The Value of Fun in Physical Activity

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It is a Tuesday morning and the physical education teacher is standing at the door between the locker room and the gymnasium and is directing students to hurry up and change. Students slowly filter into the gym, quietly sit on the bleachers and await further instructions. Six of the 30 students are not dressed to participate; these students climb to the top of the bleachers and sit down, removing themselves from any type of interaction with the activity or the teacher. Once the locker rooms are empty, the teacher takes attendance calling out the name of each student and waiting for a response. The physical education teacher gives instructions to the students to run four laps around the gym and then “circle up” to stretch. While the students stretch on their own, the teacher reviews the volleyball skills from the previous class. The students then are divided into four teams of six by the teacher and game play begins. Students half-heartedly engage in the activity; most students are standing on the crowded court with friends, talking and avoiding the ball when it comes close to them.
In this opening scenario, the teacher may be following the same routine day after day and displaying little enthusiasm or excitement for the upcoming class. Students are following the patterns that have been in place in physical education classes for decades (Gaudreault, 2014; Griffith & Gill, 2006). Activities are chosen by administrators or teachers based on the expertise and interests of the teachers (Withers, 2009). Student performance and participation are minimal, as is the energy level in the gymnasium. A passerby might think, “No one seems to want to be in this class, including the teacher.” This article discusses the implications of fun, socializing and teacher engagement in physical education. Interviews conducted with students from a suburban high school expose their perceptions of fun and socialization during physical education classes.

Fun in Physical Education

In a study by Cothran and Ennis (1997), students ranked fun, good grades and time with friends as their top three outcomes for physical education. In a follow-up study, both students and teachers ranked fun as the number-one objective of a physical education class (Cothran, 2013). While students ranked fun as the main objective for participating in physical education, teachers hoped that if students were having fun, then participation and engagement would increase (Cothran, 2013). Standard 5 of the SHAPE America National Standards states: “The physically literate individual recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction” (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2014). Despite the reference to enjoyment in this National Standard, teachers find it challenging to balance the delivery of content with varying levels of student enjoyment. Additionally, it is difficult to measure enjoyment; thus, teachers tend to focus on the more measurable outcomes of movement skills and fitness (Blankenship & Ayers, 2010).

Broach and McKenney (2012) defined fun from the students’ perspective as, “[a]ctive involvement with others and a feeling of control” (p. 175). Though the theme of fun and enjoyment was prevalent among students and teachers, the notion of fun is a personal perspective, and an activity that might be fun for one student may not be fun for another. Blankenship and Ayers (2010) remarked that while many students find similar activities fun, each student realizes their own challenges as part of the experience. Teachers who are able to work with students individually to develop skills and abilities are likely to nurture continued enjoyment in the activity (Blankenship & Ayers, 2010).

Broach and McKenney (2012) noted that students had fun when social interactions were embedded in the activities. Social interactions included talking with friends during activities, being on a team or in a group with friends, and interacting with students outside their core group of friends. Students categorized activities that did not include a built-in social aspect as “boring” (Broach & McKenney, 2012).

Similar to the findings of Broach and McKenney (2012), the high school students interviewed in this study discussed their views of social engagement and fun during physical education classes. One student noted, “Physical education is the only time we are not quietly sitting at a desk listening to the teacher talk. In [physical education], we get to move around, talk and sometimes be with friends.” The student alludes to the open environment in physical education and the appeal of movement combined with interacting with friends. Students particularly enjoyed the social interactions of the project-challenge unit. One student shared, “You have to work together, and the really shy people that you wouldn’t get to know during school, you get to know them because they get involved in project challenge, while for other activities, they sit out.” Another student revealed, “It’s just fun to be in a group with people you wouldn’t normally interact with otherwise. It is nice to get to know other people.” The ability to share the experience with a friend not only encouraged participation, but also led to increased enjoyment of the activity and continued participation in the activity itself (Bragg, Tucker, Kaye, & Desmond, 2009).

