The Boston Normal School of Gymnastics: An Unheralded Legacy

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In the late nineteenth century, issues such as professionalization, the advancement of women, and the appropriate training of teachers faced our field. The Boston Normal School of Gymnastics (BNSG) was instrumental in addressing these issues, and perhaps addressed most thoroughly, the training of teachers. This paper examines the legacy of the BNSG on today’s physical education teacher preparation (PETE) programs. Many have documented the influence of the BNSG as one of the first successful physical education teacher training institutions. However, what has not been examined are the particular philosophies of the administrators and teachers at the BNSG that still persevere in colleges and universities today. The BNSG was instrumental in the professionalization of the field and in the advancement of women in physical education. The argument is made that perhaps the BNSG’s greatest contribution was in the development of many philosophies and basic pedagogical concepts such as combining theory and practice, teaching with progressions, and using experts to train future teachers, and these philosophies and concepts that guide today’s PETE programs were the same used in the BNSG over a century ago.

Impacting on American society in the late nineteenth century were three forces: industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Each of these forces are linked to the promulgation of physical education during this time and the need to train individuals to teach physical education. The industrial revolution that overtook the country precipitated Americans to flock to the nation’s metropolitan areas to seek employment in factories that were materializing at a rapid pace.

The technological developments allowed citizens more leisure time. Thus, there was a need for physical activity and instruction in physical activity. The

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emergence of industry that attracted people to the cities, coupled with immigrants from eastern Europe, caused overcrowding (urbanization), which resulted in health problems. Reformers of the time responded to the subsequent health problems by creating the need for physical education programs and those who could teach them.

To combat the effects of these forces, in 1889, Mrs. Mary Hemenway subsidized the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics (BNSG) and named Amy Morris Homans as its director (Lee, 1983). The purpose of the BNSG was to train physical education teachers and ensure that a steady stream of gymnastics and physical education teachers would be available for the public schools, universities, and YMCAs in Boston and across the nation (Hardy, 1982; Spears, 1982). In turn, it was hoped that physical education would then better the lives of women. In subsidizing the BNSG, it is unlikely that Hemenway and Homans realized their normal school would wield an influence that is still felt almost 111 years later in physical education teacher preparation.

The emergence of the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics served to address three issues that helped shape the field of physical education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: (a) the professionalization of the field, (b) the advancement of women’s causes in physical education, and (c) the development of a physical education teacher training curriculum. The BNSG was a major participant in the development of these issues in physical education on a national basis, and its legacy still bears an influence on how physical education teacher education is conducted today. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the Boston Normal School influenced the field of physical education in more ways than just being one of the first teacher training schools in America; it provided a model from which many aspects of professional preparation could be taken by future teacher education programs. The paper is significant for two reasons. First, until now, no in-depth analysis of the BNSG and its influence upon the modern physical education teacher preparation has been conducted. Also, this paper will show how the BNSG influenced modern day PETE programs in terms of course content, philosophy, and instructional strategies. Second, it serves as a starting point for more research on the legacy of the BNSG and its influence on modern day teacher training programs.

Professionalization

In the early nineteenth century, as the United States was impacted by the primary forces that shaped modern society—industrialization, urbanization, and immigration—the nature of sport experienced a dramatic transformation and began appealing to urban middle class needs and sensibilities. This development was influenced by the influx of population, the creation of more jobs in the cities, the emergence of new sports that were compatible with the values of the middle class, and the development of a new positive sports creed that made it okay to participate in sports and, thus, receive the benefits of participation. This ideology was a partial solution to the urban pathology that accompanied the growth of cities (Reiss, 1991). As cities became larger, overcrowding led to health problems, such as disposal of sewage, and one way to combat this was to make sport respectable to the middle class so that they would participate and see the value in sport and physical activity. It was thought that sport and exercise would promote good health, sound morals, and a decent character.
In the 1820s, the gymnastic movement permeated American school circles as knowledge of Prussian educational reforms spread. School gymnastics programs emerged in states like Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia almost simultaneously. William Bentley Fowle of the Boston Monitorial School declared, “I hope the day is not far distant when gymnasiums for women will be as common as churches in Boston” (Betts, 1968, p. 793). The Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts played a significant role in the promotion of sport and gymnastic exercises. The curriculum stressed the importance of uniting physical with moral education and was the first in “the new continent to connect gymnastics with a purely literary establishment” (p. 793). Calisthenics, mile runs on the school’s track, archery, tumbling, games, and long walking trips were part of the daily routine.

