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Creating and Maintaining a Positive Environment for Students
In Middle School Physical Education:

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Abstract

The aim of this scholarly work was to identify the components that have a direct impact on the positive atmosphere surrounding the teaching-learning process in middle school physical education. As students are the main focus for instruction, the physical education teacher has the primary responsibility for crafting and preserving the best environment to encourage successful participation for middle school learners. The findings of this work indicate that there are five major teacher-controlled factors that have been identified, with ten sub-sets of those areas that play a key role in the teaching and learning of physical education in Oklahoma.
Introduction

The teaching-learning experiences of middle school physical education are taught in the gymnasium, on the courts, on the track and on the playing fields. As a result of this, middle school physical educators set the stage for learning by creating a positive, exciting class atmosphere (Lavay, French & Henderson, 1997). The primary responsibility for establishing a productive learning atmosphere is positioned squarely on the shoulders of the teachers who spend the overwhelming amount of time with students, but is also shared by all the influences in the school, including the principal, counselors, cafeteria workers, and janitors. Establishing and maintaining a stable, non-threatening situation for all these children, who are on the brink of discovering themselves, in an ever-changing world is no easy task for a teacher. These young boys and girls, who are seeking the reassurance of a peer group, yet want to be independent with their curiosity, conflicting values, problem solving and desire to resist adult authority, still have an urge to achieve. If a middle school physical educator can successfully create and maintain a positive environment for the students to explore their growing physical, social, intellectual and psychological development, then the physical education class has great promise of benefitting students' immediate and life-long wellness.

One of the most beneficial aspects of a positive environment is realized through all the characteristics of effective teaching. In middle school, physical education links the health benefits of a regular program of physical activity to the activities taught in the physical education curriculum.
This benefit is realized as a result of almost all children attending middle school in a district, modified of course by district regulations, requiring them to be enrolled and provided the opportunity to participate in regular physical education class (Sallis, et. al, 1988). In a physically and psychologically safe environment, students are provided instruction in a variety of basic psychomotor skills, cooperative activities, sport skills, modified games and play strategies, along with embracing the feeling of self-satisfaction. As students actively participate during class activities, they should be engaged in teaching-learning lessons that will focus on how, where and when to apply the skills learned in class along with the ability to spontaneously improvise, depending on the situation and the stage of development. It is a very challenging, peer pressured packed atmosphere that causes participants to critically think of solutions to activity problems and process information in a split second that will lead to a successful experience through creative problem solving. Another benefit that students may receive in a positive environment is cultivated in middle school physical education is the emotional aspect. Matsumura & Slater (2008) found in 6th and 7th grade mathematics and language arts classes, when a positive environment is present, students are more willing and comfortable expressing themselves when asked by the teacher to respond to a conversation with their own comment. Even though the context of this study was in a mathematics and language arts setting, this is still very appropriate and applicable in a physical education class. Students in a physical education class will, as reported by the authors, feel comfortable and more willing to try what is taught in class, even if they feel they are not as skilled as their classmates (Solmon, 1996). Once again, teachers set the stage for students to feel comfortable with whom they are and what the class is doing based on the perceived responses of their classmates. As a direct result of the physical, emotional and
social changes that middle school students are experiencing in their lives, students are self-conscious about how they will be judged by their peers. Teachers who are sensitive to the needs of these children and are diligent in their efforts to create, nurture and maintain a positive environment in the class, make it possible for each individual or at least a majority of students, to participate without fear or hostility in activities during their physical education class. Creating and maintaining a positive learning environment in middle school physical education takes organization, planning, constant effort and reflection, with a vigilance to even the smallest detail to make it work. The following are suggestions that have been identified in the literature (Barney, 2002; Chen, 1996; Darst, 2009; NASPE, 2009, 2010) in creating and maintaining a positive environment in middle school physical education. First, the curriculum contains all of the intended experiences included in the lessons, activities, themes, learning objectives, assessments and instructional resources for the lessons that teachers use to teach a physical education class. In most cases the state curriculum or school district curriculum, while embracing the state-wide physical education standards (Oklahoma Priority Academic Skills, "PASS") dictates what units will be taught throughout the school year. The philosophy for the school district and the need for a comprehensive experience will help the developers of the middle school physical education curriculum respond to interests and needs in a progressive yet challenging manner. While exploring the literature, it would appear that many of the instructional unit experiences focus on skills uses in duel/team, outdoor pursuits and individual sports and some even contain "adventure activities" that are intended to foster cooperation as well as reveal character. Units included are badminton, basketball, flag football, gymnastics, soccer, softball, swimming, tennis, track, tumbling, volleyball and other team related activities.
(NASPE, 2010; Rink, 2002). Barney & Deutsch (2010) looked at factors that affect middle school student’s attitudes towards physical education. The authors identified two main factors that affected middle school student’s attitudes positively towards physical education and they were the (1) curriculum and the (2) teacher. When students were asked regarding the curriculum both male and female students, from 6th and 7th grade felt that their physical education class was not boring and that it was “fun”. It was found in this study that students wanted to participate in a variety of activities. They also revealed that middle school physical educators will continue to have success, from the student’s perspective, when they teach familiar sport lessons such as basketball, softball, volleyball and other duel/team sport units. Yet, the literature identifies a philosophical position calling for the need for a more comprehensive approach to middle school physical education and that students at this age and developmental stage should be exposed to a wide variety of additional physical activities designed to support confidence and similar character traits (Darst, 2009). For example, there is dance, adventure challenges, cooperative games, jump bands, pickle ball, bouldering (horizontal wall climbing), speed stacks and many other physical activities to progressively challenge, teach, interest and prepare the learner for a life-long experience of enjoying being active (Rink, 2002).
When middle school physical educators think about designing a curriculum to implement, they may want to get input from the students in an effort to discover some of their less identifiable needs. Olafson (2002) has said, “A curriculum that responds to the needs and interests of students, and students being actively involved in structuring the curriculum, might increase interest and enjoyment in physical education.” The development process for a middle school physical education curriculum should include asking students to get their input and constructive suggestions on the types of activities they would feel comfortable participating in during class (CDC, 2008). This empowerment will give the students a sense of ownership in their individual learning.

