Fields of Study - Physical Education

Definition and Nature of the field

Physical Education involves teaching Pre-Kindergarten through grade twelve children the performance and understanding of basic motor skills, games, and lifelong fitness activities as well as the social and personal skills related to participating in physical activities. Physical Educators at all levels are responsible for addressing these skills on a continuum of ability levels to include meeting the needs of children with disabilities. Elementary physical educators usually teach levels PreK-5. The competency of basic locomotor and non-locomotor movements in various forms and patterns is the focus at the elementary level. For example, an elementary curriculum will include instruction in psychomotor skills such as running, walking, hopping, jumping, kicking, throwing, and striking. The middle school physical education teacher typically works with grades 6-8. They are responsible for the future development of motor and non-locomotor movements through an array of varied organized individual and team activities. Social skills are stressed in the middle school curriculum. Secondary physical education (grades 9-12) stresses participation in life long activities such as aerobics, rock climbing, hiking, biking, jogging, and functional training. The high school curriculum encourages students to become proficient in activities that can be experienced over a lifetime. Some schools offer a wellness curriculum for their students that emphasize a holistic approach to wellness. This curriculum may include classes in first aid, interpersonal relationships, sexuality, and nutrition in addition to sport and movement activities. Physical educators with additional training in Adapted Physical Education are responsible for ensuring that children with disabilities (preK-age 21) receive quality physical education services as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004).

Education Requirements

Students who plan to work in public schools must be licensed or certified in the state in which they teach. A bachelor's degree along with minimum performance on written state certification teacher examinations is required. Private and parochial schools vary in their requirements for teaching certification. Each state is different so it is important to check state requirements before making any educational decisions.

As mentioned earlier, some schools offer wellness programs. To teach within these programs, it is wise for a student studying to be a physical education teacher to complete health courses or acquire a health license in addition to a physical education license. At some colleges and universities, a student interested in physical education may also focus in a particular specialty area or population such as adapted physical education, outdoor education, and/or geriatrics.

High school courses in the area of fitness, sport, biology, anatomy and physiology, and exercise physiology are useful to take in preparation before college study in this area. Courses in the area of child development (emotional, social, and physical) are also very useful. Membership in Future Teachers of America or similar high school organizations such as Big Brother/Big Sister programs is also suggested. Finally, consider volunteering for local programs that include Special Olympics, Disability Sport Programs, or Adapted Adventure Activities.

Related Work Experiences

Some individuals pursue the field of physical education because of enjoyment with their own schooling and physical education experience. Some individuals discover their love of teaching movement through prior work related experiences. It is suggested that young people interested in the field obtain work experience that involves working with children, sport, and movement activities. Some suggested related work experiences might include playground directors, sport instructors, youth coaches and umpires, and camp leaders.

Career Opportunities

With an undergraduate degree, a full time position may be acquired immediately or part time work may have to be taken until a full time position opens. It is advantageous if a graduate is willing to accept a position in more than one district and/or state as well as with various grade levels. Some physical educators choose to coach or officiate as well. Soon after being hired, most states require physical educators to earn advance credits or degrees. As hired physical educators become more experienced and educated, they may find individual advancement in the form of higher pay. Some physical educators advance to administrative roles as either a director of physical education, adapted physical education, athletic director, or school principal. Further academic degrees may be necessary.

[Source: Adapted from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) http://www.shapeamerica.org/career/fields/physical-education.cfm]