Early efforts to establish teacher training programs would not occur until the Civil War era. The first physical education teacher training program, the Normal Institute for Physical Education in Boston (Van Dalen & Bennett, 1971), was established by Dio Lewis in 1861. Lewis advocated physical education for high school students as an alternative for urban youth to the hardy rural life of children on farms. Over a period of six to seven years, 250 students were trained to be physical education teachers by practicing gymnastic exercises for the majority of the day and studying subjects such as anatomy, physiology, and hygiene (Welch, 1994). While the specialization of physical education teachers began to take shape, regularized systems of physical education that went beyond recess and military drill were rarely introduced until the late 1880s in cities such as Chicago, Davenport, Los Angeles, Oakland, Moline, and Detroit (Lee, 1983).

One of the first successful attempts at training physical education teachers took place at the BNSG. It played a significant role in the professionalization of teaching physical education and addressing the problems caused by industrialization and urbanization in two major ways: (a) it provided its students with instructors who were experts in their respective fields. Thus, people who were experts in physical education and had more knowledge of fitness and how to attain fitness were teaching others how to seek and obtain fitness that would lead to addressing the health issues brought on by industrialization and urbanization; and (b) it trained teachers specifically to be physical education teachers.

The BNSG focused particularly on training teachers of Swedish gymnastics for colleges and universities, the public schools, and in YMCAs. The Swedish approach was adopted because it best fell into concert with Homans’ belief that gymnastics should improve health rather than treat disease and because Hemenway saw that it would benefit the health of school children. The Swedish system was adopted by hiring Nils Posse, an expert in Swedish gymnastics, to teach the students (Lee, 1983; Spears, 1986). Prior to the establishment of the BNSG and other teacher training facilities (e.g., Sargent School of Gymnastics, Brooklyn Normal School for Physical Education, and the Savage School of Gymnastics), many college gymnasiums were supervised by ex-prizefighters, weightlifters, and others who, although they had athletic backgrounds, were not trained properly in the teaching of physical education (Van Dalen & Bennett, 1971). Therefore, a need to provide professional training for prospective physical educators emerged. This required an instructor who was both knowledgeable at training teachers and possessed an understanding of sport and games. The BNSG was instrumental in fulfilling this void.

BNSG administrators sought to procure experts to prepare physical education teachers for public schools, universities, and YMCAs. This notion of procuring
experts was hardly unique to the BNSG. The late nineteenth century nurtured a growing sense that the increasingly complex nature of American life required careful organization of every sphere of human activity. Whether it was sport, industry, or education, professionals trained within each area of their calling would set the standards, solve problems, and instruct others. According to historian Burton Bledstein (1976), no area of American life escaped those tendencies. For better or worse, and whether in the doctor’s office, in school, or in the gymnasium, the notion of professional as a “magician,” a charismatic figure deserving of trust and capable of providing guidance, came to permeate the everyday world of Americans.

Such broad cultural patterns coincided nicely with the BNSG’s own philosophies. They were consistent with the tendency for “experts” in every field to emphasize the need for efficient management, specialization of the roles, and new organizational strategies in order to ensure the stability and success of any enterprise. Moreover, this approach marked developments as diverse as the growth of capitalism, the rise of organized labor, efforts at social and political reform, and, in the case of the BNSG, the professionalization of teacher training programs (Boyer, 1978; Levine, 1985; Mrozek, 1983; Reiss, 1980; Wiebe, 1967).

One aspect of the philosophy steering the BNSG was that students should be masters of their subject matter (Spears, 1986). Thus, it only made sense to Homans that in order for this to occur, the students should be taught by those who had already mastered their subject matter. An excellent example of this was the hiring of Swedish Gymnastics expert Baron Nils Posse to be the first teacher. A graduate of the Royal Central Gymnastic Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, Posse sought to inculcate the students of the BNSG in Swedish Gymnastics. The philosophy of Swedish gymnastics was, in the words of Posse, to train individuals in physical training that influenced health, skill, and simplicity and beauty of performance (Posse, 1891). Although Posse and Homans eventually disagreed, and Posse left the BNSG to begin his own normal school, the influence of having a professional train the students was enormous. At the BNSG, Homans continued to hire specialists to train teachers in the theoretical courses that were a part of the curriculum. Homans hired individuals with MD and PhD degrees to teach the curriculum in areas such as physiology, anatomy, and hygiene. In fact, the BNSG was the only teacher preparation program that had instructors from Harvard University, Harvard Medical School, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) teaching philosophy, physiology, and pedagogy courses.