As professionals, teachers must be mindful that asking for input does not mean relinquishing responsibility. Teachers are the trained adults who should have an educated sense of what skills need to be mastered. Physical educators, who have attended a Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) program and earned a state department of education endorsement, will have completed a requisite content and pedagogy training, methods classes along with field experiences and the training (student teaching internship) that comes with holding a professional position. Strand and Scantling (1994) suggest however, that teachers should be selective about what input is employed and not simply give in to all student ideas. Implementing the student suggestions should undergo a scrutiny developed as the result of college education and use only those activities that meet the mission of the program, are educationally sound, fit into a lesson sequence, are of a health-enhancing nature and most important are compatible with NASPE Middle School Appropriate Practices document (NASPE, 2009).
An additional thought concerning the curriculum that is that middle school students do not like or enjoy fitness activities that require the moderate to intense vigor called for by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2008) activity recommendation for children (Barney, 2010). When a middle school physical educator mentions fitness activities to middle school students, the first things that students think about are push-ups, crunches, pull-ups, pacer test, or the mile run and a way-out for this type of "sweat" activity. These components of fitness can be incorporated into warm-up activities, game play; student guided practice and drills as well as many other instructional activities. Corbin (2007) suggests that concepts to help students understand the benefits need to be blended into play activities during "teachable moments" and instructional episodes as well as having the health benefits realized from physical activity be posted for students to read. It is in the fitness activities where students acquire the real-life physical benefits from physical education class. Even if middle school students do not like or enjoy fitness activities, they are a very important part of their curriculum. When middle school physical educators can successfully teach activities or games to the middle school students, each individual student will acquire the physical benefits from their activities in class. In many cases, unless teachers blend fitness into their lessons or develop stand-alone concept lessons that link lifelong activity to the benefits, students will not know they are getting the fitness benefits as they participate in a game or activity (Corbin, 2007).
Make Content Interesting

