

PEDAGOGIES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND WELLNESS:  
HOW TEACHERS PROMOTE SECONDARY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN PHYSICAL  
EDUCATION AND WELLNESS

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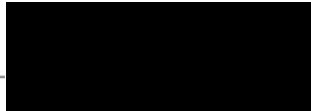
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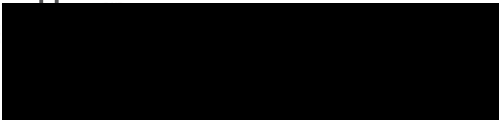
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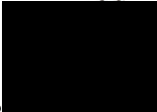
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**Dedication**

This work is dedicated to past, present, and future physical educators.

*“It takes each of us to make a difference for all of us.”*

*~ Jackie Mutcherson*

*“Intelligence and skill can only function at the peak of their capacity*

*when the body is healthy and strong.”*

*~ John F. Kennedy*

### **Abstract**

Student participation in physical education programs often diminishes when the course becomes an elective in high school. Throughout the history of physical and health education, there have been numerous pedagogical shifts, resulting in differing levels of student engagement. At the centre of these shifts were physical educators striving to create meaningful and purposeful physical education and wellness experiences. This intention is the foundation for the question driving this research project: *How do teachers promote secondary student engagement in physical education?* Through this meta-ethnographic study, I inquired into novel practices for physical educators to blend various strategies into meaningful physical education experiences for both students and teachers. Examining my own experiences, and in speaking with three physical educators with diverse backgrounds, I discovered the importance of balance, differentiation, and language. By acquiring a firm understanding of these components in connection to physical education pedagogies, a teacher may provide a more purposeful, relevant, and long-lasting impact on a student's motivation to continue their physical education through their life.

*Keywords: teacher, student, physical education, pedagogies, engagement, language*

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## **Preface**

The importance of developing life-long skills and awareness of healthy living is at the forefront of my values as an educational leader. Given the physical and mental health crises affecting the world today (Solmi et al., 2022), it is important to have an informed understanding of the impact that maintaining engagement in physical activity has on a person's health throughout their life. In Canadian society, the concepts of health and wellness have a multitude of descriptions, creating difficulty in assigning a universal definition and a concrete comprehensive physical education (PE) curriculum to implement in schools. By providing a historical review of the development of PE and comprehensive health in schools, connections are made regarding student engagement and how physical educators maintain and promote this engagement in their PE classes. In conversation with the literature, participants, and self-reflection, a path forward in the universality of PE pedagogies emerged.

## **Coming to the Research**

As a physical educator, I have centred my pedagogy on a combination of student participation, engagement, and performance rather than strictly assessing their ability to execute a skill. In my years of teaching and coaching various sports teams, I have recognized the value of positive feedback relating to an athlete's capacity to perform. In the case of team sports and PE classes, I have come to understand that creating a positive environment where a student or athlete can feel success and enjoyment without the stress of meeting a teacher's or coach's expectation to perform at a certain level has had a significant impact on not only participation but also skill development. In my experience, when students feel safe enough to take risks, they can tap into a level of participation and growth that they might not otherwise be able to achieve.



A large component of team sports and PE classes is being exposed to a large space, filled with peers and expectations, which has the potential to affect a student's ability to engage fully in their participation. These factors, however, are frequently outside the PE teacher's control. Teachers, particularly physical educators, are on the front line of effecting change in a students' construction of their meaning of PE and subsequent encouragement of developing life-long skills in choosing healthy behaviours (Hunt & Metzler, 2017). In this research, I sought innovative approaches for physical educators to blend various practices into universally meaningful PE experiences for both students and teachers.

### **Literature Review**

To grasp the complexities of how physical educators foster student engagement in PE, it's important to understand where physical health and fitness first appeared in education, as well as the evolution of modern PE pedagogies. Throughout my studies and life experiences, I have come to appreciate the importance of having PE as a comprehensive program that includes both physical health and fitness, as well as mental and spiritual well-being. This form of education, however, has only emerged in the last century. To fully comprehend its significance and impact on student health and engagement, one must first examine its origins. Students' experiences in a modern-day PE program can be linked to this historical review, stimulating discourse about how to inspire youth and adults to cultivate and nourish a healthy and active lifestyle.

### **A History of Comprehensive Physical Education**

#### ***Medical Inspections and European Influences***

Although the merging of medicine and children's education dates back to the 1850s, it was not until the 1900s that this collaboration was fully realized. Concerns about the health of school children became more prominent at the turn of the century as illnesses spread faster due to

urbanization (Allensworth, 1995). As a result of these concerns, there was a shift toward integrating medical interventions into schools. Through the early 1900s, a change in education occurred to include medical inspections of children in schools. Kirk (1998) examined this shift in Australia, and Hay et al. (2020) recalled Dr. Bryce's<sup>1</sup> work in early Canada. The "medical inspections model," which was applied in Australia and Canada (among other nations) at the time, was a spark to the development of a comprehensive model - although it was not without its flaws. Hay et al. (2020) resurface the inequity endured by Indigenous students in Residential Schools in Canada, describing how Dr. Bryce's medical inspections found "one quarter of all Indigenous children attending residential schools [to have] died of tuberculosis" (p. 223), which was ignored and neglected by the government. Though the research was promising in terms of gaining knowledge of children's health, such systemic discrimination and injustice remained overwhelming and continues to this day.

While the efforts of Dr. Bryce are admirable, the gap remained regarding the understanding of health and wellness in Indigenous culture and communities. A framework to aid in examining and comprehending Indigenous ways of knowing regarding health and wellness comes from the *First Nations Health Authority* [FNHA].

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<sup>1</sup> As the first Chief Medical Officer for the Ministry of the Interior, Dr. Bryce advocated for Indigenous youth in residential schools. In 1907, he brought his recommendations of better health and living conditions to the government, but little progress was made. In 1922, Dr. Bryce published *The Story of a National Crime*, highlighting the broken promises of the BNA Act, for which it took the Government of Canada eighty-six years to apologize (Hay et al., 2020).

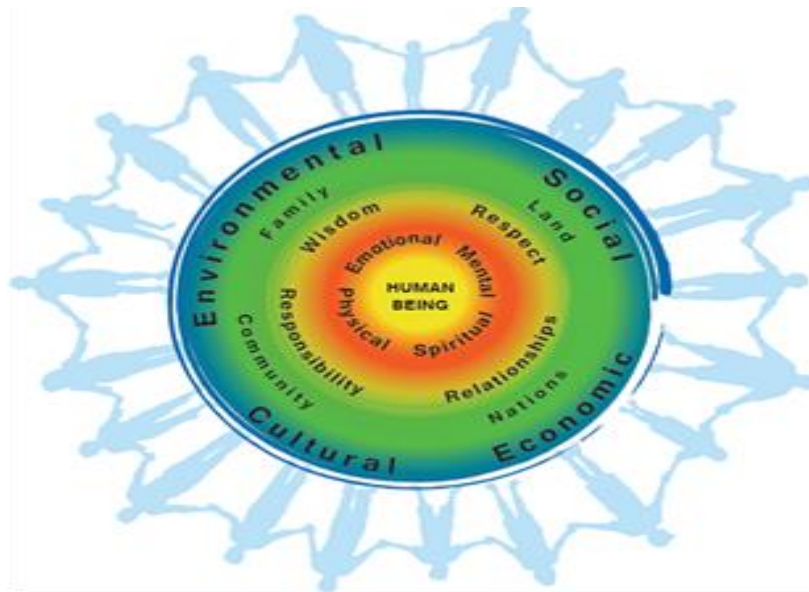


Figure 1: *The First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness (FNHA, 2021).*

As depicted in Figure 1, this model begins with the human being at the centre immediately followed by four wellness components: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. It is the fourth concept, spiritual, that is not considered when describing a person's health and wellness as is exemplified in Dr. Bryce's reports. This framework provides a foundation for the consolidation of Eurocentric wellness models and a model anchored in Indigenous ways of knowing to create balance and awareness to the complexities of PE, health, and wellness. This amalgamation, however, continues to be a work in progress as this literature review illustrated the strong European influences on the development of PE and health in North America.

