

# Structured and Unstructured Contexts in Physical Education: Promoting Activity, Learning, and Motivation

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**P**hysical activity (PA) plays an essential role in the overall health and well-being of youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). Recently, children in the U.S. received a D- for their overall physical activity behaviors (United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHSS], 2018), with nearly 76% failing to get enough physical activity each day (USDHHS, 2016). Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity & Health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019) has recommended that youth participate in at least 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) daily. Physical education (PE) is instrumental in providing opportunities for students to meet these recommendations (Sallis & McKenzie, 2012) and teaches students foundational knowledge and skills needed to make appropriate decisions regarding PA outside of school. Outside of PE, children participate in daily PA during recesses, classroom PA integration lessons, sport or club teams, and/or intramural programs (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2015). This provides an opportunity for physical educators to consider how the benefits of these contexts can inform unique methods that may encourage individuals to value health and PA for a lifetime.

Identifying and implementing strategies to enhance motivation in PE is key to developing interest and enjoyment of PA for a lifetime. Therefore, physical educators must make informed decisions regarding the instructional practices they employ to ensure youth are meeting the PE national standards and PA guidelines. SHAPE America (2015) has recommended that instructional practices aim to “maximize PA and keep students engaged in MVPA for at least 50% of the lesson” (SHAPE America, 2015, p. 6). Notably, physical educators must also account for other recommendations (e.g., consistent assessment of learning to improve practice and inclusion for students with special needs/disabilities) that demand renewed perspectives. Exploring instructional strategies that implement a variety of PA contexts may offer insight into how physical educators could address the issue. The purpose of this article is to: (1) discuss the benefits of presenting unstructured PA features during PE, and (2) present multiple pedagogical strategies for implementing an unstructured PA context for increased motivation and enjoyment in the PE classroom.

## Structured and Unstructured

PA may be organized into two broad contexts: structured and unstructured. Structured PA is planned with objectives or foci in mind, whereas unstructured PA is commonly known as free-time or leisure play. Some view structured PA as deliberate, planned and highly organized with continuous guidance from an instructor. Clearly, one opportunity for youth to engage in structured PA during school is PE. Other forms of structured PA may include classroom brain breaks, organized sports, intramurals, and before- and after-school programs. Most school-based PA is delivered in a structured manner traditionally, except recess. The case for a structured environment during PE is founded on the notion that this setting increases

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the ability to meet various learning objectives. In addition, recent research has demonstrated that structured activity in PE has shown to deliver adequate amounts of MVPA (Hall, McDonald, Hay, Defries, & Pryce, 2016; Shen et al., 2018).

There are numerous advantages for youth to engage in structured PA contexts. First, structured PA contexts provide students with expectations and routines that are well-defined and organized, as well as with ample guidance during their efforts. Receiving explicit instruction and encouragement during bouts of PA, such as in the traditional PE setting, can enhance motivation, enjoyment, and one's sense of purpose (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Simonton, Garn, & Solmon, 2017; Webster, Mindrila, & Weaver, 2011). Research has shown positive associations between high self-efficacy and PE enjoyment with structured PA (Barr-Anderson et al., 2007). Leading to an increased sense of belonging and social satisfaction (Kinder, Gaudreault, Wade, Jenkins, & Woods, 2019), prior research has indicated that structured contexts offer youth adequate amounts of health-enhancing PA (Dudley, Okley, & Cotton, 2012; Hall et al., 2016; Scruggs, Beveridge, & Watson, 2003). Scholars have also found that youth engage in a vast amount of PA during a variety of unstructured contexts (Beighle, Morgan, Masurier, & Pangrazi, 2006; Mitchell, Gray, & Inchley, 2015; Mota & Esculcas, 2002).

Students typically spend upwards of 8 hours each day in the structured environment of school; however, a large portion of daily PA engagement for youth is accumulated outside of school in primarily unstructured contexts (Tudor-Locke, Lee, Morgan, Beighle, & Pangrazi, 2006). The central element to unstructured PA context is that an instructor or coach does not determine the conditions, rules and pace. Opportunities for children to engage in unstructured PA during school includes recesses, before and after school, and free time. Various studies have examined children's PA during unstructured contexts throughout different times of the school day (Barr-Anderson et al., 2007; Beighle et al., 2006; Flohr, Todd, & Tudor-Locke, 2006; Gutierrez et al., 2016; Mota & Esculcas, 2002; Tudor-Locke et al., 2006; Woods, Graber, Daum, & Gentry, 2016). Overall, these results highlight the numerous opportunities that have the potential to contribute to youth's daily PA attainment.

