MAKING PHYSICAL EDUCATION MEANINGFUL FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS

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Abstract

Are students more or less interested in physical education classes today than they were in the past? How are today's teachers of physical education changing in response to the options and distractions that today's youth are engaged with? This paper discusses how student engagement can be increased and what teachers might do to make their physical education classes more meaningful, engaging, and relevant to their students. If teachers understand why students enjoy physical education, as well as why they may dislike the subject, they can improve their planning and avoid the displeasure some students have towards physical education. Teachers need to listen to their students and offer activities and learning opportunities that appeal to everyone in the classroom. Educators should also provide meaningful exposure to activities that challenge, motivate, and inspire all youth to be active and strive to be healthier and ultimately happier, throughout their lives.

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Introduction

Participation in regular physical activity is important for the prevention of childhood obesity, cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes and is associated with improved physical, mental, and emotional well being (Anderson, 2002; Lyu & Gill, 2011; Springer & Hoelsher, 2009; Thorp, 2013). Given the declining levels of physical activity in the present generation of youth, and the importance of school physical education (PE) in combating this inactivity (Sallis, McKenzie, et al. 2012), it becomes imperative to understand factors that can contribute to increasing student engagement in the physical education classroom. Increasing physical activity through structured physical education classes in school is a great starting point, but only if those classes deliver a quality program (Silverman, 2011). Physical education programs that provide opportunities for a wide variety of physical activity and promote the development of physical activity knowledge, skills, and attitudes are essential components of such a program (Liukkonen, Barkoukis, Watt, & Jaakkola, 2010; Thorp, 2013).

Student engagement has long been accepted in educational research as a primary facilitator of school success and student learning (Bevans, Fitzpatrick, Sanchez & Forrest, 2010). Student engagement is composed of behavioral, affective, and cognitive indicators of students' investment in and connections to their academic environments (Bevans et al., 2010). Engaged learners experience a sense of connectedness with, and as a result make important contributions to, the meaning and value of what is studied (Anderson, 2002). Engagement occurs when students feel that they can interact with the content and realize that their lives are in some way "touched" by the content (Chen, Chen, & Zhu, 2012). Students need to be invited to work with their own reasoning and perspective as well as develop and contribute personal insights that further enrich the understanding they, their fellow learners, and teachers derive from class instruction and the learning experience (Bibik, Goodwin, & Orsega-Smith, 2007). Accordingly, students are recognized as active participants in the learning process rather than simply receptacles for knowledge created by others (Anderson, 2002).

Since teachers often view the learning process differently than students' interpretations, which are based in a reality that has a different context and culture (Bibik et al., 2007), teachers must learn to probe, observe, and listen to cues that go beyond pedagogical and curricular outcomes. Attention to the phenomenological aspects of learning or the real understanding of specific moments when teaching children, requires an attitude of awareness to the things that matter to students, to that which brings teachers in touch with the experiences of students, and ultimately to the "good" contained within such experience (Anderson, 2002). If one goal of teaching is to trigger student engagement, then the teacher must be in touch with the learner's reasoning and feelings about his or her performance and their learning. Both the teacher and student must create a relationship that recognizes and fully appreciates the value of subjective knowledge gained through experience, reflection, dialogue, and experimentation (Anderson, 2002).

In the various physical education environments that PE teachers work in, engaged students persist in active and effortful attempts to master the knowledge and skills that they encounter, with the hope that they will exhibit a preference for and enjoyment of physical activity both during and after formal schooling has concluded. As such, a logical step toward developing effec-

tive physical education programs in schools is to identify student and classroom factors that increase engagement in physical education. Research has identified that perceived physical competence, skill practice with active instruction, and positive interrelationships alongside social motivation are key components that positively affect student engagement in physical education (Lundvall, 2015).

Perceived Physical Competence

Students' perception of their own competence in physical activity, or the degree to which they feel competent in physical movement, exercise, and sport plays a critical role in predicting engagement regarding both in-class and out-of-class activity (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). This relationship has been shown to be reciprocal such that prior feelings of competence in physical education affects subsequent physical activity behavior, and prior behavior affects subsequent perceived competence (Bevans et al., 2010). In addition, body image, a related but conceptually distinct domain of self-concept, is also a positive determinant of physical education engagement and physical activity levels (Silverman, 2011). Defined as confidence in one's own physique and personal appearance, body image is commonly considered a positive outcome of physical activity. PE programs that incorporate physical activities and promote attitudes that foster an environment of mutual respect for each individual can further develop a positive climate for student engagement.