According to Welch (2004), several European gymnastics systems dominated PE programming in North America during the latter half of the nineteenth century. "In general, from 1865-1900, American [PE] was guided largely by European influences [... with] the main objective [of promoting] better health through exercise, thereby enhancing the quality of life" (Welch, 2004, p. 110). Two systems were compared, both centring heavily on movement through gymnastics and military-style training. The German system, introduced first, implemented an approach to PE lessons consisting of general class exercises (such as marching in various forms),

games, and concluding with individually chosen and performed exercises (such as running, hopping, dancing). Contrarily, Welch (2004) described the Swedish system encompassing more body positioning movements based on physiological principles, for instance balance movements, shoulder-blade movements, abdominal exercises, and respiratory exercises. Welch (2004) contested both systems were incremental in the development of PE at the time, but by the 1910s, the author stated:

Dr. Thomas D. Wood of Columbia University charged that the existing program was ineffective because of three major reasons: 1) It purported to achieve postural and corrective results through formal movements in class exercises which are unsatisfactory [and it would] be more advantageous to employ more natural and spontaneous exercises. 2) There was too much attention [on] the body to the detriment of one's personality and attitude development. 3) The activities developed abilities not closely related to the activities of daily living (p. 117).

With this philosophy growing in popularity, the focus of PE shifted from movements and strength training to a more holistic approach addressing “child development, needs, and interests” (Welch, 2004, p. 117).

### ***Natural Physical Education and the Three-Component Model***

Clark Hetherington (1921) is often considered one of the founding philosophers of PE as a part of holistic education. In the early shift from subject-based PE to one of play and development of the whole child, Hetherington (1921) posited PE to consist of four main functions: to develop character through experience, develop intellect, develop psycho-motor mechanisms, and develop “organic power” through activities. Hetherington (1921) stated, “[PE] because of the nature of the activities it directs, is changed with training for self-direction in the

standards of social behaviour and of hygiene” (p. 526). This emphasis on holistic development, as opposed to strictly physical fitness, provided a pathway toward a more comprehensive approach to teaching PE programming.

Additionally, from the 1920s to the 1980s, a three-component model surfaced, encompassing health instruction, health services, and a healthy environment. This comprehensive PE and health education focused on improving the understanding of health principles and modifying health-related behaviours. A healthy environment considered the “physical and the psychological setting and such issues as safety, nutrition, food service, and a positive learning atmosphere” (Allensworth, 1995, pp. 13-14). Allensworth (1995) explored a history of school health in the USA from the 1920s to the 1980s: “In the 1920s, over 73% of [...] schools taught health directly under the name of ‘health’ or ‘hygiene’ [and correlated] content in their health curriculum to other subjects such as language, civics, reading, [PE], general science, and art” (p. 10). Much of the growth in PE and health education came from the rise in health concerns after the world wars. Welch (2004) explained an upsurge in testing in PE after WWI, as it is an integral piece in evaluating the success of the program and subsequently its students. The author described the use of this testing into two categories: “classification tests to determine an individual’s capacity in relation to a standard [and] achievement tests [measuring] what the individual could do which included the knowledge and skills possessed at the time the test was administered” (Welch, 2004, p. 122). Similarly to other school subjects, the administration of testing to a standard allowed for an evaluation of varying PE pedagogies and curriculum.

In the 1960s, the School Health Education Study initiated the inclusion of school nurse practitioners, and concepts such as “human growth and development, personal health practices, accidents and disease, food and nutrition, mood-altering substances, and the role of the family in

fulfilling health needs” (Allensworth, 1995, p. 11) into health education in schools, as illustrated by the three-component model of school health. Fascinatingly, as PE and health education moved toward an emphasis on child development, there was an additional shift in the 1950s and 1960s toward including a variety of sports techniques in PE. Kirk (2012) explained this change was “due to a complex interplay of forces, ranging from the school timetable and the subject-centred academic curriculum to the sheer number and diversity of physical activities” (p. 3). Though PE and health education began to incorporate more holistic approaches to developing physical literacy in young people, there continues to be a need for a universal understanding of the purpose of PE and health education.

### *Pedagogical Models and The Eight-Component Model*

With the developing research in school health and PE programs through the 1960s to the 1990s, the three-component model needed enhancing. Allensworth (1995) described this expansion as the eight-component model for school health. In this framework, health instruction is extended to include not only the physical, but the mental, emotional, and social health of students in a planned Kindergarten to grade 12 curricula. Furthermore, this framework develops the components of PE, nutrition services, health promotion for staff, counselling, psychological and social services, and community involvement (Allensworth, 1995). A rise in parental and community involvement, coupled with an increase in health services and education, gave schools the potential to provide a space in which many agencies worked together to maintain the well-being of young people.

What I question about this time period, however, is the continued use of sport-based PE as the dominant pedagogical model. Kirk (2012) attested a problem with this approach to PE, deeming it one-size fits all, with the “range of cognitive, affective, health, social, and motor skill

learning outcomes [that were and continue to be] pursued [use] the same programs, typically short units of work, focused on techniques” (p. 5) which cater to a learner who thrives on a directive teaching style. Moreover, Kirk (2012) explained though physical educators may implement varying pedagogical approaches, such as sport-technique-based, or models-based (seeking to align subject matter and teaching strategies to reach an individual), there remains to be a lack of practical implementation in the field. Again, I question if the shift to the individual occurred in the field of health education, why has that not transferred in practicality for physical educators?

### ***The Full-Service Model and Comprehensive School Health***

In the continued movement for comprehensive PE and health education, through the early 1990s the Wheel of Wellness (WOW) model and the Comprehensive Whole Person Wellness Model (WPWM) (Wickramarathne et al., 2020) came into play. The WOW model was introduced by J. Melvin Witmer and Thomas J. Sweeney to emphasize longevity, prevention, and growth throughout one’s life. This model was designed to centre oneself in spirituality, branching out into the widely known six dimensions of wellness: emotional, intellectual, vocational, physical, social, and spiritual (Wickramarathne et al., 2020). Additionally, this model was partially organized via the influence of Alfred Ardell’s model, divided into meaning and purpose, self-responsibility, nutritional awareness, relationship dynamics, and physical fitness. As Wickramarathne et al. (2020) noted, self-direction and behavioural growth were the central points of the WOW model. Evolving from a “wheel” of wellness, in 2002 Jay Montague, Wiley Piazza, Kim Peters, and Tony Poggiali introduced the comprehensive WPWM. This model was organized similarly to that of the WOW model; however, Wickramarathne et al. (2020) illustrated the interconnectedness of the centre and the six wellness dimensions. This expanded

upon the notion of a person simply existing with six individual health and wellness aspects and dove into “a comprehensive whole-person approach to wellness [that emphasized] humans as multidimensional beings” (Wickramaratne et al., 2020, p. 194). At first thought, when applying such a model in PE and health curricula one might focus too narrowly on the physical dimension minimizing the holistic nature of a comprehensive approach.