Positive Interactions between Students and Teachers

In addition to being able to socialize with friends during activities, students acknowledged that social interaction with teachers also produced increased levels of fun and participation (Garn & Cothran, 2006). Teachers who were disengaged from the activity or interacted negatively with students reported lower levels of student engagement in physical education classes (Cothran, 2013; Mitchell, 2013). Consequently, a relationship exists between teacher and student actions and interactions. Engaging with students throughout the lesson creates a positive learning environment for student participation, as stated by Mitchell (2013):

When students are the targets of enthusiasm, teachers communicate a genuine pleasure for the presence of the students. This communication begins with welcoming students . . . , and continues with verbal and nonverbal interactions with the students throughout the lesson. (p. 20)

When a teacher acknowledges student effort and gives positive feedback and encouragement to students, the students are likely to recognize that the teacher is engaging in the learning process and possibly motivating students to increase participation levels. One student recounted, “I remember he would always teach how to throw a football and he knew what he was talking about; he would come out and play with us, and help us throw better.” If the teacher is enthusiastic, positive and engaging with students, then the students’ participation in the activity may increase. Students may be more inclined to participate in new activities and learn new skills when the teacher is encour-
aging and supportive. By engaging with students, the teacher can create an environment where students feel safe, supported and validated while trying and learning new skills.

Student energy levels often reflect the energy level of the teacher. To set the scene for a fun, positive, energetic class, one teacher shared, “I must enter the class with a great attitude, energy, and confidence . . . I must make this setting successful because the students do not always enter the gym in this manner” (Garn & Cothran, 2006, p. 291). The teacher sets the atmosphere for the class by being knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the content that will be covered that day. As Garn and Cothran (2006) found, if students perceived the teacher as skillful and knowledgeable in a topic, then the students had fun; if the students perceived the teacher as neither skillful nor knowledgeable in a subject, then the students did not have fun during the activity.

**Selected Curriculum Suggestions**

How can teachers restructure their physical education curriculum to be enjoyable and to increase student participation and engagement levels while teaching valuable skills? First, teachers have the opportunity to set the environment and climate for each class. The teacher’s energy level creates excitement at the beginning of class. Instead of students entering the gymnasium and sitting on the bleachers, they enter the gymnasium, pick up their attendance card, check in, and select an opening activity from the white board. The teacher deliberately plans a variety of activities to give students the opportunity to choose one that is interesting, challenging and possibly relevant to their lives. Simultaneously, teachers are checking in with students individually and offering motivational and specific feedback. Physical educators who interact with students and are aware of student interests are better able to determine developmentally appropriate lessons.

Physical educators who are knowledgeable about content and student skill levels have the opportunity to plan activities that appropriately challenge students. To do so, teachers should be continually learning, exploring new activities and participating in professional development opportunities (Patton & Parker, 2012). Instead of having two games of volleyball with the entire class divided into four teams, setting up multiple stations would allow for a variety of activities that promote individual skill development. Using different instructional models is one way to incorporate instant excitement and student-to-student interaction (Blankenship, 2008). For the purposes of this article, the personalized system of instruction (PSI; Metzler, 2011) and sport education model (SEM; Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2011) will serve as examples of student-centered instructional strategies that can create enjoyable learning experiences for students.

**Using the personalized system of instruction model**

The PSI model (Metzler, 2011) is designed with the purpose of helping students progress through tasks at their own pace. Task presentation, task structure, error analysis and performance criteria are included in each module (Metzler, 2011). The PSI model provides options for a variety of student ability levels and student progress through the tasks individually, rather than as a class, with established timelines. Students must meet predetermined performance criteria before moving on to
the next module (Metzler, 2011). The PSI model offers teachers the opportunity to give students’ individualized instruction and varying amounts of feedback. While students progress through activities at their own pace, teachers are offering support to students who need additional assistance. Individual attention from teachers can lead to positive student–teacher interactions and increased levels of fun for the student.

Before beginning the PSI volleyball unit, the teacher creates a workbook with skills and activities presented in a progressive manner. All of the activities are set up daily, and students move through the skill progression independently. Upon completion of one activity, the student progresses to the next one. Assessments are included at predetermined points in the workbook, and the students must complete these assessments successfully before continuing on to the next set of skills or concepts. The teacher may design and set up stations to provide students with readiness drills, comprehension tasks, criterion tasks, challenge tasks, quizzes and game or match play (Metzler, 2011). Stations may include task cards, worksheets or videos to aid comprehension and correct performance of the tasks. Because students are in smaller groups for practice sessions, the class format lends itself to students communicating and socializing.

