thereby unimportant, since assessment arrangements shape how students understand their own bodies and their standing among peers [4]. Studies of mandatory fitness testing in Chinese settings report effects on intrinsic motivation and sustained participation [3], and earlier experimental work showed that the achievement goal orientation a testing situation induces affects children's intrinsic motivation during the test itself [14]. Table 1 collects the three manifestations with the signals by which each can be recognised in a lesson.

Table 1. Three Manifestations of Goal Displacement and Their Classroom Signals

Manifestation	What it looks like in a lesson	Observable signal	Main consequence
Narrowing of content	Examined events occupy most of the year; games and gymnastics are compressed	Grade 7 classes already practising grade 9 test events	Loss of the variety through which students find an activity that holds them
Reorganisation of intensity	Load is set by each student's distance from the score threshold	Near-threshold students drilled; others maintain or repeat	Practice replaces progression; both extreme groups receive time rather than teaching
Reduction of assessment	Stopwatch and count become the classroom record	No record of understanding, safety, cooperation, or progress	The middle and inner layers of the subject lose all operative force

4. Mechanisms

4.1 Accountability Transmitted Through a Comparable Score

The first mechanism is the transmission of accountability through a number that can be compared. Before the subject was scored its contribution had to be argued; afterwards it could be tabulated, and a tabulated result permits management at a distance. A school can rank classes, a district can rank schools, and each level can act on the ranking without entering the lesson.

Where accountability of this kind is applied to a subject with layered aims, pressure falls on the layer that produces the number. This is the classic condition for displacement: the intangible aim is not abandoned in principle, it is simply never the object of the next decision [7]. In education the same condition narrows both what is taught and how, with the form of the test shaping the form of instruction [9]. It also explains why displacement resists exhortation, since a school that asks for broader aims while ranking classes by score has arranged matters so that only the score carries a consequence.

4.2 A Measurement Technique That Admits Only What Is Easy to Count

The second mechanism is technical. Physical education has well developed instruments for time, distance, count, and body composition, and much weaker ones for competence in games, tactical understanding, and the willingness to be active. The asymmetry is not accidental, since the first group can be measured in one administration by one observer and the second cannot.

An assessment arrangement built from available instruments inherits their shape. What the instruments can measure becomes examinable, and what they cannot is left to professional judgement, which under pressure is the first thing surrendered. This is the sense in which technique rather than intention sets the boundary of the examination, and why that boundary resists arguments from principle. The residue is the part of the subject the instrument cannot see [4], and over time it loses the resources, the time, and eventually the vocabulary through which it

was described.

4.3 Contraction of the Space in Which Teachers Decide

The third mechanism concerns the teacher. Curriculum reform in physical education is interpreted, adapted, or stalled at the level of the teacher, whose reading of a reform decides what reaches the lesson [11]. The teacher is therefore the point at which displacement becomes real, and the size of the space in which the teacher decides determines how much of the broader aim survives.

Under an examination regime that space contracts in identifiable ways. Syllabus decisions move upward because the score is a school level outcome, collegial time is reorganised around test preparation rather than around the problems of teaching games, and the expertise that the subject most needs, which is sequencing content, is replaced by skill in allocating practice, which is what the score rewards. Teachers experience this as pressure and are offered it as support.

5. Correction Paths

5.1 Rebuilding the Unit Around a Learnable Sport

The first correction is at the level of the teaching unit. Displacement is sustained by an implicit answer to what a unit is for. If the unit exists to raise a score on an event, that event is the content and everything else is preparation. If the unit exists to teach a student to play something, the examined event becomes one element of a larger object, and the larger object supplies the progression that repetition cannot.

Rebuilding the unit means specifying, before the term begins, what a student should be able to do at the end that they could not do at the start, in terms that are not the score. For an invasion game this may be maintaining a defensive shape and selecting when to pass; for a racquet activity it may be keeping a rally going under a rule constraint. The examined events are then placed inside the unit as the conditioning and skill work it requires, which is where they are most efficiently developed in any case.

5.2 Redesigning Process Assessment

The second correction is at the level of assessment, and it matters more because assessment is where accountability lands. Where an examination includes a process component, as the Huanggang arrangements do through assessment spread across grades 7 to 9, that component is the natural place to record what the timed events cannot.

The design question is what it records. If it records attendance and a single result, it reproduces displacement at a slower tempo and adds administrative work. If it records three things, it begins to carry the middle and inner layers: progress against the student's own starting point, the quality of participation in lesson activity, and demonstrated understanding of rules and safety. Work on formative assessment in physical education reports that teachers can design and use such records, and that the difficulty lies less in the instruments than in the conditions under which they are kept [5]. Three conditions follow. The records must be few, since a teacher meeting several hundred students a week cannot maintain an elaborate scheme. They must be defined by observable behaviour so that two teachers would record the same student similarly. And they must be used in the lesson they describe, since a record that is only submitted changes nothing.

5.3 Adjustments at the Level of the Lesson

The third correction is closest to the teacher and needs no change in the examination. The first adjustment is to give one event several objects: a running lesson can have one group working on pace judgement, another on the relation between stride and fatigue, and another on completing a distance without stopping. The event is the same and what is learned differs, so the threshold stops being the only thing the lesson is about.

The second adjustment is to make non-examined content examinable inside the lesson, which follows once the process component records it, and the third is to give both extreme groups an object: students above the standard can take a coaching or officiating role that requires them to articulate what they know, and students below it can be given a version of the activity rather than a slower repetition of the test. Table 2 sets out the three levels with the point at which each acts and the condition it requires.

Table 2. Correction Measures by Level, Point of Action, and Required Condition

Level	Measure	Point of action	Condition required
Teaching unit	Specify a learnable object for the	What the term is organised	The object must be stated in

	unit; place examined events inside it	around	terms that are not the score
Process assessment	Record progress, participation quality, and understanding of rules and safety	What is counted when the score is not being produced	Records must be few, observable, and used in the lesson they describe
Lesson organisation	Give one event several objects; record non-examined content; set objects for both extreme groups	What happens in the next forty minutes	The teacher must retain discretion over the organisation of practice

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis has treated goal displacement as a property of an arrangement rather than a failure of persons, and this matters for what follows. If displacement were a matter of conviction, correction would be a matter of persuasion and would fail, because the teachers asked to resist the score are the same teachers ranked by it. Treated as a property of the arrangement, it can be addressed where the arrangement is made: the unit, the record, and the discretion left to the teacher.

Two qualifications apply. The argument does not support removing the subject from the examination, since the evidence points to gains in health related indicators [1] and the standing the subject has gained is not something to surrender; it is that the gains and the losses come from the same arrangement and that the losses are addressable without abandoning it. The manifestations are also drawn from one municipal context and are offered as a description with analytic reach rather than as a measurement.

Three directions follow for work that could establish the proposals: how teaching time is actually distributed across content before and after the reform; whether units organised around a learnable sport produce score outcomes no worse than units organised around the examined events, which is the comparison that would decide the practical question; and what happens to students after the examination, since the disposition layer is the one the score cannot see and the one that determines whether anything the subject did survives the test.

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