The Coalition of National Health Organizations and the American Academy of Pediatrics assembled a group of representatives to form the Association for the Advancement of Health Education in 1990 (Allensworth, 1995). This committee was tasked with reviewing and updating terminology as well as supplying new terms to be used in the field of health education, from which derived the following definition of comprehensive school health (CSH):

A [CSH] program is an organized set of policies, procedures, and activities designed to protect and promote the health and well-being of students and staff [and should] include, but not be limited to, guidance and counselling, [PE], food service, social work, psychological services, and employee health promotion.

(Allensworth, 1995, p. 15)

Employing a CSH framework in schools, according to Allensworth (1995), is synonymous with the terminology of full-service schools. He argued, “The exact nature and configuration of services and resources offered will vary from place to place, but services should thoroughly address the unique needs of each particular school and community—hence the title Full-Service Schools” (Allensworth, 1995, p. 17). In his work, Kirk (2012) argued the “traditional teacher-centred multi-activity, sport-technique-based form of [PE] cannot easily facilitate the development of these key psychological characteristics [perceived competence and motivation] in young people” (p. 6). In concurrence with the sentiments of Kirk (2012), although there are



other forms of teaching PE and health education, such as comprehensive physical health and wellness programming, the sport-technique-based model appears to remain dominant to this day.

### ***Modern Physical Education and Wellness***

Over the last half-century, physical fitness and health education has transformed from an individual, developmental approach to providing supportive communal and physical settings for students to flourish. Veugelers and Schwartz (2010) explored this continued development in schools across Canada. The authors described schools as vehicles preparing young people for the world beyond the school's walls. Furthermore, since education falls under provincial ruling, it is important for these governments to apply a holistic framework of PE in curriculum development to ensure the best possible experiences for youth. For example, the Alberta Government has recently taken action in this regard. A draft curriculum for PE and Wellness was launched in March 2021, updated in December 2021, and is to be released in the fall of 2022. "It focuses on developing the whole individual and nurturing students in pursuing a healthy and active life" (Alberta Education, 2022). The draft presents a shift from separate PE and health curricula to a combined program that supports the development of physical literacy, nutrition, and mental well-being. To contribute meaningfully to good physical health and wellness education, it is critical that teachers receive an equal opportunity to implement comprehensive physical fitness and health education through professional development, particularly regarding PE teachers.

Physical educators have a crucial role in helping foster an environment where students feel motivated and excited to continue to participate in physical activity. Hunt and Metzler (2017) take the concept of CSH further and delve into its implication in a PE setting through a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program [CSPAP]. The authors explained a CSPAP to incorporate quality PE and physical activity throughout the school day and outside school hours.

As evidenced in their work, Hunt and Metzler (2017) noted more research is needed to answer the question of application and practicality, “which can be best addressed by those standing on the front lines of CSPAP implementation: the PE teachers” (p. 334). Students become stronger advocates for their own learning when the emphasis is placed on their unique needs and abilities. This can be achieved through a CSPAP backed by properly trained PE teachers.

### **Student Participation in Physical Education**

With this historical review of the development of physical fitness and health education, the connections can be made to the students’ experiences in modern-day PE programs. There has been a wide range of research on student engagement in PE programs, which has prompted discourse on motivation for pursuing and maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle in children and adults.

Sulz et al. (2010) examined the influences impacting a student’s choice to enroll in an elective PE program. The key elements influencing behaviour toward physical activity and fitness, according to Sulz et al. (2010), are “intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, communal, and public policy” (p. 2). Several themes emerged for each component, including a lack of information about the PE program for the coming years, self-efficacy, personal class schedule, past experiences, peer influence, and opportunities to be physically active outside of school. All of which, as the authors point out, would necessitate distinct intervention strategies, emphasizing the importance of avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” model in teaching and curriculum. Sulz et al. (2010) explained that from a social standpoint, many students are influenced by their peers both positively and negatively. In their research, the authors noted a major factor for female-identifying<sup>2</sup> student enrollment was the “type of students intending to enroll [...] described as

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<sup>2</sup> To normalize and promote inclusivity, the terms female-identifying and male-identifying are used throughout the paper in place of binary genders.

athletic, naturally skinny, fit, overachievers, and people who succeed at everything, especially sports” (p. 9), making the students feel self-conscious about their abilities. Furthermore, regarding male-identifying student enrolment, Sulz et al. (2010) explored one of the interpersonal influences as their PE teachers would take the time to explain the curriculum for the coming year, encouraging their students to continue to enroll in their PE program.

Gruno and Gibbons (2016) delved into a narrative study of a female-identifying high school student’s decision to continue in an elective PE program. The authors remarked on four themes: variety and cooperation within the course content, having a fun and welcoming environment, fair and private assessment, and social safety and competence. The authors found that “in essence, a girl’s perceptions of competence influence whether she will remain engaged in an activity” (p. 162). According to the authors, there must be an emphasis on listening, acknowledging, and putting into action the lessons learned from the stories shared by students, particularly those of female-identifying adolescents, to encourage a desire to develop and maintain a physically active lifestyle.

Sulz et al. (2010), also evidenced by Gruno and Gibbons (2016), noted the lack of literature regarding PE participation among male-identifying students, as female-identifying students have a higher decline in their engagement in physical activity with increasing age. Moreover, research needs to be engaged with students who do not identify within gender binaries. Although there have been positive steps in the direction of inclusion and diversity, there continues to be a gap in the understanding of how educators, and those in the education field, must normalize the complexities of gender identity. Drury et al. (2022) examined the implications of this matter. The authors explained the lack of professional development in the area of inclusion specifically in PE regarding students outside gender binaries and stated, “PE

teachers felt they lacked the knowledge and experience required to facilitate safe and inclusive learning environments for [non-binary] young people” (p. 11). Drury et al. (2022) noted though, that regardless of this feeling of inadequacy, physical educators understood it was their responsibility to create an inclusive environment for all students.

### **Teacher Self-Awareness and Pedagogies**

As a physical educator, Rosemary Keegan (2016) engaged in action research, exploring the impact of the teacher’s instruction in PE on students’ motivations to participate in the class. Keegan (2016) explained that for a teacher to succeed in implementing more student choice, this “requires teachers to relinquish their traditional role within the classroom, to one of shared learning and allowing students to have an input into their own learning” (Keegan, 2016, p. 278). Keegan (2016) stressed the importance of teacher collaboration, which can generate the confidence needed to establish a comprehensive PE program.

Further to Keegan’s (2016) work on teacher collaboration, Al-Rawahi and Al-Yarabi (2013) discussed the influence of attitudes toward participating in physical activities on physical educators’ decisions to pursue teaching PE as their career. The authors used two questionnaires, reviewed by six PE specialists, with 57 male-identifying and 41 female-identifying participants. The results showed participants demonstrated “a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons as to why they opted for [PE] as a teaching profession” (Al-Rawahi & Al-Yarabi, 2013, p. 177). Moreover, the authors found many participants expressed support from parents and teachers in a positive experience with PE, physical activities, and/or sports. Al-Rawahi and Al-Yarabi (2013) observed no significant difference between male-identifying and female-identifying reasoning behind choosing a PE teaching career. I found this interesting as much of the research

investigating why students chose to continue in elective PE classes has focused on female-identifying students.