Youth often seek to engage in activities that allow them to showcase their creativity and independence. Characteristics of unstructured contexts provide alternative experiences to improve students' decision making, communication and problem-solving skills in autonomous environments. Children and adolescents are intrinsically driven to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct goal-directed activities when learning in unstructured environments (Theobald et al., 2015). Because of this, unstructured PA presents opportunities for children to explore and engage in PA in a manner not facilitated by structured PA. Specifically, unstructured PA permits children opportunities to interact, modify and manipulate their environment to attain positive outcomes and maximize pleasure (Sternberg, 2005). These defining characteristics have the potential to enhance youth's value of participation in quality PA experiences.

Programs that promote positive experiences through unstructured formats could optimize the way youth understand the value of PA. More often than not, the instructional climate of PE is viewed as sacredly structured. Unstructured PA and learning seem quite contradictory to one another, but perhaps providing more unstructured PA opportunities could lead to sustained motivation and enjoyment that will translate into a lifetime of movement engagement. Consequently, discovering how to leverage the defining characteristics of unstructured PA during PE requires careful consideration. Please consider that the discussion of implementing unstructured PA experiences in the following sections does not reflect free time.

## Unstructured PA in PE

Allowing students to engage in unstructured PA during PE lessons does not have to associate with the classic model of a roll-out-the-ball educator. To be clear, we are advocating that physical educators consider including bouts of unstructured PA within PE lessons when appropriate and without compromising a focus on skill development. We are not offering that teachers move toward “non-teaching” and deliver lessons that are composed solely of unstructured PA time. We believe that physical educators who creatively plan and implement unstructured PA can still keep in mind the primary goal of developing physically literate individuals. SHAPE America (2014) has recommended that individuals receive PE through deliberate, well-designed tasks focused on acquiring skills in a mastery-focused climate. Perhaps physical educators may explore unique approaches to offer students more unstructured PA, which still fits under the confines of a well-designed plan aimed at meeting specific learning outcomes, thus emulating an ideal mastery-focused climate. Planning tasks that incorporate distinct unstructured PA contextual features may elicit learning different knowledge, skills and behaviors that are difficult to meet in a more structured educational climate. Physical educators who creatively employ unstructured learning episodes in their lessons attempt to shift from the traditional instructional approach and aim to meet all student needs.

Integrating unstructured PA in PE requires thoughtful consideration of how to introduce this type of task relative to their specific context. The four standard task functions (i.e., inform, extend, refine and apply) centered on Rink’s (2006) content development process. For example, a physical educator may attempt to integrate unstructured learning into various stages of a lesson across the various task function (see Table 1). For this example, the word “unstructured” is interchanged with the term “student-focused application time.” Undoubtedly, certain lessons or units are more equipped for this modified instructional strategy, but the success of integrating this type of activity into a lesson is dependent on the ability of the teacher to remain flexible and to

relinquish some control. Students are granted more autonomy by providing them choice and voice that allows them to interact, deconstruct and make decisions in the unstructured PA context. A critical aspect to consider is the more accustomed students become to autonomously engage in unstructured activities, the less time is spent listening to instruction, and more time being active and receiving quality support. Creatively integrating features of the unstructured context that students prefer over structured could potentially maximize motivation to engage in PA behaviors long-term.

PE should be attempting to mimic positive factors of unstructured PA contexts reported by students, due to the correlation of increased motivation and enjoyment in this type of activity. The ability to incorporate central characteristics of unstructured activities that lead to enjoyment in movement may potentially resemble activities students select after their K–12 experience. This environment provides students a chance to develop and apply self-management skills, experience autonomy, and interact positively in a less controlled environment. The conditions of the unstructured environment provided by the physical educator may more accurately reflect the activity preference of students after K–12 PE.

