

# GYMNASTICS – WHY IS IT IN SCHOOL CURRICULA

By Keith Russell

Are these familiar feelings?

1. Gymnastics is dangerous and the possibility of lawsuits makes it an undesirable activity.
2. Gymnastics equipment is expensive, awkward to store and I cannot see the necessity for it.
3. I did not like gymnastics myself and cannot expect to make it enjoyable for my students.
4. There are so many different skills and progressions to these skills that it seems impossible to get a grasp on where to start or in which order to teach skills.
5. Students have neither the strength nor the flexibility to do gymnastics skills and it is therefore a frustrating experience for them to attempt to do so.
6. I am confused by the apparent contradictions between movement education (educational gymnastics) and traditional gymnastics.

If these are common opinions then we may be justified in examining the presence of gymnastics in the school curriculum. There is this persistent opinion that gymnastics is a necessary and useful inclusion in physical education. So let us first examine from whence this opinion originates and then if it is still justified.

Starting as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Herodicus, a scholar and contemporary of Hippocrates, advocated the use of “gymnastics”. At that time “gymnastics” was the term used for any health-furthering physical pursuits.

In addition, Plato in his “Republic” advocated that equal time be given to grammar, music and gymnastics while Galen (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) wrote many articles on the subject of gymnastics and its importance in the total education of the child.

In the Medieval period there was a decrease in the emphasis placed on education yet gymnastics exercises were still carefully documented as they played a prominent role in the training of the soldier and the nobleman. Ability and strength were required in both combative skill and horsemanship and they were developed and maintained through various gymnastics activities.

During the Renaissance period there was a rebirth of the humanistic educational philosophy of the Greeks and Romans with emphasis on producing “...a man of vigor and wisdom” (3). Consequently classical gymnastics reappeared.

The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries produced many books on the subject with the most influential being six books by Hieronymous Mercurialis on the Art of Gymnastics.

These books not only had a great influence on the contemporaries of Mercurialis but also authors for the next few centuries. Similarly, the single text by Tuccaro: Three Dialogues on the Acrobatics of Jumping had a long lasting influence.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century medicine finally began to emancipate itself from dogmatic doctrines of the past and attempts were made to examine exercise (gymnastics) in a scientific manner. Many leading physicians and scientists studied and wrote on the subject of gymnastics:

From France: LeThieulier, A Disputation on the Benefit of Exercise for Health.

From England: Fuller, Gymnastics Medicine.

From Germany: Platner, Gymnastics of Antiquity.

From Italy: Nenci, Discussion on Gymnastics with Regard to its Use in Medical Practice.

It was during this period that gymnastics began to be divided between Military, Medical and Athletic styles.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of strong nationalistic trends, and the concomitant desire for physically robust, regimented youth led to the development of many systems of gymnastics. The Germans: Muths, Vieth, Pestalozzi, Jahn and Spiess introduced various exercise regiments and apparatus to facilitate the development of strong, flexible and agile students. The Swedes: Lindfors and Ling also developed various pieces of apparatus and systems of exercise in order to enhance the different aspects of physical development while the Austrians: Gaulhofer and Streicher developed the “natural gymnastics” system which still remains as the basis of Australian physical education.

With one main exception, these systems were and still are the basis of physical education in most European countries. The exception being England, which will be discussed later in this article.

From the above very brief historical account we can deduce that the term “gymnastics” has for 2000 years, been synonymous with physical exercise and indeed was the embryo of our contemporary physical education. We must remember that gymnastics consisted of detailed study of human movement followed by systematic design and invention of exercise regimes and apparatus which would facilitate “physically educating” persons.

It is therefore justified, at least historically, why gymnastics still is considered an important aspect of our contemporary programs.

The past 100 or so years has been a time of profound changes in the philosophy and content of physical education.