As aforementioned, it is crucial to listen to the stories students share to provide the greatest PE experience. Similarly, it is equally important to understand the physical educator's background, from which their influences in PE pedagogies are derived. Hetherington (1921) explained the importance of providing physical educators with proper training, reinforcing the need to attend to the teachers proportionately to the students: "The functions of PE [...] are not determined by the limitations of teachers. The training of teachers is determined by the objectives for education. The objectives of education must be determined, and teachers trained accordingly" (p. 528). Still, when examining the reasons behind student participation and engagement in PE classes, physical educators are on the front lines and can perceive disengagement in their students in different ways. For this study, therefore, I drew on the work of Bracco, Lodewyk, and Morrison (2019) to provide a clear definition of disengagement. Bracco et al. (2019) describe disengaged students as displaying the following characteristics: "(a) emotionally or physically withdrawn from the class, including demonstrating a lack of interest and attention in class, (b) had experienced some bullying during PE, (c) avoid full participation in-class activities, and/or (d) persistently disrupt the class" (p. 211).

With the forenamed criteria, I consider the work of Al-Rawahi and Al-Yarabi (2013) again. The fact that most participants had positive experiences with PE, physical activity, and/or sports is certainly consistent for continuing in the PE field. I myself, however, exhibited all four criteria at different points throughout my PE class experiences. It would be equally as interesting and informative to know the reasons behind choosing to teach PE from those with a less positive attitude toward their PE classes in Junior and Senior High. The authors stated, "it is apparent that

student who chose [PE] are intrinsically motivated [...] by love for sports since childhood and at the same time [wanted] to encourage other to engage in physical activities” (Al-Rawahi & Al-Yarabi, 2013, p. 189). This notion does ring true for me, as my passion for physical activity and sports outweighed my negative experiences in PE classes enough for me to pursue a career in the field of physical fitness and health. The question remains: How can teachers encourage this same passion and desire to develop and maintain a physically healthy and active lifestyle through their PE pedagogies?

## **Research Approach**

### **Methodology**

This project was conducted via meta-ethnographic analysis for reliable data collection. A meta-ethnography, first coined by Noblit and Hare (1997), is “a unique, systematic, qualitative synthesis approach widely used to provide robust evidence on [subject] and [researcher] beliefs and experiences and understandings of complex social phenomena” (as cited in France et al., 2016, p. 1). This methodology is best suited for this study because it combines autoethnographic data with qualitative interviews to create a unique interpretation of the data results (France et al., 2016; France et al., 2019; Stafford & Farshadkhah, 2020). The purpose of this meta-ethnographic project is to understand the rationale behind physical educators’ pedagogic approaches towards promoting student engagement in PE. My aim is to understand how physical educators grow their PE teaching skills to encourage more genuine and meaningful student participation in their classes. Guiding this meta-ethnographic study is the following research question: *How do teachers promote secondary student engagement in physical education?*

In my experience, and in scholarly research (Ferland et al., 2014; Fung et al., 2012; Georgakis, Wilson, & Evans, 2015; Storey et al., 2016), I have found teachers with divergent PE

pedagogies promote engagement differently. I was curious about the ways both participation-based and performance-based PE pedagogies are used to guide student participation in PE classes. In this study, I have defined participation-based PE as assessing students on their activity and engagement in class, and performance-based PE as assessing students on their ability to execute and master a particular task. To conduct this research, I engaged in qualitative semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> with three current PE teachers. These interviews were administered remotely for two reasons: 1) to allow for optimal convenience for the teachers' schedules, and 2) in accordance with COVID-19 protocols at the time.

It is important to acknowledge the evolution of this study. Within each interview, depending on the responses from participants, other questions and discussions occurred. Each interview was approximately an hour-long, and no follow-up interviews were conducted. As evidenced in the interview questions, my focus originated on how PE teachers navigate external factors influencing student participation. Upon analysis and reflection of the data, an unexpected shift occurred with my overarching research question. The rich dialogue that transpired during the interviews guided my research to examine how PE teachers encourage and maintain student engagement in their PE classes.

Additionally, I have drawn on my own experiences through an autoethnographic personal narrative. This data, synthesized with the interview data, will be analyzed to identify possible considerations for PE teachers to address factors of engagement, which can lead to more meaningful student participation in PE and potentially an extended commitment to a physically healthy lifestyle. I hope to improve my critical thinking and understanding of various PE

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B for interview questions.

teaching methods, and how these practices can be integrated into more balanced and universal PE pedagogies.

### **Participants**

For this project, I recruited three physical educators, and did not exclude any participant based on positionalities such as age, gender, or race to allow for equity, diversity, and inclusion (Mehta et al., 2020). All participants were employed by the same school division and currently teaching PE (among other subjects) with at least two years of teaching experience. Through this process, I interviewed two female-identifying PE teachers and one male-identifying PE teacher. Each participant, along with myself, had vastly diverse experiences in the field of PE and health education including specialized and online PE programs.

### **Analysis**

The analysis of my data was conducted simultaneously with the collection of data as I interviewed each participant and reflected on my pedagogic experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). During the recorded interviews, I took written notes of the participants' responses and added reflective pieces when connections arose. Following the interviews, I watched each interview and transcribed the dialogue. After member check approval from my participants, I began to analyze the transcripts in search of commonalities as well as outstanding differences among the participants (including my own experiences). The background, responses, and significant quotes were gathered and organized in a table format to allow for clear distinctions and connections amid the four subjects of this study.

### **Physical Educator Stories**

As it is widely known in the field of PE and sport, there are a wide variety of settings where physical activity can occur. Not only can PE be taught from a school gymnasium, but also



from a field, a classroom, a pool, a multi-activity recreation centre, and even from the comfort of your own home online. In accordance with my participants' backgrounds, this study focuses on a traditional PE setting and specialized PE programs. The traditional PE setting encompasses a gymnasium, school field, and potential field trips to alternate programming. Specialized PE programs are commonly implemented throughout many school divisions. In the interest of this study, a specialized program is defined as a PE program that is outside the traditional PE setting. In a specialized PE program, students specifically choose to attend these programs (often with additional costs) that are either sport-specific and/or have a strong focus on leadership within a variety of activities that students may not otherwise experience in a traditional PE class. In their work on sports academies in schools, Leong, et al. (In Press) support this sentiment stating, “it is often the belief of parents that, if their child attends a school sports academy, they are in essence getting the best of both worlds” (p. 162) referring to high quality education and intrinsically motivating athletic programming.

### **Specialized Programs**

#### *Alex*

The first participant, Alex (pseudonym), is the lead teacher of a specialized Recreation Academy PE program, though she did not always know she wanted to pursue a career in education. She enjoyed PE throughout elementary and junior high school, but when it came time to continue in grades 11 and 12, she decided to opt out. For her, “phys. ed. wasn’t a priority, [she] played sports outside of school and in school, but for [her] the focus especially in high school was [her] grades and taking all [the required science and maths courses] to get into university.” Alex achieved a degree in business and subsequently pursued a Bachelor of Education. After teaching elementary (kindergarten to grade 6) for twelve years, Alex knew her

passion for teaching physical health and fitness to the younger grades would lead her to teach PE in some capacity to secondary students (in her case grades 7 to 9). For the last five years, Alex has loved being the program director for the Recreation Academy at her school. As part of her PE teaching philosophy, Alex takes pride in implementing a combined approach of assessment based on both participation and performance. Alex understands that for students to flourish, they need to feel comfortable to take risks and make mistakes in order to improve their skills.