To gain a better understanding of factors affecting student engagement in PE, it is essential to distinguish between student- and system-level facilitators of physical education engagement (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). At the student level, understanding how individual characteristics influence student engagement should guide identification of students in need of engagement-promoting interventions. Garn, Ware, and Solomon (2011) suggested that perceived competence in physical education was

found to positively predict physical activity levels, both directly and through its relation with PE engagement. They also stated that enhanced body image positively influenced physical activity levels by increasing students' engagement in physical education classes (Garn et al., 2011). Therefore, interventions should target students with poor perceived competence and body image beliefs, and PE teachers should focus on eliminating these negative attitudes. Students' self-concept and competence beliefs in physical education are enhanced through teacher and classmate praise and encouragement, as well as when students are provided with opportunities to participate in physical activities without evaluative judgment or summative assessment (Bibik et al., 2007). As such, it is recommended that teachers create a learning environment in which students are encouraged to define success in terms of effort and personal improvement, rather than performance relative to that of other students or pre-determined standards (Furlong & Christenson, 2008).

At the system level, understanding how contextual factors influence student engagement guides the selection of useful instructional strategies for PE teachers (Bevans et al., 2010). Contrary to the core assumptions of sport/game-based curricula, Furlong and Christenson (2008) and Garn et al. (2011) indicated that an overreliance on game play could have negative effects on student engagement in physical education settings. Game play environments typically create a performance-oriented learning environment where students focus on interpersonal competition and view success in terms of winning/losing rather than on improving one's personal best (Garn et al., 2011). Performance climates reinforce normative comparisons, center on interpersonal competition, and generate disengaging consequences for making mistakes or errors (Bevans et al., 2010). Further, emphasis on game play, where only the 'playing' and the 'winning' were the sole foci, demonstrated detrimental effects on PE engagement regard-

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less of students' perceived competence or body image (Anderson, 2002; Chen et al., 2012; Silverman, 2011). As such, physical education teachers should take these research findings surrounding student's perceived physical competence into consideration when developing and structuring their school physical education programs.

Skill Development

During physical education classes, teachers should encourage students to think about what they can do to increase their knowledge and understanding of game play and tactics as well as their individual skill development (Anderson, 2002; Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Solmon, 2006). Introducing a Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) approach, when teaching and learning games, encourages students to think more and engage cerebrally versus only moving their bodies and learning through the psychomotor realm (Alcala & Garijo, 2017). This added level of engagement and student responsibility requires students to be more in tune with their learning and generally increases intrinsic motivation. Mastery climates in physical education focus on skill practice and support hard work, active instruction and learning, cooperation and task mastery, while considering the student as an integral part of the learning process (Springer & Hoelscher, 2009). Within physical education, student engagement can be increased by creating climates that encourage students to define success as a measurement of personal gain (Dyson & Coviello, 2008). Skill development can also be achieved through hard work and a desire to learn. Students feel satisfied when they develop new skills and view mistakes as part of the natu-

ral learning process (Springer & Hoelsher, 2009). Thus, activities focused on skill development with the added level of cognitive involvement can enhance student engagement in physical education. Whereas an overreliance on competitive activities that involve peer comparisons and winning as the primary goal may actually decrease engagement among students, particularly those with initially lower perceived competence (Chen et al., 2012; Thorp, 2013).

Consistent with recommendations for promoting a mastery-oriented learning environment, the proportion of class time devoted to skill practice is positively associated with engagement among students with low perceived competence (Garn et al., 2011; Solmon, 2006). However, research also indicated that it is unrelated to engagement among students with high competence beliefs (Garn et al., 2011; Thorp, 2013). Students developed competence through engagement in mastery tasks, such as skill practice, which facilitated perceived competence and individual motivation to participate in physical education class (Solmon, 2006). Physical education teachers that allocated a much larger proportion of time and resources to skill practice and development as a means of creating a mastery climate enhanced student engagement and activity levels (Bevans et al., 2010).

Despite its prevalence in the current physical education class setting, the amount of time devoted to game play was negatively related to perceived competence and student engagement in physical education (Springer & Hoelsher, 2009). Although significantly less time was devoted to skill practice in PE settings that emphasized gameplay, the proportion of class time spent on developing physical skills is still positively associated with student engagement (Bevans et al., 2010). With respect to the effects of skill practice on student engagement in PE, the amount of class time devoted to inactive instruction was also associated with lower levels of engagement (Garn et al., 2011). Therefore, teachers should reflect on the amount of class time spent describing activities, explaining rules, and demonstrating skills. As these instructional practices decrease student activity levels. However, including students in-class demonstrations, creating relevant lessons, and incorporating peer-teaching opportunities where appropriate can lead to an increase in student engagement (Silverman, 2011; Thorp, 2013).

Relationship Building

Positive relationships and social interactions are vital for students in order to be motivated and engaged in physical education classes. These factors highlight the complex set of personal strivings students have in a physical education setting (Solmon, 2006; Thorp, 2013). The relationship between competence and peer recognition emphasizes the need for physical educators to carefully plan how they structure group or team activities. PE teachers can help to change students' negative attitudes towards physical education through consistently reinforcing the importance of personal competence, stressing improvement over ability, and educating students about accepting skill level diversity (Solomon, 2006). Trying to attain high levels of personal competence is not necessarily associated with seeking to enhance one's peer group standing (Dyson & Coviello, 2008). In other words, students who try and attain high levels of personal competence in skill development were not doing so to try and enhance their own standing within their peer group. PE teachers are encouraged to structure lessons that focus on student imporovement of motor skills, while trying to minimize comparison of ability among students.

