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To cite this article: Sarah Doolittle (2016) Engaging Middle School Students in Physical Education and Physical Activity Programs, Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 87:6, 29-34, DOI: 10.1080/07303084.2016.1192940

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2016.1192940

Published online: 29 Jul 2016.
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The middle school physical education teachers featured in this issue embrace the goal of engaging their students in physical activity for a lifetime through physical education classes, extracurricular sports at school, and opportunities for physical activity in the community. They know that middle school is the most critical time of life to foster long-term engagement in physical activity, sport and exercise. Years of research show that young adolescents (ages 11–14) drop out of sports at alarming rates, and that moderate-to-vigorous physical activity also plummets between the ages of nine and 15 years old. Researchers believe that interventions at this stage may help young people develop an identity as physically active persons (Dishman, McIver, Dowda, Saunders, & Pate, 2015). Physical education and middle school programs for sport and physical activity can be that intervention. Physical education teachers and the programs they deliver can help young adolescents internalize the concept that exercise, sport and physical activity are a part of who they are, which in turn provides the foundation for lifetime habits of health-enhancing physical activity.

Researchers who seek to understand why adolescents drop out of organized sport (Staurowsky et al., 2015) and disengage from physical education (Carlson, 1995; Garn, Cothran, & Jenkins, 2011; McKenzie, 2001; Solmon, 2003) most often take a psychological perspective, identifying individual factors such as prior knowledge, experience and personal interest within an individual student or athlete. However, a theoretical shift from a psychological to a socio-ecological perspective, which examines a student’s physical and social ecology, may offer a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent physical activity dropout and engagement. Recent research on school dropouts and school engagement begins with the assumption that student engagement in school is a long-term phenomenon, one that extends over successive grade levels and outside of school boundaries. Although student knowledge, experience and interest remain important, additional factors in a student’s environment, such as peers, family and community, also influence engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Feldman-Farb, 2012). Both intrinsic student factors and ecological influences can be identified that, when connected to the organizational structures and cultures of school, suggest ways to reduce student disengagement from school as well as increase student engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). This perspective also offers new guidance for addressing the question...
of student engagement in physical activity and physical education (Bornstein & Pate, 2014).

The Teachers of the Year who wrote for this feature all recognize their essential role in preventing physical activity dropout and increasing engagement in physical activity. All three are committed to the long-range goal of educating their middle school students to enjoy participating in physical activity and to begin making it part of their daily lives — now and in the future. All three teachers described changes they have made to traditional teaching, physical education, and extracurricular programs to engage all students. They aim for lifetime engagement in physical activity. As Emily Pharez (2016/this issue) said:

The more enjoyable physical education experiences are, the more likely students will find enjoyment in activity outside of school. A positive experience in physical education is a stepping stone toward a more active and healthy lifestyle for all students. (p. 24)

To achieve this goal, these teachers take a holistic view of their students. Mike Tenoschok (2016/this issue) wrote:

[T]he most effective middle school programs have engaged students in the widest variety of activities possible... Middle school, ideally, should be a bridge between skills and specialization by allowing for exploration and exposing students to the plethora of sports and activities available to them... [and providing] opportunities for optimum learning and personal/social development. (p. 9)

Jessica Shawley (2016/this issue) put it this way:

I believe the middle level is a “make it or break it” time for our kids socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively. It is a fragile time developmentally, and my colleagues and I want students to walk away from middle school knowing they are capable of achieving whatever they put their mind and heart to... I want students to be willing to try new things that will help keep them moving, as well as understand and value the importance of physical activity as it relates to their overall physical and emotional well-being. (p. 23)

These teachers are savvy about their middle school students’ needs and have taken the initiative to design and deliver programs accordingly. Through a genuine commitment and caring for their students, awareness of current activities and best practices, and a willingness to engage in frequent trial and error on their students’ behalf, these teachers have discovered a number of practices to get and keep their students engaged in physical education. Furthermore, these teachers recognize the importance of complementing a solid physical education experience with additional activities and options such as access to intramurals, drop-in programs, recreational leagues, interscholastic teams, electives, and family and community events in order to ensure that students will voluntarily participate in activities beyond the required physical education classes. All of these efforts send the message that physical education is a vehicle for developing skills, knowledge and attitudes so that students can seek out and successfully participate in physical activity as a lifelong commitment.

The articles in this feature provide practical examples of ways to engage middle school students in physical education, sport and extracurricular physical activity that parallel principles from school dropout and student engagement research.

The ABCs of Research on Student Engagement

Students drop out of sports and physical activity for reasons that are strikingly similar to the reasons they drop out of school. Elementary students, who until late elementary and middle school are fully engaged in both voluntary physical activity (e.g., recess, free play opportunities) and physical education, too often become less active and more often disengaged as they enter early adolescence. Research from children, youth and their parents indicates that the reasons why they begin to lose interest in physical education and drop out of extracurricular sports and physical activity include changes in interests or responsibilities, not having fun, feeling incompetent, disliking the coach, not getting along with other players, too much emphasis on winning, lack of family support for getting to practice, and negative sport experiences (Staurowsky et al., 2015; Woods, 2016).

Research consistently reveals that students drop out of school for similar personal reasons. Students have reported feeling pushed out or pulled out, and in some cases they simply fall out of school through a gradual decline in academic success and interest, as well as a lack of social connections to teachers and classmates in school (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; see Table 1). Recent research on combating school drop-out focuses on identifying organizational factors of the way schools are run that may have important influences on vulnerable students (Christensen, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). This focus on long-term student engagement in school has strong parallels for combatting the decline in participation in physical education and voluntary sport and physical activity.