For one thing, English physical education was developing quite differently from other countries with respect to the continued development and evolution of gymnastics systems. For various reasons (geographically in less need of armies, earlier industrialization and democratisation etc). English educators showed a predilection for developing games and sports. This trend greatly reduced the emphasis on systematic applied gymnastics education in England and of course in its North American colonies. Paralleling this rapid growth of sports and games in England were some changes in gymnastics brought about by exhibitions between different

schools of gymnastics. These exhibitions required formalisation of rules and standardization of apparatus and was the beginning of sport forms of gymnastics. This process was greatly speeded up by the reintroduction of the Olympic games and culminated in the birth of sports of Artistic (Olympic) Gymnastics and then later of Modern Rhythmic Gymnastics. While these “sports” of gymnastics continued to co-exist in Europe along with the physical education “systems” of gymnastics this was not the case in England or North America.

On this content, the majority of physical education programs became games/sports oriented and what little gymnastics was taught was mainly a bastardised version of the sport of artistic (Olympic) gymnastics which remains the case today. Gymnastics as it is normally taught in North American schools can be fairly dangerous; it is frustrating for both teacher and student; it is confusing because of the unlimited number of skills that can be taught plus equipment is expensive and awkward to store. WHY THEN DO WE STILL INSIST ON DOING IT? Well, for the most part, our cultural mosaic is such that there are plenty of pro-gymnastics European trained teachers sprinkled amongst us (who have had far richer and more comprehensive gymnastics background than most North American trained teachers). Also the historical importance placed on gymnastics demands second thoughts about its elimination.

### IF GYMNASTICS HAS BEEN SO IMPORTANT HISTORICALLY AND IS SO IMPORTANT IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD – WHY ISN'T IT HERE?

The answer to this question lies in the two previously mentioned developments:

1. Our games/sports inheritance from England.
2. Our unenlightened use of bastardised versions of the sport of artistic gymnastics as the core of our physical education gymnastics program. (A malady affecting most North American literature and teaching in gymnastics).

### HOW USEFUL IS GYMNASTICS AND IS IT REALLY THAT NECESSARY?

The most useful aspect of the “Activity of Gymnastics” is the principle that you teach a student to control their own body in a variety of situations; while doing various locomotor activities: swinging, springing off hands and feet, balancing, landing etc and while on the ground, off the ground, right side up, upside down etc. The student is taught via the activity of gymnastics to develop total control of his/her body. They learn to attempt skills, not with implements or projectiles, but with their bodies.

It seems quite reasonable to assume that if students can first control and manoeuvre their own bodies with a fairly high degree of skill then they can subsequently better control and manoeuvre themselves PLUS an implement (bat, stick, racket) or themselves plus a projectile (ball, discus etc). Likewise, they could then better control themselves in various mediums (water, snow, etc), or better handle themselves PLUS an opponent.

One can see that the very nature of the “Activity of Gymnastics” is to enhance our physical abilities (flexibility, strength, muscular endurance) and our basic motor abilities (balance, general coordination, agility, spatial orientation etc). The apparatus have been designed for this purpose over hundreds of years by medical, military and educational experts who were seeking tools by which they could develop their charges into robust and agile beings. That is the way the educator should be perceiving gymnastics apparatus. They are his/her tools,

his/her instruments, his/her lab equipment, his/her resource centre. They were not designed for the competitive sport of gymnastics. Instead, the sport evolved from the competitive usage of educational equipment! You need not use only the Olympic apparatus (there are numerous other designs) and you certainly need not restrict the kind of activity you teach on the Olympic apparatus to the kinds of skill patterns that are done in that sport. The apparatus should be regarded much the same as a room full of weights or a universal gym but with the added advantage of being portable and being designed to also allow you to teach balance, flexibility, rotation skills, landing skills, confidence while off the ground etc.

We have rather a mammoth task of trying to promote more physical education in the hope of better harmonizing it and the intellectual education of our youth. Though gymnastics is by no means a panacea or an all-inclusive instrument for this purpose, it is nevertheless one of the best tools that you employ to better physically educate your students. It need not be a dangerous, complicated, frustrating, painful, scary activity that you would just as soon avoid. Instead, it can easily be made safe, uncomplicated and rewarding for all, while still maintaining the rigour we need for producing robust students and also still retaining that element of “thrill” – that kinaesthetic stimulation that prompts students to want more!

### References

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4. McIntosh, Peter. Fair Play, Ethics in Sport and Education. Heinemann, London, 1979.