

Gymnastics for all: a challenging experience with high school students from the South-East Federal Institute of Minas Gerais/Brazil

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Abstract

This article has been written in the interest in spreading the gymnastics in schooling spaces, since it is almost nonexistent due to the lack of infrastructure and poor professional training. Gymnastics is essential to formal education, since it enables general education and provides humans with valuable experiences with their bodies. At school, it is necessary to redefine senses and create new experiences, in order to widen the expression of such experiences. Therefore, it is believed that Gymnastics For All (GFA) may bring the opportunity to reconstruct gymnastics for Physical Education (PE) in the school environment through a perspective of confrontation and synthesis, which is also creative, playful, and participative. As a result, this study has the objective of reporting a GFA experience, developed with six groups of 40 students, belonging to different classrooms in the first year of high school, from the South-East Federal Institute of Minas Gerais in Brazil. The PE classes in this Institute follow the historical-critical perspective. Such approach recognizes the contribution of education in changing society, offering individuals great historical, cultural, scientific, and body knowledge. The challenge was to experience the same choreography of the global team, which was developed for the XVI World Gymnaestrada, which took place in Austria in July of 2019. With the awareness that it is essential to cooperate, participate, and build collectively, students left their fear behind and plunged into the new experience. Furthermore, the non-competitive practice of gymnastics permitted knowledge, learning, practical experience, and the ability to present. During six weeks, 240 students broke paradigms and experienced playful, affective, cooperative, and physical movements, while participating in the GFA activities.

Keywords: Gymnastics for all. School physical education. collectivity.

Introduction

Gymnastics For All (GFA) is the only non-competitive discipline of the International Gymnastics Federation (*Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique*, also known as FIG) and offers varied activities appropriate to all genders, ages, abilities, and cultural origins. It contributes, not only to health, but also to physical, social, intellectual, and psychological well-being. The main focuses of the Gymnastics For All are happiness, the main principles of Gymnastics, health aptitude, and friendship. It includes both dance and gymnastics, with or without equipments, in simple participation, presentation, demonstration, and entertainment environments (FIG, 2016).

Also according to FIG (1993), there is the gymnastics oriented towards leisure, which encompasses the huge fields of gymnastics and dance, according to national and cultural preferences. First, GFA is an activity that entails enthusiasm and game. Participation is determined by the pleasure of practicing it, above all.

GFA does not necessarily mean a high level of ability. Its objective is social cohesion, general well-being, and health improvement. The main motivation to choose exercising is the pleasure to practice physical activities and feel the satisfaction of feeling active, communicate, find people, make friends, and escape from daily stress.

GFA is characterized mainly by its non-competitive character. The choreographies can be practiced with synchrony, following the rhythm, with the aim to be presented. GFA also includes creative aspects, such as song, extra materials used, and also specific equipments from the other gymnastics discipline that exist. GFA's principles foster inclusion, since they require no advanced levels of motor ability, stimulate musical and cultural diversity, and contribute to human training because they are oriented towards inclusive, democratic, and creative teamwork. In such an environment, collective learning and interaction with different cultures are encouraged. GFA also involves pleasure because it is a discipline different from any other pre-established models, comparisons, and frustrations, which are pretty common in other competitive fields of gymnastics.

According to Ayoub (2003), at school, GFA means to study, live, know, understand, realize, share, face, interpret, systematize, and learn several gymnastics interpretations, on the basis of searching for new meanings

and creating new possibilities of expression in gymnastics from this experience. Gymnastics For All brings the possibility of reconstructing gymnastics for Physical Education (PE) in the school environment through a perspective of confrontation and synthesis, which is also creative, playful, and participative. In order for that to happen, the support of a critical pedagogical team will offer many paths towards this objective.

Gymnastics is a particular type of exercise that, with or without any equipment, offers the possibility of activities that promote different body experiences, which enrich the body culture of children, teenagers, and humans in general. There are many different types of gymnastics, which offer different fields of activity, according to Souza (1997). Gymnastics can be divided into: Physical Conditioning Gymnastics, which include all the modalities that aim to acquire or maintain the physical condition of normal individuals or athletes; Competitive Gymnastics, which include all the competitive modalities; Physical Therapy Gymnastics, which are responsible for using the physical exercise to prevent or treat diseases; Body Awareness Gymnastics, also known as Alternative Techniques or Light Gymnastics; and Demonstration Gymnastics: Gymnastics For All, whose main characteristics is the non-competitiveness and main objective is the social interaction between the participants.