Implementing cooperative and smaller-sided games is another strategy to promote social competence for PE students. Since students can gain fulfillment when they feel socially successful and accepted in physical education, teachers must understand the social structures of their classes and plan for learning activities that promote positive interactions. While physical educators may not be able to directly impact a students' social status among peers, providing a social climate of acceptance would likely allow more students to thrive in PE contexts (Garn et al., 2011).

Student motivation can also be seen as an important factor underlying participation in physical activity (Liukkonen et al., 2010). Research has demonstrated that motivation and self-determination are related to persistence and engagement in physical activity (Garn et al., 2011; Springer & Hoelscher, 2009). The importance of motivation is its function in facilitating and enhancing learning achievement (Chen et al., 2012). Liukkonen et al. (2010) suggested that the physical education environment affects students' motivational regulations, which influence student intentions to participate in physical activities. Physical education classes that are appealing to all students emphasize a focus on learning, plan for student development, and

foster positive attitudes toward well-being (Solomon, 2006). Students enjoy physical education when classes are intrinsically motivating and contain a high level of student engagement. As such, physical education teachers should provide a range of activities, a variety of student groupings, and sport-related choices within their classes in order to promote a sense of autonomy and increase levels of self-determination (Bevans et al., 2010).

Research has also demonstrated that enjoyment represents a key factor underlying students' motivation to maintain positive engagement in physical education (Yli-Piipari, Watt, Jaakkola, Liukkonen, & Nurmi, 2009). Enjoyment represents a direct and tangible influence on students' participatory behavior, providing immediate results for being physically active (Thorp, 2013). Enjoyment positively encourages students' behavior and motivates them to participate in physical activity. Through interaction with students and instruction, teachers possess the influence to create and enhance student enjoyment (Smith & St. Pierre, 2009). Educators can also increase enjoyment, and therefore student engagement, by utilizing enthusiasm, sense of humor, and exhibiting outgoing personality traits (Thorp, 2013). Intrinsic motivational strategies, which include giving students a choice in the activities in which they want to participate, modifying activities, and properly challenging all students also increases student engagement (Smith & St. Pierre, 2009). Physical educators can further increase student engagement by providing continued encouragement, acknowledging student involvement in structuring groupings, and incorporating student input regarding lesson planning and assessment methods (Thorp, 2013).

Increasing Student Engagement in Physical Education

Factors that Influence Student Enagagement	What Teachers Can Do
I. Perceived Physical Competence	• Incorporate physical activities and promote attitudes that foster an environment of mutual respect for each individual. • Create a learning environment where students are encouraged to define success in terms of effort and personal gain, rather than performance relative to others. • Limit the amount of gameplay as this performance-oriented learning environment defines success in terms of winning/losing rather than on improving one's best. • Introduce a Teaching Games for Understanding Approach to all game playing lessons. This increases the cerebral component of learning and allows all students the opportunity to be engaged and involved.
II. Skill Development	• Dedicate more class time to skill practice. This is positively associated with engagement among students with low perceived competence. • Ensure a variety of equipment, size and variability are offered to increase student choice and thus opportunity for successful practice opportunities. • Minimize the amount of time describing activities, explaining rules, and demonstrating skills as these practices decrease student activity and student practice time.
III. Relationship Buidling	• PE teachers must be thoughtful about how teams are chosen or groups selected. • Implement cooperative games or smaller-sided games. • Provide a variety of activities and a variety of student groupings, which can foster or promote a sense of autonomy and increase levels of self-determination. • Utilize enthusiasm, exhibiting outgoing personality traits and instilling humor where possible and appropriate.

Implications

Schools may be one of the most powerful systems for the establishment of a physically active lifestyle among youth, and the physical education setting may be the best environment to effect such change (Dyson & Christenson, 2008). Further, student engagement is essential to the success of any educational program, including physical education. Perceived physical competence, skill development, and positive relationship building are key components to positively engage students in physical education. Physical education teachers need to consider these factors by incorporating a variety of instructional strategies and creating an environment where students feel safe and comfortable.

Research indicates that engagement in physical education enhances the frequency and intensity of student physical activity (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). Given this association, activity-promoting physical education programs should be developed with consideration to the student, school, and classroom characteristics that strengthen student engagement over time. Undoubtedly, adequate exposure to high-intensity physical activity is a key contributor to a healthy lifestyle among youth. Students' engagement in physical edcaution is an important target for those physical activity-promoting interventions. Specific physical education instructional strategies such as focusing on enhancing student perceived competence, reducing game play while increasing skill practice in a mastery-oriented climate, and emphasizing the positive social interaction and relationship building within the physical education setting all effectively lead to an increase in student engagement in physical education.

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