The second way to impact the middle school learning environment is to make the content interesting (Chen, 1996). One of the most common curriculum units taught in middle school physical education is basketball and many middle school students, who are good at this game, like and enjoy basketball. Luckily for the physical educator, students who have been successful at the game will not have to have artificial incentive in order to participate. A challenge for the teacher who has large class sizes, is to find a method to teach the content so it challenges the less skilled student yet will not be boring to the more skilled student. Teaching the skills of shooting, passing, dribbling, rebounding and defense to middle school students gives them the opportunity to successfully participate in a game of basketball. When analyzing our basketball example, some middle school students, both male and female, have already had many opportunities to participate and compete in basketball games. Thus, the above mentioned skills of basketball (shooting, passing, dribbling, rebounding and defending the opponent) are in place for some of the more skilled students, but many of the students still need developmental even remedial activities to internalize these skills to an acceptable level of competence. This does not mean the middle school physical educator completely abandons teaching the basic skills of basketball. Yet, this is where the middle school physical educator can provide modified activities for students to help improve and reinforce the basic skills they will use during participation in basketball.
Prusak & Vincent (2005) found that if the activity is fun, there is a better chance of keeping a student’s interest in the activity. It would appear from their research, if the student stays interested (on-task) with the activity there will be a greater chance for student learning based on strengthen of their skill abilities. One suggestion for middle school physical educators to maintain interest in their lesson is to introduce the students to new or novel activities. Earlier, such activities such as jump bands; pickle ball, bouldering (wall climbing) and speed stacks were mentioned for middle school students to participate in as a way of developing self-satisfaction through activity. These types of activities are not the typical activities many middle school students have been exposed to in a traditional curriculum. As teachers develop the activities to challenge these middle school students, some trial and error episodes will be encountered (i.e. finishing in success), and the middle school physical educator may find that these activities could be very popular, thus resulting in high levels of activity based on interest in class and physical activity.

**Creating an Atmosphere that is Positive that Fosters Development**

The third way to impact learning is to create an atmosphere of positive social interaction that fosters development of middle school students without being a distraction from the purpose of the class, learning. This includes student to student as well as teacher to student and student to teacher interactions. When analyzing the various types of teacher to student interactions, the basis for the communication accounts for many different ways in which teachers and students can and do interact with each other. Probably the most common method of teacher/student interaction is when the teacher gives feedback to the student. In physical education this usually occurs when the student is practicing a given skill or activity. Knowing all the feedback tools and
developing solid strategies for choosing the correct comment with delivery is the difference between an instructional technician and a teacher who is an artist. This feedback can come with the intent to be corrective, reinforcement (positive or negative), motivating, about the performance, involved in the task or how to blend the intrinsic feelings with the outward (extrinsic) observations. An example of feedback by the middle school physical educator could go something like this, “John, your kick was technically correct because you attended to all the instructional cues and performed them well. Next attempt, extend your leg more after you have kicked the ball and that will provide you much more power.” What this type of feedback is intended to accomplish is send a message to the student that the physical educator is observing, cares about the performance and is interested in strengthening the performance. It also sends a message to the class that the teacher knows the students (called John by name) and what they are doing (I saw your kick and what happened). Another important point from the example is that the feedback was specific as well as the comments by the teacher were understandable. The teacher told the student what he did and how to improve his performance of the skill.