Interestingly, since the onset of her leadership in the Recreation Academy, Alex noticed an increase in female-identifying student enrollment of almost one hundred percent, whereas male-identifying student enrollment decreased by the same amount. She expressed that this shift could be caused by a number of reasons but believed because the female-identifying students had Alex as their role model, more students felt comfortable and at ease to join her program.

Though the number of students identifying as either binary gender has changed, Alex noted the participation from students has remained relatively steady. She did mention however, that grade level had an impact on student engagement:

I find the nines are very confident in what they do, and they just want to do everything, especially if they've been with me since grade seven. I find the grade sevens are very timid and they don't want to try because they don't want to look stupid in front of the grade nines. The grade eights are still trying to figure themselves out, so they're kind of in the middle.

At the core of her PE teaching philosophy, she wants to ensure her students feel empowered and confident in their abilities. Alex found that to facilitate this growth and to encourage the seventh and eighth graders to participate to their fullest in class, she needed to build a strong team atmosphere in her program.

At the beginning of the school year, she starts with cooperation and communication games to promote a welcoming and safe environment for her students to build strong relationships with the whole group. Her best efforts are nonetheless met with some resistance throughout the year as the division between grades seven, eight, and nine remains a factor in her students' engagement. To mitigate these issues, Alex explained that with whatever problem that arises (whether it be social media dilemmas, body image issues, peer pressure) she takes action in different ways on a "case-by-case" basis. She will often sit down with students, either one-on-one or in small groups, to ensure each student feels heard to reach a resolution with which each student can feel comfortable. Alex reiterated that "especially for the girls," their mindset needed to be unblocked and recentred to understand that whatever was happening outside of their control, anything they could do and however they could participate and perform, "they just need to try their best," which will always be enough.

### ***Blake***

The second participant, Blake (pseudonym), is the lead teacher of a Soccer Academy PE program and has been running the program for over sixteen years. He began his teaching career with only one short year as a physical educator in a traditional PE program and jumped at the opportunity to teach a sport that he loved. Growing up, Blake spent his time playing various sports in and out of school, demonstrating his passion for physical health and fitness. After receiving his Bachelor of Education, he achieved a Master of Physical Education in Education as well. With his extensive experience in PE and sport, he felt right at home leading the Junior High Soccer Academy at his school.

Over the years of development for the program, Blake noticed it evolved to a very competitive environment, associating his practice in assessment primarily with that of a

performance-based approach: “I would say that my teaching has evolved to nourish those athletes that are striving for excellence.” This desire for excellence, Blake explained, is not isolated to the students. He described an added pressure from parents as a unique factor contributing to student engagement that may not be apparent in a traditional PE setting. Excluding COVID-19 restrictions and online schooling, parents often come out to watch the soccer sessions, which is certainly not congruent with the traditional PE setting. This pressure, Blake shared, again is not isolated to the students. As the fees for the soccer academy are substantially higher than the traditional PE program at his school, parents’ high expectations are distributed among the staff and their student-athletes.

Blake described one of the positive outcomes of these higher expectations as an increase in leadership among his athletes. Whereas Alex saw a divide among grades, Blake’s division is apparent among skill-level. With his athletes being at such diverse levels of soccer competencies across the same grade, he has seen his athletes develop a sense of belonging among their similarly skilled peers, as well as leadership from the higher athletes to the “rookies,” as they called themselves (beginner to moderately skilled). Though this promotes an atmosphere of integrity and fair play, it remains a program of adolescents, which in turn has its fair share of issues, including bullying. Blake explained his approach to this kind of external factor influencing student participation:

I always teach my athletes - anyone that's bullying, there's usually something that needs to be handled for them. There's a reason why they're lashing out and in a lot of times, it's because they're not confident with themselves.

Although there is additional pressure from parents, their increased involvement is helpful in these circumstances. Blake shared that with most of the athletes who join his program, their

parents usually foster and nourish this same mentality. With the support of his athletes' parents and school administrators, Blake maintained the program's competitive nature allows for increased and sustained engagement from an overwhelming majority of his student-athletes.

### **Physical Education Online**

#### ***Cam***

The third participant of this study, Cam (pseudonym), is in a relatively novel PE setting. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the utilization of online education skyrocketed, including online PE classes. Cam has been teaching online for two years now but had her first two years of teaching experience in an elementary school. She explained that although teaching kindergarten to grade two was different than what she had hoped for, the best part of her week was getting to teach their PE classes.

Cam's favourite subject in school has always been PE. Since the day she started school, she knew she wanted to be a physical educator because she thought it was so much fun. Throughout her youth, from whatever age the minimum was to start a sport, she was enrolled. Whether it was swimming, gymnastics, soccer, basketball, volleyball, track and field, or any other sport she could participate in, she was always on board to try new things. She started her leadership on the soccer field, helping coach summer camps and teams throughout the years, which solidified her passion for teaching physical activities. When her school spoke to her about a teaching assignment of online PE for grades seven to nine students, she jumped at the opportunity. She thought it would be "really fun because it wasn't something anyone had really thought to do before, it's something that [she feels she] would do a really good job, and it might get [her] foot in the door for other PE teaching opportunities in the future."

Having taught students from kindergarten to grade nine, Cam has seen a wide range of skills, participation, and engagement in her PE classes. She explained at the younger ages, her pedagogic philosophy was a combination of both participation-based and performance-based as teaching the fundamentals of movement require effort as well as mastery of the skill to improve their physical literacy. Cam shared that for her online classes, her approach is similar in that she uses a combination of both assessment strategies but from a different perspective.

As Cam described, teaching PE online requires some creativity regarding instruction and assessment: “Being online, because it’s very individual, the focus is more on goal-setting, leadership, and trying new things.” She explained that since the focus of her instruction was not sport specific as is the tendency in PE classes, she was able to delve deeper into outcomes that she may otherwise have only brushed over in a traditional PE setting. She shared, “[her] students can explain what locomotor movement is, or body composition, or any of those more nuanced terminologies” that are often overlooked in a traditional and/or specialized PE program. Furthermore, with the expectations of individual improvement, Cam shared the fear her students had of participating in in-person PE classes was almost eliminated as they were focusing on their own development rather than comparing themselves to their peers or classmates. For this reason, Cam described her participation and engagement as “very high,” with the caveat - depending on the grade level.

In relation to the two participants in specialized PE programs, Cam saw a difference in participation across grade levels but found the older students, in grade nine, demonstrated the least amount of engagement. She added, though, that in communication with other online staff, this participation level was not isolated to her PE classes. On the other hand, Cam was excited to share her engagement with grade seven students was almost one hundred percent. Her grade

eight students were “in the middle” depending on the activities or assignments, but overall Cam was happy with the participation level of the seventh and eighth-grade students. To combat the grade nine engagement, Cam has tried alternate assignments or activities, allowing for choice in how the student wanted to show their learning. She provided options for individual, paired, or group work, as well as one-to-one assistance from her if the students needed more guidance. Nevertheless, her grade nine classes remained at a lower engagement level.

### **Traditional Physical Education**

As a physical educator in a traditional PE setting, my teaching experience has been primarily with junior high students (aged 11-15), but additionally a few years with upper elementary students (aged 9-11) and senior high students (aged 15-18). My pedagogic strategies have changed and evolved over my seven years of teaching and continue to grow every day.