The student-focused application type tasks allow students to feel challenged with easy-to-complex decision-making tasks that involve less instruction from the teacher. Student-focused application time may require students to select and modify rules, conditions, environment, or equipment and select type of activity or foci with supervision from the teacher. At this time the physical educator should focus on providing deliberate suggestions for fair play, giving positive, individualized feedback, utilizing authentic assessment, and most importantly, stimulating higher levels of PA engagement. Of course, implementing student-focused application time should not occur in each lesson, but it may be a worthwhile addition. Physical educators who offer unique and innovative opportunities to engage students in unstructured learning formats may facilitate PA participation for a lifetime.

Applying an unstructured PA opportunity in a setting primarily known for structure may elicit meaningful experiences that

**Table 1.**  
**Example of Lesson Plan That Includes Unstructured, Student-Focused Application Time**

Lesson Structure	Example Content	Emphasis Examples
Instant Activity	<i>Throwing tag</i> – intended to increase time spent in MVPA, work with a partner, practice throwing	Activity Time/Practice ( <i>Competence/Autonomy</i> )
Introduction Task	-Skill: Throwing -Focus on skill cues -Hitting a large target	Learning/Practice ( <i>Competence</i> )
Extension Tasks	-Increase distance -Increase force -Decrease size of target	Challenge/Practice ( <i>Competence/Autonomy</i> )
Refinement Tasks	-Highlight follow through -Dropping shoulder when trying to be precise	Learning/Practice ( <i>Competence</i> )
Lesson-Focused Application Task	-Throwing to a partner while moving against a single defender	Activity Time/Learning ( <i>Competence/Relatedness</i> )
<b>Student-Focused Application Task</b>	-Students are told to create a game or individual activity that focuses uses movement and throwing	Activity Time/Affect ( <i>Autonomy/Relatedness</i> )
Lesson Closure	-Learning components of lesson -Affective challenges during student centered time	Learning/Affect



contribute to developing the whole child. As previously stated, the action of implementing unstructured PA in PE will require educators to relinquish control — however, not all control. We suggest that practitioners consider the importance of utilizing features of unstructured opportunities to meet specific learning outcomes and increase student's daily PA. An individual may value certain facets of PA that are prominent characteristics exclusive to unstructured contexts. Furthermore, this approach forces physical educators to attempt charting new territory to meet learning objectives that are difficult to achieve in a more traditional, structured setting. In the following sections we provide benefits and examples or combining the structured and unstructured components within PE.

### Learning and PA Occur Simultaneously

Teaching PE through different contexts to maximize students' motivation and enjoyment does not deviate from the primary goal of PE. The focus in PE is not solely PA, but to provide students with the ability (1) learn the skills that they need to become competent movers; (2) view physical activity as meaningful and enjoyable; (3) confidence in participating in physical activity; and (4) discover physical activities that cultivate the habits that lead to being active for a lifetime (USDHHS, 2010). Despite our strategy of implementing PA through unstructured contexts, this approach does not support compromising learning for PA. Instead, our recommendations hope to stimulate increased motivation and enjoyment that allow students the chance to learn and apply movement through innovative instructional methods.

Planning lessons that aim to increase the time students engage in PA while learning the skills and movement concepts may be easier said than done. Consequently, physical educators must be looking for innovative ways to integrate more PA into their lessons. One such strategy is by offering contexts that mirror unstructured PA and delivering a semi-unstructured version of play-practice-play. This method is quite popular and utilized in several evidence-based curricular/

instructional models, such as the Tactical Games Model (Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2013) or Sport Education Model (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2011). Play-practice-play refers to giving students ample game form opportunities and then utilizing game form success/inefficiency to teach students. The key to this format is utilizing small-sided games (2 vs. 2 over 5 vs. 5) and utilizing questioning as teaching.

Students are capable of attaining high levels of PA through multiple game form opportunities. Allowing students to take charge and have voice in game selection, conditions and rule setting, or pace will leave students feeling challenged and motivated to improve through practice. When utilizing these models, sport does not have to be the only focus. For those physical educators who want to offer curriculum beyond traditional sports, the semi-unstructured play-practice-play format can also be used. Exploration of an unstructured approach during the play segment of this model can be implemented with PA or skill development as still the central focus. Teachers can follow up on these opportunities with questions or problem-solving prompts and challenge students to teach their peers before letting them re-enter play. Again, considering the ability to offer students unstructured formats is not concerned with engaging students in more PA or learning, but rather embedding them together.