The BNSG exemplified the progressive ethos by using experts to train its graduates. It was determined that any graduate of the BNSG would be expertly prepared to teach students. This philosophy was not only directly related to securing that the BNSG would be consistent with the rest of society, but it can be argued that it was done to ensure that its women graduates would be given the best advantages in the field. The women that graduated from the BNSG were considered some of the best physical education teachers in the country. Their knowledge of the most appropriate ways to instruct students helped them obtain teaching positions at schools throughout the United States. Their professionalism and knowledge of the human body, health, and exercise earned the BNSG graduates respect, and they were, in turn, able to use their qualifications to advance themselves in the field and improve physical education for students, primarily female students.
Advancing the Cause of Women in Physical Education

In the early nineteenth century, the perceived poor state of health and deportment of American women resulted in a number of reformers calling for the development of appropriate exercise programs. Middle class reformers, like Catharine Beecher, were concerned over the presumed demise of the natural order and the social chaos that appeared to be the result of industrialization and urbanization (Borish, 1987). According to Beecher, the blurring roles of the modern woman as worker and homemaker, which resulted from rapid social change, threatened the orderly natural development. She concluded that gender role differentiation was essential for the future of the race. To be sure, the cult of motherhood, domesticity, and the womanly woman, which was etched into the North American educational system with the expressed purpose of improving women’s health and fitness for motherhood, can be viewed as a significant influence upon the way in which modern physical education programs have been affected by the sexual equality debate (Vertinsky, 1976).

The initial efforts to promote organized physical education for American women took place around the 1830s and 1840s. These efforts were attributed in large part to Beecher, Emma Willard, Almira Phelps, and Zilpah Grant. Beecher, particularly, stressed that calisthenics and other physical activities be incorporated into female seminaries as a means of combating the poor state of women’s health. A central theme among writers of the era was that the state of American women’s health was declining to the point that they were becoming unfit to bear the succeeding generation. Beecher surveyed 450 women and classified only 24% of them to be strong, while labeling 42% delicate or diseased and 34% habitual invalids (Park, 1978).

Concerned about the perceived needs to correct female physical defects, several female reformers initiated the task of developing appropriate physical exercises for girls and women. Emma Willard prescribed exercise designed to improve the posture and gracefulness of her pupils at Troy Female Seminary. Zilpah Grant also instituted a systematic course of calisthenics at Ipswich Seminary. Catharine Beecher’s system of calisthenics was adopted and modified by Dio Lewis by the 1860s (Lumpkin, 1998; Park, 1978). Moreover, in many ways, her system continued to form attitudes toward female participation in sport and physical education.

By the end of the Civil War, the heirs to Dio Lewis’s system of gymnastics to improve women’s health (Matthew Vassar, Edward Hitchcock, Dudley Sargent, William Anderson, and others) were responsible for promoting physical education for women in female colleges and other institutions. Primarily homeopaths, these physicians were, like educators and women reformers, all strongly influenced by the general belief that American society was in need of a rescue operation. During this time, many perceived a rapid decline in the birth rate among upper-class Americans. This was attributed to the lack of health among women and dictated a need for better training that would result in health and better the ability of women to bear children. These concerns led to advocating the need for the development of female exercise systems (Vertinsky, 1986).

The belief in physical frailty of women, however, and a separate women’s sphere worked against the establishment of programs for girls on the same level of
boys. The separate women's sphere meant that sports and activities were adjusted for women's participation, thus creating different versions of sport and physical activity that reflected the qualities of motherhood, domesticity, and the womanly woman. Yet, the rejection of competitive athletics for girls did not rule out women's participation in sport altogether. Reformers approved of sports designed specifically for girls.

In response, several female physical educators established a separate sphere in athletics. Cindy Himes-Gissenmer (1986) noted that directors of physical education did not have the reputations that allowed for eccentricities like active sports. As a result of the considerable pressure college women came under for engaging in games, Himes-Gissenmer (1986) stated that "female physical educators modified athletics for women in an attempt to disassociate them from the rites of masculinity" (p. 64). The result was the college athletic festival, which linked sports with a celebration of traditional feminine qualities such as beauty, primness, delicacy, and austerity. Thus, physical moderation became the goal for women's sports, and these festivals reflected this.

It was within this context that the BNSG was instrumental in advancing the cause of women. Posse's (1903) philosophy of gymnastics coincided with the ubiquitous theory of moderation for women in the United States; he contended that

The art of educational gymnastics is to develop the body into a harmonious whole under the perfect control of the will. It is not to produce great bulk of muscle, but to cause that already present to respond readily to volition. (p. 11)

This type of instruction had a far-reaching impact. By 1890, more than 200 teachers had been trained in this type of gymnastics, and the city of Boston had adopted this system for use in its school system.