Similarly to Alex, I did not always know I wanted to be a teacher. I have always had an affinity for physical activities and sports, but it was not until my second year of university that I realized my path was to share my passion for PE in teaching. During this year, I took a course teaching youth physical literacy, and I found a sense of fulfillment and gratification seeing these young people greatly enjoy something I have always had such a passion for. This passion for physical activity and fitness was easily found in extra-curricular activities but unfortunately did not always, in fact rarely, stem from physical activities in school. As a young student myself, I found it difficult to enjoy my PE classes for a few reasons. In my youth, I had always felt I was on the outside looking in at those who seemed to have much more confidence in their abilities than I. Regrettably, this led to low motivation in my PE classes throughout junior and senior high. I feel this could have been combated with a different teaching approach, as many of my PE instructors seemed to have a more performance-based methodology.

As a Physical Educator, I have centred my pedagogy primarily on student participation and engagement, with less of a focus on assessing their ability to execute a skill. In my years of teaching PE, coaching, and playing sports, I have recognized the importance of positive feedback relating to an athlete's ability to perform. Much of team sports and PE classes is exposing oneself to a large space filled with peers, which could potentially raise fear or doubt in one's ability - which Cam's students shared with her as a reason for choosing online PE classes. In all cases, I have found that having a positive environment where a student or athlete can feel success and enjoyment without the stress of a teacher's or coach's pressure to perform at a specific skill level has had a great impact on not only the participation rate but also skill development in my classes.

Through this reflective project, however, I have noticed a change in my teaching. As a beginner teacher, although I had the aspiration to incorporate a variety of fitness and health activities in my PE lessons, I found the planning (and eventual execution of said plans) to be extremely overwhelming. I, therefore, followed in the footsteps of some colleagues with a few more years under their belt and maintained the traditional format of sport-specific units throughout the year. Teaching high school, contrarily, was different because with more students and more funding, my colleagues and I could plan more field trips, and a larger variety of equipment to partake in activities that the students may not yet have experienced (such as pickleball, water polo, sepak takraw, billiards, and more student-lead activities).

Though my high school teaching experience was short-lived, I tried my best to maintain this notion of creativity when teaching at the junior high level. I can encourage and maintain reasonably satisfactory participation and engagement in my PE classes, depending on the activity. In congruence with all three participants, I have seen a distinction in engagement in



physical activities across grade levels and across skill-level within a grade. Not unlike the three participants, to minimize the lower engagement and encourage higher participation, I adapt my teaching practices and strategies. Whether it is creating a good rapport with students, providing choice, having open communication, and/or simply being patient, student engagement will vary. It is, therefore, crucial for the PE teacher to maintain their enthusiasm for physical health and fitness. In doing so, I have seen an increase in participation and engagement from my students in the traditional PE setting and equally less if my energy is lacking.

### **Research Outcomes**

As previously mentioned, three primary themes emerged from my discussions with each participant and my own experiences with physical activity and wellness. Despite the fact that each participant answered the questions from quite diverse perspectives, the commonalities were evident. All four of us developed and maintained a love and passion for sport and physical activity, leading us down the career path of being physical educators. From each conversation, I found recurring themes of the importance of balance between participation-based and performance-based PE pedagogies, the need for differentiation and student choice, and the impact of the language used with students and staff alike.

### **Balance**

At the onset of this project, I will admit I dug my heels into building a strong case for the superiority of a participation-based PE philosophy. After the dynamic conversations with my colleagues and upon further reflection of my practices as a physical educator, I have come to appreciate the importance of creating an environment that has room for both pedagogies at their respective times. Alex explained the necessity for balance across all grade levels, emphasizing the importance of awareness from the physical educator. She stated,

It depends again on what activity we do. For me to try to keep it more engaging for the kids, I always try to change it up as much as I can. It's trying to plan fun activities and balance them with skill development. For example, we'll do volleyball for a week, but then I'll change up the location - it's the same skills, but gives them a new environment to try them in. Or having different instructors teach skills instead of me all the time really helps, too.

For Alex, a balance of pedagogies means a balance of activities, and awareness of her students' abilities. Cam demonstrated this awareness of when to apply each pedagogy. She reiterated the notion of building the foundational skills at younger ages, focusing on participation, engagement, and growth, compared to students in higher grade levels when performance-based assessment can be used meaningfully in a student's development of physical literacy. Cam shared an additional important factor of balance and awareness influencing engagement in her PE classes.

Being in a lower-income school, there weren't a lot of opportunities for students to get any sports training outside of school. In the beginning, my strategy was very much encouraging and verbally sharing my happiness that they showed up to school. I would actually say, 'I'm so happy you're here,' because I knew for a lot of them it was the highlight of their day, being able to play sports. The ones that would come to the teams after school needed to learn the basic skills so that came first, but then I could start to build higher expectations.

Cam understood the importance of being aware of the level of physical literacy at which a student begins, gradually moving her teaching strategies from encouragement to incorporating higher expectations of students to improve their skills.

Although Blake's PE environment is primarily based on assessing the performance level of his athletes, he reported the same awareness and necessity for balance. He explained,

We do several activities throughout the year that focus on participation, but for the most part, the program is definitely performance-based. When I say performance-based, though, the number one underlining direction is having fun. The kids that I teach have fun when it's performance. For them, it goes hand in hand - being competitive means having fun. I find that if I were to not pay attention to the score or not keep track of who won and lost, they would have a decline in involvement and engagement.

Blake echoed the sentiments of Alex and Cam, demonstrating the physical educator's attention to their environment and their students (and/or athletes<sup>4</sup>) and being proactive to the nature of their PE program.

In my PE classes, I will often have open communication with my students regarding participation and engagement, mirroring Cam's strategies. I build a rapport with my students at the beginning of every year and establish my expectations for engagement in my classes. With the foundation of a participation-based pedagogy, and with consistent positive feedback, I find my students generally feel safe to take risks in improving their physical literacy. The question that remains for me, however, is does this transfer to subsequent years and into a life-long enjoyment of physical activity?

### **Differentiation and Student Choice**

Although teachers differ in how they view PE, among the four participants of this study it is clear that student choice and differentiation are integral pieces of the 'engagement in PE'

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<sup>4</sup> I draw attention to the term 'athletes' here as it is a significant example of the use of language employed by educators in a PE program.

puzzle. When educational leaders hear these words, though, a plethora of definitions and examples may come to mind. For this study, differentiation refers to providing opportunities that are catered to an individual student to encourage them to reach their full potential (De Jesus, 2012). In congruence with differentiation, student choice involves communication with the students and providing them the space to have their voice heard regarding their desired PE experience.

As we all experienced teaching online through a pandemic, the question of differentiation and student choice was at the forefront of our minds. Alex explained her empathy for her students who felt uncomfortable turning their cameras on during class. She expressed her aversion to seeing herself on the computer and offered her students options of turning on their cameras for a few minutes at a time during a fitness workout activity to assess their participation. Cam demonstrated promoting student voice and choice as she would often ask her students what kinds of activities they were interested in for any particular day. She would provide a variety of assignments the students could choose from, including individual or group work, and even alternative assignments for those that required higher participation levels than the student was comfortable with showing online. Blake provided optimal differentiation, particularly online, as reviewing the recorded soccer sessions from previous months had been an excellent source of feedback for his athletes. Not only were the recordings a good tool for assessment, but Blake also noted the incredible improvement that was made with individualized student analysis of their movements.