There are times middle school physical educators’ feedback is not substantive and consists only of telling a student “good job” or “way to go”. This type of feedback is general and does not help the student when learning or practicing a skill. Another problem that comes from this type of feedback is that physical educators commonly and frequently give this feedback to their students. As a result of the frequency of this feedback, students will eventually turn off the teacher, and the student will not care what the teacher is telling them. One very important point from our feedback example is that the teacher used the student’s first name in the communication. It does not matter where or what class middle school students are in, they want
to hear their name from their teachers. It is the opinion of the authors that a majority of students want to hear their first name, not their last name or a nickname. When teachers use a student’s last name or nickname, the teacher/student relationship has a tendency to be casual or too cutting. The teacher by knowing and using a student’s first name sends a respectful message that can be advantageous when the teacher may need to discipline or correct a student (Rink, 2002 & Hichwa, 1998). It also indicates to the student that the teacher is interested in them and cares about their learning the skill or activity as well as how they perform as an individual or part of a team.

Another form of feedback middle school physical educators can use with students is non-verbal feedback. Non-verbal feedback can be used to praise students’ efforts by giving a thumbs-up, a high-five, fist-bump, shaking a student's hand, a smile, or clapping hands. Middle school physical educators need to be cautioned not to make this their primary form of feedback to students, as it is less formal than a clear verbal message. Darst & Pangrazi (2009) caution middle school physical educators to consider cultural implications when giving non-verbal feedback to students. For example, “Hmong and Laotian adolescents may be touched on the head only by parents and close relatives. A teacher who pats a student on the head for approval is interfering with the student’s spiritual nature. The okay sign (touching thumb and forefinger) is an indication of approval in the United States. However, in several Asian cultures, it is a “zero,” indicating the student is not performing properly. In many South American countries, the okay sign carries a sexual connotation. “Teachers new to areas should ask for advice when expressing approval to students from other cultures” (pg. 136).
Additionally, physical education teachers who take the time to plan out their lessons can also tie their feedback comments to their teaching cues. If cues are posted on the walls of the gymnasium, pointing to performance characteristics on a specific element while commenting or asking a student to conduct a self-analysis using a task sheet is a creative to engage as well as empower participants.

Many physical education teachers are now using performance rubrics as a teaching tool as well as a method of measuring performance. This step toward accountability help students understand the components of the performance while also helping to create a mental image on which to based performance. A properly formatted rubric contains all of the parts of a perfectly performed skill allowing the teacher to explain during a demonstration. A student, when asked about a specific element of the lesson, checking-for-student-understanding, can respond with specifics from the rubric that will demonstrate knowledge of the performance expectation.
One last point concerning the teacher/student interactions is for the teacher to show interest in what the student does outside of class or other aspects of the student’s life. Barney (2002) looked at what positively and negatively affected middle school students’ attitudes towards physical education. One of the findings from the study was that students appreciated it when the middle school physical educator took the time to ask how they were doing, how their weekend was or how their sport team did in their last game. Many of the middle school students felt that when the middle school physical educator took the time to briefly visit with them, the students felt that the teacher cared about what they were doing outside of school, communicating a clear message that the teacher cared about them as a person not just as a student in class. It was found that many of these brief conversations took place before, during and at the end of the physical education class. As a result of these conversations taking place during the physical education class period, this positively affected their attitude towards simply attending and participating in physical education activities without being a distraction. All of these points of the teacher/student interactions can pay great dividends for a teacher and for the students when creating and maintaining a positive environment in middle school physical education.

**Do what is "BEST" for the Students**

The fourth component that impacts the learning environment in a positive way is doing what is best for the middle school student by putting the needs of the student first. Whatever activity is being taught to the students should inspire them to be physically active in class as an immediate goal and hopefully throughout their lives. Middle school physical educators should carefully think through their lessons, the activities students will be participating in, the equipment and space used for their activities and anything else that is special to their situation.
that will benefit the middle school student. Whatever activities, drills, modified games or events take place in class should focus on and allow for individual student differences in interest and ability. Middle school physical educators need to promote the idea that middle school students need to adopt an active lifestyle and that this is an ongoing process, and this ongoing process is our product. The performance objectives developed for the lesson and used to focus instruction are not a one shot deal or just about the immediate fun. Physical activity is a lifelong endeavor that should be stressed by acknowledging the available resources of the community (Prusak & Vincent, 2005).