Although physical education in the late nineteenth century was a field, for the most part, open to women, the BNSG advanced the crusade of women by preparing graduates of the BNSG to obtain and keep administrative jobs in schools, colleges, and YMCAs who could then enhance women's lives through physical education (Spears, 1986). A second major element of the BNSG philosophy was that all graduates would be at ease with and feel equal to college presidents, deans, and other administrators (Spears, 1986). This is, arguably, the most important contribution of the BNSG to the amelioration of women in the field of education. During this period, most administrative positions were held by men, and college campuses were male dominated (Park & Hult, 1993). At the outset, the BNSG was entirely devoted to training women to teach physical education and making sure that women were prepared to obtain jobs in which they would work closely with men. This occurred at a time when this type of interaction between men and women on a professional basis was rare. Some indication of the BNSG's influence was the result of a survey that indicated that the majority of teachers teaching physical education in American public schools in the early 1900s were trained at the BNSG (Park, 1985).

An excellent example of preparing women to become administrative leaders is that of Senda Berenson, one of the first graduates of the BNSG who was able to use the knowledge gained there to help advance the cause of women in physical
education. Upon graduation from the BNSG, Berenson acted as a physical educator and administrator at Smith College for twenty years. While at Smith, Berenson was a leading advocate of physical activity for women and promoted women’s participation in games such as basketball. However, as with gymnastics, the idea of moderation was prevalent. Berenson, also a proponent of moderation for females, modified rules designed to prevent overexertion and encourage equal participation by all involved. In 1899, Berenson was appointed director of the Committee on Women’s Basketball and served as editor for the guidebook that explicitly stated the rules for women’s basketball (which later became the National Association of Girls’ and Women’s Sports [NAGWS]; Hult, 1985).

Another way in which the BNSG helped advance the cause of women in physical education was by allowing and encouraging them to become members in organizations such as the American Physical Education Association (APEA), so that they could have a voice in how physical education was conducted in the country (Spears, 1986). In fact, a BNSG graduate, Mabel Lee, became the first female president of the APEA in 1931 (Park & Hult, 1993). Additionally, alumnai of the BNSG were encouraged to organize professional clubs that provided outlets for them to network through reunions and conferences (Remley, 1994). This network was vital to the advancement of women in the field by allowing women to help each other obtain jobs and other important positions.

Professional Preparation Curriculum Development

The original curriculum of the BNSG is still seen in the modern day physical education teacher education curriculum. Previously, students graduating from the BNSG were well versed in subjects such as anatomy, physiology, and teaching strategies. Students today enrolled in professional preparation programs take classes with the same content. A major belief that governed curriculum decisions at the BNSG was that graduates needed to be experts in the subject matter (Spears, 1986). The graduates of the BNSG were required to complete a two-year course of study that provided them with a knowledge of many different areas related to the human body and movement. An examination of the BNSG curriculum by Spears (1986) indicated that Homans knew physical education teachers must have a knowledge of the body in ways to improve health and that a combination of practical course work and theoretical course work was the best way to achieve this goal. Indicative of this philosophy was that in their junior year at BNSG, students were required to take 100 lectures in applied anatomy, physiology, and theory of gymnastics, while also completing daily drills in pedagogical gymnastics, games, and a class that could be termed as a methods of teaching course.

In today’s teacher education programs, the same types of courses are required for certification. Prerequisites for graduation regularly include that preservice teachers complete courses in the sciences, such as biology, anatomy, and physiology. Furthermore, hours of practical experience also are needed to complete degree requirements. For example, preservice teachers are required to complete three practical teaching experiences, methods classes that include practical experiences in the schools, and student teaching in addition to theoretical course work before graduation and certification.
Possibly, the choice of Swedish gymnastics as the curriculum was influential in the development of today's teacher preparation curriculum (Kennard, 1994). In Posse's *Handbook of School Gymnastics*, evidence of his recommendations for conducting training sessions are seen in many of today's physical education teacher education programs. Although it is not claimed in this article that Posse was the progenitor of the idea of good teaching, an examination of the primary tenets of Posse's (1903) educational gymnastics curriculum reveals many methods that are currently taught to prospective physical education teachers. These methods include (a) progression and (b) providing clear commands and directions. For example, Posse (1891) warns the potential gymnastics teacher:

Progression should be made as rapid as possible, for the question is to accomplish the most in the shortest time. Yet never leave an exercise until the class can do it well as their degrees of physical culture will permit. Do not hurry for the sake of variety and at the expense of developing effect. (p. 18)

Posse (1903) thought that each lesson should be taught in a systematic fashion and that lessons should follow each other in a logical manner. This concept exemplified teaching age-appropriate subject matter. He believed that the progression should take into account the age of the learner while at the same time considering their level of development. He advocated that exercises for kindergarten should start with general movement, then move to more specific exercises as children physically and mentally mature. An analysis of textbooks from an elementary or secondary physical education methods class would reveal this developmental concept being taught to prospective teachers today (Kirchner & Fishburne, 1995; Nichols, 1994; Pangrazi & Dauer, 1992; Wuest & Lombardo, 1994). A clear example of exhorting teachers to present content in progressions is seen in the text *Children Moving* (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 1998). The book provides future physical education teachers with “a series of tasks (not lessons) that you will be able to develop based on the skill level and abilities of the classes you teach” (p. 275).

Students of Posse were also cautioned to use clear commands to begin and end each exercise. Posse believed it was imperative that teachers use short commands so that the students would not grow weary of the teacher's voice. Furthermore, he indicated that it was essential for the teachers to use “Good Language” (Posse, 1903, p. 23), which meant using proper English and grammar. Communicating to the students in a nonredundant manner also was important. This philosophy is demonstrated when Posse (1891) exhorts the teacher to “not say 'upward raise' and 'downward sink' as raising is an upward movement and sinking a movement downward” (p. 24). In current teacher training programs, preservice teachers also are urged to speak and provide directions in this way. For example, a leading elementary school methods book illustrates that effective teachers “provide clear and interesting explanations and descriptions so that the children can easily understand the information” (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 1998, p. 152). Again it is not suggested that only Posse believed that this was essential for effective teaching or that he was the first to begin this practice. It is simply interesting to note that Posse’s tenet of effective teaching is still used today, 111 years later.

Further evidence of Posse’s methods being promulgated in today’s physical education teacher training programs is seen in Siedentop’s (1991) *Developing*
*Teaching Skills in Physical Education.* In this methods book the preservice teacher is reminded that an effective teacher is one that can communicate clearly to his or her students. Siedentop (1991) suggests, as did Posse, that teachers "include necessary information to make it a complete task description . . . use language students can understand . . . talk enthusiastically but slowly [and] demonstrate a skill or strategy under conditions as close as possible to the way it will be used" (p. 211).

**Conclusion**

The legacy of the BNSG is well documented in terms of its place as one of the most influential physical education teacher training institutions. What has been overlooked is the influence that it exerted on the professionalization of PETE and the advancement of women in physical education. The BNSG was instrumental in both of these areas. However, the BNSG’s greatest contributions were in the areas that helped shape the teacher training field such as (a) course content; (b) philosophy; and (c) instructional strategies regarding the preparation of physical education teachers, many of which are still evinced in today’s professional preparation programs. The modern-day physical education teacher education curriculum closely resembles that of the BNSG, which emphasized its students’ gaining knowledge of all subjects that pertain to physical education. Preservice teachers are required to complete courses ranging from biology and physiology to pedagogy and health and must demonstrate their knowledge and abilities both on tests and in practical situations. Today, this philosophy is thought to be the best way to prepare future teachers (Goodlad, 1990), and PETE programs strive to provide preservice teachers with the ultimate blend of theory and practice.

Teaching theories that were espoused by the BNSG are still seen in the instructional strategies taught to preservice teachers as we approach the millennium. Although many experts have claimed that physical education should be taught in different manners, they all agree that certain pedagogical concepts such as teaching progressions and clarity of communication should be ingrained in preservice physical education teachers. These pedagogical concepts were the foundation of the BNSG. They were essential to the teaching of Swedish gymnastics and the training of physical education teachers at the BNSG and remain essential to effective teaching of physical education today.

Serving a societal need by training physical education teachers for public schools and YMCAs, the BNSG addressed important issues of the era. Some graduates of the BNSG went on to serve the field of physical education in capacities that were extremely influential. These achievements were probably within the vision of Mary Hemenway, Amy Morris Homans, and Nils Posse, and they have exerted an influence on the profession of physical education teacher training for over a century. Thus, when studying PETE programs to improve and sustain them, it is important to remember that they are influenced by some of the philosophies that guided the BNSG 111 years earlier.

**References**