### Using Affective Learning Objectives to Promote PA

Social factors play an integral role in the PA behaviors of youth and adults. There is some evidence to suggest a direct relationship between adolescents' social networks and PA levels (Voorhees et al., 2005). A recent study found social connections with peers to be a primary source of enjoyment in structured and unstructured PA opportunities for children (Kinder et al., 2019). Providing opportunities for youth to interact and communicate in structured and unstructured play with friends, mentors and other peers could increase students' motivation and PA behavior. In congruence, youth who have more physically active friends



report higher levels of PA enjoyment (Salvy, De La Haye, Bowker, & Hermans, 2012). Furthermore, specific emphasis on the affective domain of learning within PE can positively impact students' social experience. Students who can effectively interact personally and socially will have more enjoyable and motivating PA experiences (Bailey, 2006).

National Standards 4 and 5 require demonstrating appropriate personal and social behavior by exhibiting respect of self and others, and they focus on student recognition and value of PA for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction (SHAPE America, 2014). The unstructured PA context presents multiple advantages to meet objectives in the affective domain. Focusing on personal and social interaction during unstructured PA contexts in class may have a positive effect on the students' motivation to continually engage in outside of school PA opportunities. There is a reason to believe that if students can create appropriate rules, accept others who are less skilled, and handle conflict during play, the experience will be far more enjoyable. In return, a positive social interaction or experience could be the driving force to their continued enjoyment of movement.

### Practical Considerations and Examples

Integrating a well-planned, unstructured PA opportunity during PE may be a way to provide students with a setting to practice leadership, group work, and self-directed activities. Another strategy to consider is offering students an opportunity to engage in an unstructured "recess bout" within a skill-focused lesson once per month. In these sessions students would be instructed to self-select one of the previously performed tasks within the lesson during skill practice, doing so independently with the option of choosing to select another and different tasks at their own discretion and on their own time. This bout of unstructured PA (lasting no longer than 3–5 minutes) would allow students to engage in activities that

are available during recess while also practicing skills, meanwhile exposing students to appropriate personal and social behaviors needed in such environments. A "recess bout" during PE provides additional time to observe students in an authentic PA setting. This permits the physical educator to support students through the process of resolving issues that frequently arise during recess periods. Lastly, giving students options to work by themselves or with peers could help them appreciate and find value in PA. As children age, the desire for social interaction with peers becomes a significant determinant in whether they choose to engage in certain types of PA. When focusing on the affective domain, physical educators must work to develop an environment that fosters relatedness (Cox, Duncheon, & McDavid, 2013), thus enhancing the enjoyment.

Physical educators must attempt to promote relatedness for youth in novel approaches to assist them with feeling empowered to move. Creating favorable conditions for inclusion in an unstructured PA environment may maximize participation and student learning for those who may not be confident movers. Physical educators willing to change an environment to fit the needs of students are more likely to cultivate connections. Unstructured PA or student-focused application time in PE allows teachers to focus on aspects such as (1) how learners are grouped (pairs, small groups, co-ed, large groups), (2) teaching by intra-task variation (inclusivity), (3) reducing or removing restrictions on how to organize learners, or (4) providing children choice. Beyond promoting an inclusive environment that focuses on relatedness, teachers must initiate students to self-direct and initiate organized PA experiences by themselves during the student-centered application time.

### Conclusions

This article presented the benefits of unstructured PA and provided suggestions for innovative strategies for embedding

unstructured activities within PE lessons without sacrificing skill development as the focus of a quality physical education program. Offering children opportunities to engage in PA in both unstructured and structured formats may provide a sense of value to engage in PA. Enhancing children's motivation and enjoyment is a result of feeling positive affective experiences (e.g., autonomy, competence, relatedness) in learning experiences of varying contexts. Providing students with unstructured PA opportunities that mimic positive characteristics of recess and free time may alter their perception of the value of PA, which has the possibility of translating to enhanced engagement within PE contexts. PE may be able to bridge the gap between PE experiences and PA behaviors outside of school if physical educators consider how to find ways to include unstructured PA opportunities within skill-focused PE lessons. Rather than positioning PA and PE in opposition to one another, we advocate that physical educators begin to contemplate what innovative practices in PE will maximize students' PA engagement and, ultimately, increase children's value placed on being physically active.

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