As a result, this study has the objective to report a GFA experience developed with six groups of 40 students, belonging to different classrooms of the first year of high school, from the South-East Federal Institute of Minas Gerais, in Brazil. The PE classes in this Institute follow the historical-critical perspective. Such approach recognizes the contribution of education in changing society, offering individuals great historical, cultural, scientific, and body knowledge (Saviani, 2007).

The historical-critical pedagogy has five stages to plan the content to be studied by students: Initial social practice, problematization, instrumentalization, catharsis, and social final practice. The sum of these stages represents the experience the students had. They will be described in detail in the Material and Methods section.

Material & Methods

High school students from the South-East Federal Institute of Minas Gerais were the population of this study. The sample included 240 students in total, divided into six groups of 40 students. Eighty percent of the sample were male (192 boys) and twenty percent were female (48 girls). Age varied between 14 and 16 years old.

The experience lasted six weeks. Each group of students had two lessons per week, which together correspond to 140 minutes, for twelve meetings in total.

During the first week (lessons 1 and 2), the social practice happened through the theory of Gymnastics For All. The official website of XVI WORLD GYMANESTRADA, which is the most famous event of the discipline, was used as a didactic resource. The event took place in Austria, in July of 2019.

The presentation of the website during the theoretical class was the students' first contact with Gymnastics For All. At the start, they could see the most important gymnastics event that includes this discipline, followed by its principles and the diverse possibilities and expressions of GFA. Students were challenged to try out the choreography, available on the website for download, of the global team during the following classes.

The global team is an international performance of a large group containing a significant number of participants, ranging from 200 until 2,000, in which people from all over the world can participate. The choreography is usually performed in soccer fields. The global team is not connected to any specific group, but all those who participate in the World Gymnaestrada can be part of it. The choreography developed for the event in 2019 was presented by the FIG's committee in February of 2018 during the 2nd Common Meeting. All those who were interested could download the material with the instructions and learn the choreography of the Global Team, available at the XVI World Gymnaestrada website <https://www.wg2019.at/wg2019/en/events/world-team>.

It is important to mention the use of technology and media during PE lessons at schools, as suggested by Vogt and Klein (2019) in a recent paper published. In their study, the authors list competencies that can be developed in students when interacting with websites, applications, devices, and virtual environments. Such competencies are: creativity to solve problems and conflicts, ability to easily learn, motivation to deal with new contents, cooperation and social interaction, creation of tools like videos and channels to keep what they experienced and learned.

During the second week (lessons 3 and 4), the practical experiences started, in which students began to learn the choreography available on the website. This was the problematization step, in which students faced the movements proposed by each of the pieces of the choreography. In order to facilitate learning, the choreography was taught step-by-step, or in other words, through a bottom-up approach, so that first they learn the smaller pieces and then the whole. Other pedagogical resources were also implemented, such as recording videos using mobile devices and using the slow motion in order to be able to follow the pace of the song more correctly. Making shifts and shapes was also slowly practiced until the group could perform them correctly. The teacher made a few changes so that everyone could participate in the activity. The choreography videos were shared on WhatsApp chat groups and could be watched at any time.

During the third week (lessons 5 and 6), the instrumentalization step started, or in other words, the appropriation of knowledge, which in this project was learning all the choreography pieces. The sum of all pieces resulted in the complete choreography. In gymnastics, as well as in dance, repetitions are essential in order to promote the assimilation of movements and choreography pieces. In order to have a satisfactory collective result, students repeated the choreography several times. They watched themselves on the recorded videos and this feedback strengthened the learning process.

During the fourth week (lessons 7 and 8), there was the synthesis of the whole process and the development towards knowledge, which makes us affirm that they acquired knowledge. The playful and collective character of GFA characterizes this stage. Students felt empowered and showed joy and pleasure while performing the choreography.

During the fifth week (lessons 9 and 10), students showed full appropriation of the choreography and we had a collective rehearsal with the participation of the six groups of students. Over the previous weeks, each group had their own lessons. In order to organize this collective rehearsal, the gym floor had been marked so that students could find their correct positions.