Interestingly, in conversation with both Alex and Blake, I recognized a subtle and perhaps overlooked differentiation in how they responded to the participation levels of different genders. This is not to say either participant purposefully neglects gender constructs in their

classes. Still, it is nonetheless a topic of interest in what one can only hope to be an expansively inclusive society. In my conversation with Alex, I noticed a somewhat narrowed focus on the participation of female-identifying students in her program. When discussing potential causes of decreased participation and engagement, Alex mentioned she felt “[female-identifying students] aren’t as confident to try things - [male-identifying students] tend to more easily shake it off if they’re not as good at a sport, whereas [female-identifying students] take it very personally.” This exemplifies some of the literature discussed above, as the emphasis was placed on the participation of female-identifying students rather than equally distributed among all students regardless of gender.

Contrarily, in conversation with Blake, the notion of disregarding gender as a teaching strategy grabbed my attention as well. As the discussion rounded to the number of female-identifying athletes compared to male-identifying athletes enrolled in the program, I wondered if there may be more enrollment from female-identifying athletes if the program was segregated. Blake explained that with scheduling, the possibility of a segregated program was challenging to employ, but on the field, he does often split the athletes according to their identified gender. He shared, “Some athletes, whether you're male or female, it really doesn’t matter, it was about the skill. I never taught the athlete based on their gender. I always taught the athlete based on their ability and their skill.” Though at the surface this is an inclusive mindset, it is equally important to recognize and acknowledge the diverse experiences that students carry with them onto the soccer field or gym floor.

Cam had an intriguing perspective on this matter from her experience as an online PE teacher. Cam and I expressed our experiences teaching students who identify as part of LGBTQ2+ communities. Cam shared she has had some “heart to hearts with a lot of students

who fear being bullied in class and at school, which is a reason why many of them chose to stay online.” This circumstance is, unfortunately, a reality for many students I have taught in the past, and sadly most likely will in the future if action for change is not taken. As I have grown and adapted my practices throughout the years, I have tried my best to use inclusive language such as folks or friends and ensured I no longer split my class based on gender. This year, with my current students, I have been able to make groups and teams based on their desired level of competition - albeit bringing its faults as any type of separation could add a stressor to the student’s motivation to remain engaged in their PE participation.

### **Language**

The power of language used with students and staff was the final theme that emerged from my research. Cam and Alex expressed the attention they hold to using language that is encouraging and promotes a safe environment. Both teachers shared stories of their students making statements such as, “I’m going to be the worst at volleyball, I can’t even get the ball over the net” or “I’m going to be the worst at soccer, I don’t like to run” or getting emotional over a mistake in a game. Alex explained her tactic of constant reassurance and positive feedback regarding her students’ efforts, regardless of the execution of the task, purposefully telling them, “It’s okay to make mistakes, that is the only way to learn!” Cam agreed with this sentiment and further expressed her strategy of accentuating and taking advantage of the individualized nature of an online PE program. As previously stated, in her program Cam employed more of a comprehensive approach to instruction for she can focus on the mental aspect of PE as well as the physical health and fitness. With an emphasis on individual development and improvement, Cam noticed the students who developed those negative attitudes or thoughts toward their

physical literacy abilities as a part of their in-person PE experience have been able to shift their mindset to one of personal growth.

This shift in mindset is what I have been striving to provide for my students. Using inclusive, positive, and encouraging language has enabled me to support and boost engagement in and enjoyment of physical activity for many of my students, but not all. What I hear most from my students is that they are not “athletic enough” to perform well at a certain task, which leads many to participate at a lower level than their potential. This notion struck me as I discussed the use of language with Blake. In his program, his students are athletes. Regardless of skill level, he maintains that any student in his soccer academy is addressed as an athlete.

Upon further analysis of the data, Cam had brought up a similar point that was revealed in Blake’s interview regarding differing language used in courses like maths and science. In maths class, a teacher will often call their students mathematicians - or in science: scientists. Why is this not the case in PE classes? This question drove me to define the terms. According to two online dictionaries, a scientist is defined as “an expert who studies or works in one of the sciences; a person learned in science and especially natural science: a scientific investigator” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022c; Merriam-Webster, 2022c). A mathematician is defined “as someone who studies, teaches, or is an expert in mathematics; a person skilled in mathematics; a specialist or expert in mathematics” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022b; Merriam-Webster, 2022b). Finally, an athlete is defined as “a person who is very good at sports or physical exercise, especially one who competes in organized events; a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina; an animal (such as a horse or a dog) that competes in races or other sporting events or has qualities (such as stamina or agility) suggestive of a human athlete” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022a; Merriam-Webster, 2022a). What

is comical about these definitions in relation to the language used in schools is that a student is often called a scientist or mathematician simply for their effort in class. While a student may demonstrate mastery of a certain topic in science or maths, it is unlikely they would be considered experts.

For this reason, my eye is drawn to the words “learned” or “studied” as it would be difficult to dispute that a student who is learning and studying maths or science is not a “person learned in or studied in” the subjects, therefore can be considered a mathematician or scientist. Concurrently, when examining the definitions of an athlete, what is noticeably apparent is the subjective nature of the description. I question the criteria for being “very good” at a certain sport or physical exercise - if a horse or dog is considered an athlete, should the term not first be extended to a student in PE class?

The notion of using certain terminology to describe students is something I had not considered before this research. Again, of course I do my best to use inclusive and encouraging language, but the concept of changing the mindset of my students by calling them athletes is unique and I believe quite innovative.

### **Discussion**

When I first embarked on this research project, my initial expectations and hypotheses reflected my biases toward ameliorating student engagement with a universal combination of participation-based and performance-based PE programming. I believed for teachers to encourage life-long engagement and enjoyment in physical activities, it would be necessary to create an entirely novel pedagogic approach to teaching physical literacy. My findings were unexpectedly refreshing and substantial in my search to find ways to increase prolonged student



engagement in PE. When examining the three overarching themes among my data analysis, the standout was the impact of language.

The overwhelming significance of a teacher's attention to language is evident in the conversations with participants and in my reflections upon my practices as a physical educator. What is necessary to explore further here is communication in PE programming. In their work, Preja (2013) explained, "The types of communication used by coaches and physical education teachers are: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and mass communication" (p. 240). This interpretation of communication is commonly understood and studied in the education world, but the literature for communication in a PE setting is widely centred on sports. Preja (2013) does bridge the gap in this article, using the terms 'student' and 'athlete' interchangeably, but there remains a lack in the literature regarding specific language used in PE classes.

Preja (2013) presented four types of communication that are generally employed in PE and sport and added there are three levels to communication as well: logical, paraverbal, and non-verbal: "The logical level (words) represents only 7% of all communication levels, 38% of communication occurs at a paraverbal level (tone, volume, rate of speech, etc.) and 55% is non-verbal (facial expression, position, movement, clothing, etc.)" (p.240). The second level of communication is of interest when it is considered in the context of a PE program, as so often I am told I have a "gym voice" that is loud and boisterous. In this circumstance, I believe this comment to be positive in nature. Interestingly however, loud and boisterous communication, by contrast, can be deemed aggressive behaviour. Though a physical educator may not intend to be aggressive in their communication, it is important for the teacher to be aware of the impact their use of verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal communication has on their students' perception of PE and in turn their motivation to engage.