Use NASPE Guidelines

As the middle school physical educator implements these methodologies of teaching middle school students, there is one other suggestion they may want to consider when creating and maintaining a positive environment for their teaching-learning experiences. This would be studying documents and resources created by the practicing professionals who make-up the committees that write for the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). One document specifically that can be extremely valuable is the Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Middle School Physical Education (NASPE, 2009). The purpose of this document is to “offer specific guidelines for recognizing and implementing developmentally appropriate physical education.” The document continues by indicating which practices discussed “are in the best interests of students (appropriate) and those that are counterproductive or even harmful (inappropriate) when used with learners. Physical education teachers can use the contents of the document to check the quality of their work (NASPE, 2007:pg.7), but more important an individual teacher can use the ‘spirit’ of the appropriate practices guidelines to
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shape their lesson planning as well as the implementation of activities. This document provides school administrators, parents and guardians a guide for what is taking place in their student’s physical education class. This document can also provide policymakers with knowledge and suggestions for what should take place in middle school physical education, thus giving those with a stewardship for physical education the support necessary as well as the leadership essential for continued growth to achieve a high quality physical education experience in the middle school (NASPE, 2009).

The Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Middle School Physical Education (NASPE, 2009) document is organized into five sections. They are: 1) Learning Environment, 2) Instructional Strategies, 3) Curriculum, 4) Assessment, and 5) Professionalism. For each statement in the document there is an appropriate statement and an inappropriate statement. The practices mentioned are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but provide guidance to educationally sound activities. The professionals that developed the guidelines felt appropriate activity suggestions will help to develop an individual’s motor skills competencies as well as their appreciation for and attitude to develop a lifelong plan. These are basic instructional methodologies that should be embraced and practiced during physical education classes. Several of the components of the NASPE Physical Education Teacher Evaluation Tool (NASPE, 2007) contain instructional elements that have been identified as effective and these along with many additional practices, that are not enumerated here, could be included in an excellent program. The list does, however, include practices observed recently in gymnasiums, courts, tracks, fitness centers, pools and fields across the country.
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When reading through the five separate sections of the document, much of what is presented helps the middle school physical educator create and maintain a positive teaching-learning environment for the middle school student. The following are a few examples from the document, “The environment is supportive of all students and promotes the development of a positive self-concept”, “Students are allowed to try, to fail and to try again, free of criticism or harassment from the teacher or other students”, “Teachers form pairs, groups and teams in ways that preserve every student’s dignity and self-respect (e.g., randomly, by fitness or skill level or by a class system such as birthdays, squads, colors or numbers)”, “Activities are developmentally appropriate for early-adolescent students and are aimed at promoting success for all students (e.g., heart rate monitors allow students to exercise in their own individual target heart zones and at different intensity levels)”, “Physical educators make every effort to create testing situations that are private, nonthreatening, educational and encouraging (e.g., they explain what the test is designed to measure)”, and “Physical educators use fitness assessment as part of the ongoing process of helping students understand, enjoy improve and/or maintain their physical fitness and well-being (e.g., students set fitness goals for improvement that are revisited during the school year)” (NASPE,2009).
In conclusion, these few examples of self-improvement type suggestions for middle school physical educators have been made to help create and maintain a positive environment in physical education class. They have been made to be sure that the physical education lessons are planned to challenge the developmental needs of the majority of students, modified for the special-needs of others, rather than interests of the very few skilled or even the teacher. There are numerous resources, many by NASPE available on the internet-site, which can help with the design implementation of a quality physical education program. It is the implementation and the day-to-day activities that will help to develop a healthier, stronger and more aggressive attitude on the part of the student toward engaging in a healthier lifestyle.
References


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