During the sixth week (lessons 11 and 12), all the 240 students presented their GFA choreography. Teachers of other subjects were invited to watch their presentation, which has been recorded and sent to students through message applications. GFA gained new meaning and senses that have been incorporated by students. The group got together at the Sports Gym and presented the choreography of the global team with happiness and hardwork. According to their own descriptions, they felt delighted. They accepted the challenge, followed the stages of the learning process, and overcame the problems that they faced on the way.

Results and Discussion

Despite the fact that, in many schools, PE favors sports, competitions, and ball games, the South-East Federal Institute of Minas Gerais follows an annual plan that includes the body movement culture, which enables students to have deeper experiences with Physical Education. For this reason, the proposal was welcomed by students, providing another possibility to learn, experience, study, and recognize, as Ayoub (2003) argues. This author affirms that GFA enables rebuilding gymnastics in school PE, by using a confrontation and synthesis methodology in a creative, playful, inclusive, cooperative, collective, and non-competitive environment.

GFA's core is exactly the manifestation of collectivity. It is through collectivity that the body is stimulated. Students expressed that, since the task was performed in a group, they felt more confident, because, if they made any mistakes, it would not be noticed, due to the great number of participants. Their bodies also showed creativity, freedom of movements, joy, and pleasure. Rehearsals were not based on technical skills or perfection of body movements, but on trying all the movements taking into account individual possibilities and limitations. This posture brought students closer and created bonds among students, since participation was more important than performance. Being aware that it is essential to cooperate, participate, and build collectively, students left their fear behind and plunged into the new experience.

Collins (2004) affirms that daily life is based on different habits and such habits may become stronger or weaker as they are experienced. When it comes to the global team's choreography, students felt stronger with collective actions, courage to have new experiences, and the challenge to learn new rhythms, movements, and compositions. Students also expressed satisfaction with the use of technology in this experience, since video resources helped with memorizing the choreography and enabled learning. The interaction on the WhatsApp group chat was also an extra motivation to participate in the task.

The main objective of GFA was the interaction among participants, which provided the group with a confrontation and synthesis perspective. It is quite curious to analyze the great number of boys compared to the number of girls. This fact did not interfere in the experience, even though gymnastics attracts a greater number of girls and even though boys tend to appreciate more competitive sports. Gymnastics For All brought the possibility to reconstruct gymnastics for Physical Education in the school environment through a creative, playful, and inclusive perspective.

The results of this study encourage GFA in the school environment. The pedagogical framework of this research is compatible with the principles of GFA. Each student became collective because of the great number of participants involved and the challenge to do gymnastics joyfully became concrete.

Conclusions

This article was written in order to contribute to the process of strengthening gymnastics in the school environment. We believe in the importance of socialization in experiences related to gymnastics at school, with the aim of encouraging other professionals to incorporate such content in their PE lessons.

The possibilities presented in this study may contribute to teaching practices. According to Rinaldi and Pizani (2017), gymnastics is almost absent in the school environment. This fact can be explained using different reasons: lack of infrastructure and appropriate materials, poor professional training, unfamiliarity with the theme, and difficulties of teachers in working with this content.

In order to overcome the absence of gymnastics in schools, GFA was an interesting challenge to face in this environment. Valuable body experiences can be acquired, enriching the body culture in children, teenagers, and adults. Because it is a non-competitive discipline and it does not necessarily require a high level of skills, students become interested in GFA and become motivated to learn and to redefine gymnastics in their lives. Social cohesion generated by GFA, well-being, and health improvement maintain the interest of students in this discipline. The experience gained reinforces the meaning of the words “for all” added right after “gymnastics,” since all the competitive character of gymnastics is weakened. Gender, age, and skill diversities not only describe the discipline, but also foster its practice. GFA can be seen widely, which permits a variety of senses and understanding and is always seen as a collective, creative, and playful practice. This discipline is absolutely possible in the school environment.

In the Brazilian context, GFA is a recent practice, so it is necessary to spread it in the academic environment in order to encourage further projects and so that PE offers this rich and playful content during its lessons, enabling valuable body experiences.

Furthermore, the non-competitive practice of gymnastics permitted knowledge, learning, practical experience, and presentation. During six weeks, 240 students broke paradigms and experienced playful, affective, cooperative, and motor moments, while participating in the GFA activities.

Finally, we hope that this text in some form contributes to encouraging gymnastics in PE lessons.

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