Each day when students arrive, they retrieve their workbooks and continue where they left off during the previous class. Assessments are administered based on the students’ progression through the skills to give students the opportunity to master the skill without feeling pressure to keep up with their classmates. Fun can be experienced quite quickly through innovative practices and introductions to activities, but to nurture a desire for extended participation in an activity, certain levels of motor skill competence, knowledge of rules and fitness are needed (Hawkins, 2008). The PSI instructional model can help students gain competency and knowledge through purposeful practice in class and possibly participation beyond school.
Using the sport education model

Another option for high school students is to teach the unit using the SEM (Siedentop et al., 2011). The goals of the SEM are for students to become competent, literate and enthusiastic participants in sport (Siedentop et al., 2011). The implementation of the SEM allows for a more student-directed approach to teaching. Students are assigned to a team, and in addition to membership as a player, each student on the team is assigned a role. Teachers assign roles that emphasize students’ individual strengths. The student is then responsible for all aspects of that role, thus offering students the opportunity to participate in leadership roles. The SEM encourages affiliation with a team, formal competition, recordkeeping and sports journalism among other opportunities, which provides the experience of a sport season and team camaraderie.

The gymnasium setup for the SEM looks different from that for the PSI model. In the SEM, the students are involved in a sports season. After preassessment of students’ skills, the teacher assigns students to a team, and within the team, each student is given a role. Examples of team roles and responsibilities include: 1) the coach, who provides general team leadership and directs skill and strategy practice; 2) the captain, who provides leadership and encouragement to all players; 3) the equipment manager, who is responsible for collecting and returning equipment; 4) the fitness specialist, who leads the daily warm-up and provides the fitness schedule for the season; 5) the statistician, who records performance data, compiles scores, and calculates participant statistics; and 6) the journalist, who writes reports on games and performances. In addition to individual roles, all students on each team are required to be contributing players, scorekeepers and referees.

For example, a student in the position of equipment manager would be an individual who is dependable, organized and reliable. The student would be responsible for meeting with the coach of his or her team before each class and determining what equipment is needed for the upcoming games or practices of the day. The equipment manager is then responsible for gathering, maintaining and returning the equipment to the storage facility at the end of each class. Communication between the coach and the equipment manager is essential to successfully completing the activities of each day.

For some roles, such as the coach, students are responsible for teaching the skills, rules and strategies to the rest of the team, while other roles encourage the use of interdisciplinary skills to calculate team statistics, market tournaments, or compose newsletter articles. To help students with their roles, the teacher schedules meetings to provide information that will assist students in successfully fulfilling their roles. Teachers may meet with coaches to plan practices, captains to talk about role modeling and good sportspersonship, fitness specialists to set up a warm-up and fitness plan for the season, and statisticians to show how to calculate specific data.

Team affiliation and the festivities of sport become an integral part of the unit as well. Teams have their own practice area and equipment. Teams are encouraged to come up with an appropriate team name, color and cheer. During Olympic years, teams may choose to represent a country and use the country’s colors, flag and anthem. Throughout the season, excitement builds and teams appreciate and celebrate the festive atmosphere. The journalist on each team can create portfolios or bulletin boards with biographies of each player, team statistics and rankings as the competition continues throughout the season. In the spirit of fairness, culminating competitions should occur between teams with equal abilities. Instead of playing a full-sided regulation game, each team is responsible for creating smaller teams, where a series of matches is played and the points can be combined to create a team total.

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Conclusion

Student participation is multidimensional; students want to have fun in physical education! Although each student defines fun differently, there are common elements. Students appreciate teachers who are engaged and enthusiastic during class. Students respond to teachers who are excited and passionate about being in class and who are involved in class activities. Students also value teachers who connect with them by providing encouragement, positive feedback and individualized instruction. The ideas provided in this article can guide teachers in developing curricula that meet the needs of students and provide challenging experiences for individual classes and students. Additionally, physical education provides an opportunity for students to interact with one another socially, unlike in other academic subjects. One key component of increasing participation in physical education and continued participation in physical activity is the creation of an enjoyable, positive learning environment.

References


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