The literature undertaken for this study explored the implications of nonverbal communication in sports and pedagogy centring on self-awareness and understanding from where the behaviour originated (both in the student-athlete and the teacher-coach). Rasul et al. (2021) explored this self-awareness further, describing two types of non-verbal communication attributes a teacher exhibits: controllable and uncontrollable. An educator's controllable attributes would include hairstyle, dress, posture, and accessories, whereas uncontrollable attributes consist of height, body weight, gender, and race. The authors explained the importance of being attentive to these attributes to establish the strongest culture of inspiration and creativity in the teacher's classroom.

In relation to a PE environment, Rasul et al. (2021) described the use of non-verbal codes to support or replace verbal communication: "For example, a pat on the back for a student may be used to appreciate the performance or to pay attention to the task given. In such cases, the receiver has to decide the real meaning according to the situation" (p.159). Perrin-Wallqvist and Carlsson (2011) analyzed the impact of different messages, stating, "mixed messages (i.e., when the teacher verbally expresses something positive while simultaneously expressing something negative via body language) are perceived as affecting self-image negatively" (p. 944). Dena Evans (2016), a high-level basketball coach, illustrated the significance of body language from the coach and the athlete. In her coaching sessions, she explained the need for clear verbal and non-verbal communication from the coach to the athlete to ensure understanding and equally from the athlete to the coach to ensure the correct reception of the message. As is evident in the literature and the data of my project, self-image is a strong contributing factor to a student's motivation to participate and engage fully in their PE classes. It is, therefore, imperative to

initiate open dialogue with student-athletes to create an atmosphere and culture of positive and constructive communication, encouragement, and enjoyment.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

As discussed, there are limitations to this study and the literature that need further exploration. First, three of the four participants in this study were female-identifying, with the fourth participant being male-identifying. The lack of diversity in this regard can speak to the lack of attention given to issues surrounding participation and engagement in PE from diverse gender identifying student-athletes - which is evident in the literature as well. Second, though the concept of spirituality is discussed in the literature review, it was not mentioned by any participants in the study nor considered by myself in creating my interview questions. As this study was completed in a short period of time, the pool of participants needed to be smaller with little follow-up. With additional time, the unexpected theme of language in respect to its influence on student-athlete engagement in PE classes, as well as the component of spirituality in health and wellness, would have been explored further in a second interview with each participant. Moreover, in reviewing and analyzing the literature and data, the concepts of paraverbal and non-verbal communication brought to mind the effect of different expressions from teacher-coach to student-athlete and vice versa.

A recommendation to examine more in this regard is the understanding of diverse learning preferences of student-athletes in PE programs. As Alex, Cam, Blake, and I can attest, each student-athlete brings to class a unique perspective of physical activity. In PE, the kinaesthetic learner is often catered to, but I think about the visual learners who see the basketball hoops as a challenge to be conquered or avoided. Or the auditory learners hearing the squeaking shoes, a thud of a volleyball spike, or the whistle of a teacher-coach to commence the

lesson, either to run toward with excitement or saunter to in hopes of exerting the least amount of effort to get through the class. For whichever style of learner, it is crucial for the physical educator to promote and establish a safe environment where a student-athlete can develop and maintain, hopefully life-long, a comprehensive enthusiasm for physical health and fitness and its impact on overall wellness.

### **Conclusion**

Physical educators have a crucial role in helping foster an environment in which students feel motivated and excited to continue participating in physical activity throughout their lives. From kindergarten on, a person meets and interacts with numerous teachers, coaches, administrators, school staff, and other students across schools and grades, creating many potentially positive or negative connections within their physical learning experiences. The connections between students' experiences in modern-day PE programs and the historical assessment of the development of physical fitness and health education illuminated the complexities of engagement in PE programs. Based on the literature and my findings, increased involvement and engagement in PE, improved physical and mental well-being, and increased motivation to continue with physical exercise and fitness into adulthood are all possibilities. Through my reflection and interviews with the participants, the importance of balance, differentiation, and language became clear. A physical educator can make a more purposeful, relevant, and long-lasting influence on student-athletes by developing a solid understanding of these components in relation to PE pedagogies and practices. This research, I feel, will help open the doors for transforming the world of PE from one of obsolete teaching approaches and expectations to one of positive student-athlete attitudes and motivations toward leading a healthy, active lifestyle.

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**Appendix A**  
**Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form**

Study Title: Physical Education Pedagogies: How teachers navigate external factors influencing student participation in Physical Education classes

Research Question: How can teachers navigate external factors influencing student participation in Physical Education classes?

Researcher: Caitlin Ryan-Jean

Research advisor: Dr. Teresa Fowler

Before agreeing to participate in this research, it is strongly encouraged that you read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. Also described is your right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Boards of Concordia University College of Alberta and the Edmonton Catholic Schools District.

Explanation of Procedures

This study is designed to examine the ways teachers navigate external influences on student participation in Physical Education classes. I am conducting this study to learn more about this question to help teachers and students increase their participation in physical activity and build healthy lifelong habits. Participation in the study involves an interview virtually via Google Meets, which will last for approximately one to two hours. The interviews will be conducted by myself, recorded, and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. These transcriptions will be emailed to you for your approval. You will have two weeks to read the transcript and redact, clarify, or add any information you see fit.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no risks or discomforts more than everyday life that are anticipated from your participation in the study.

Benefits

The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of teaching Physical Education, and to contribute to understanding of the ways different pedagogies can be integrated into a more balanced and universal style of teaching Physical Education and mitigate external factors that influence the PE classroom.

Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in a locked office and on a password protected laptop during this project. A master list with identifying information will be stored separately. Only the researcher and research advisor will have access to the raw data. Participant names and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The results of the research will be shared in the form of a research paper

for my Master of Education program and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings and teacher conventions. The knowledge obtained from this study will be of great value in guiding professionals to be more effective in encouraging higher participation in and motivation towards physical activity.

Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty and any data will be destroyed. You are also free to refuse to answer any question I might ask you.

Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask any questions that occur to you during the interview. If you have further questions once the interview is completed, you are encouraged to contact the researcher using the contact information given below.

If you have other questions or concerns about the study, please contact the chair of the Research Ethics Board at Concordia University College of Alberta via email at reb@concordia.ab.ca

Please indicate below if:

- (a) you are interested in information about the study results as a whole and/or;
- (b) if you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for a possible follow-up interview

Please check those that apply:

- I would like a copy of the final paper
- I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Researcher's contact information:

Caitlin Ryan-Jean

Email: cryanjea@student.concordia.ab.ca

Phone: XXXXXXXXXX

Research Advisor: Dr. Teresa Fowler, teresa.fowler@concordia.ab.ca

### **Appendix B**

The following questions were asked to each participant in their respective interviews:

- Can you please tell me your background and experience in Physical Education, as a student and teacher?
- What grade level of PE are you currently teaching, and have you taught in the past?
- Can you please explain whether you identify more with one pedagogy over the other, or with a separate PE pedagogy?
- Can you describe for me the level of engaged participation you generally see in your PE classes?
- Has this changed over your years of experience?
- Have you found a difference in student participation at each level and if so, in what ways?
- What factors have you encountered that influence student participation? For example, social media, socioeconomic background, bullying.
- Are there any other external factors you believe influence student participation in PE?
- How do you address or plan to address these challenges in your teaching practice?
- From the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, what are some ways you have navigated the additional challenges of teaching PE virtually?