Research on why students leave and why they stay in school suggests that three dimensions of student engagement are related to staying in school: affective/emotional (including reactions to teachers, classmates and school, as well as feelings like enjoyment, boredom and anxiety), behavioral (characterized by voluntary participation in available opportunities and the effort or willingness to comply with rules and expectations), and cognitive (which includes prior knowledge of activities and tasks, as well as levels of effort and commitment to the process of learning; see Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Mahatmya et al., 2012). Individual factors such as prior knowledge, experience and personal interests affect each individual’s engagement in physical education. But current research also recognizes that peers, family, school and community cultures can influence engagement. Preventing school dropout means that school officials may need to take responsibility for adjusting the organizational structures and cultures at school to support affective, behavioral and cognitive
Affective Engagement: Students’ Feelings and Emotional Attachments Matter. In terms of affective/emotional engagement, teachers are aware of the enormous influence of students’ positive and negative reactions to teachers and peers. The teachers profiled in this feature strive to get to know each student’s strengths and vulnerabilities. Jessica Shawley’s philosophy aims to provide an emotionally safe environment where all students feel they can take a risk and are willing to try new things. She creates a positive emotional climate in her gymnasium by playing upbeat music, smiling and greeting students as they enter for class. Emily Pharez attends her students’ extracurricular games at school and in the community. She also recognizes the efforts of her students in class, especially those for whom physical education may be particularly challenging. Her “Physical Education Student of the Year” award had a major impact on at least one overweight student, inspiring him to change his health habits. Similarly, Mike Tenoschok acknowledges student effort when he makes “unsolicited good-report phone calls” to parents. This has the effect of conveying to students that the teacher “is actually watching what I do.” Teachers’ interactions with students lay the groundwork for affective/emotional engagement. Students can feel good about coming to physical education when they know their teachers care about them.

Teachers also pay attention to student interactions, choosing class routines that put students at ease and encourage respect and positive social interaction while doing physical activity. Each of these teachers recognizes that being thoughtful about student grouping, intervening in negative student interactions, and teaching positive social skills through class-based activities all help students build confidence and invest the effort needed to improve skills and learn the content of physical education. This is done by regularly providing task choices and differentiated instruction that explicitly and implicitly acknowledges that students progress at different rates (Pharez, 2016/this issue; Shawley, 2016/this issue; Tenoschok, 2016/this issue). Partner and group peer-teaching projects using technology (Pharez, 2016/this issue) and peer tutors (Tenoschok, 2016/this issue) also help students in mixed-ability groups interact in positive ways.

Behavioral Engagement: Students’ Behavior and Participation Matter. The teachers in this feature keep in mind the importance of setting behavior expectations and rewarding positive behavior and full participation in class. Setting behavior expectations in classes provides a reliable structure that helps students anticipate and comply with the class requirements, while at the same time recognizing that “one size does not fit all.” These teachers...
use heart-rate monitors and pedometers to hold students accountable for activity expectations (Pharez, 2016/this issue; Tenoschok, 2016/this issue). They assess student improvement, while also using choice-based strategies and differentiated learning approaches. They teach respectful behavior and acknowledge that students at all levels of ability can succeed when they are helped to identify and work toward appropriate personal fitness goals. They acknowledge that different students like different activities, but that all are responsible for participating in every class activity. The policy of short units reinforces students’ willingness to put up with activities they might not enjoy, because in a short period of time the unit will change to something different, perhaps something they do enjoy.

Teachers know that not enough time is allocated for instructional physical education to develop sport skills, so they use school resources to provide more opportunities for enjoyable physical activity — time and space before school, during lunchtime and breaks, and after school — for advanced students and (perhaps more importantly) for beginners and more tentative students. To encourage all students to participate in physical activity, these teachers arrange for multiple inclusive extracurricular activities, and then actively recruit all of their students to participate, whether in drop-in fitness workouts, free play in the gym, intramurals, or club or competitive sports. They provide the widest variety of sports and activities possible, connecting different kinds of students to class activities and extracurricular opportunities of their preference. Mike Tenoschok’s list of intramural choices illustrates how almost every kind of student could be persuaded to participate in extracurricular physical activity. In addition, because inclusion and full participation is so important, Jessica Shawley and her colleagues support a “no-cut” team policy for interscholastic teams, a policy that is rapidly being adopted by other middle schools. While providing for large numbers of students seeking to play a single sport seems impossible for some teachers, Jessica Shawley and Mike Tenoschok prioritize a sport-for-all philosophy over the development of elite teams and athletes. This, in turn, leads to the developmentally appropriate goal of “exploration” for many more students and multiple opportunities for practicing and mastering multiple sport skills for each student. Close relationships with community agencies allow teachers to send advanced and highly committed students to more specialized programs if they are interested. Instead of developing a few specialized athletes in exclusive school teams, they prioritize time and facility resources at school to serve the physical activity needs of the majority of students.

All of these teachers are aware of the multiple personal and social benefits for students who regularly participate in extracurricular activities at school. By providing opportunities to participate...
in a wide variety of sports and physical activities, students also gain opportunities to get to know one another, be on a team, and increase their sense of competence and self-esteem through extra practice and game play opportunities. This inclusive philosophy supports long-term engagement in physical education and physical activities.

**Cognitive Engagement: Students’ Interests Matter.** In terms of cognitive engagement, teachers build on prior knowledge, experience, and interests. They ask students for input. Emily Pharez explained, simply talking with students as they get ready to leave the gym, more formally through student surveys, yields important information about the physical education and extracurricular programs — what is working and what changes to consider. All three teachers recommend finding out what students think and working to include their ideas. Emily Pharez went beyond soliciting student requests by implementing a student-directed research process whereby students requested new activities and developed a formal proposal. All of the teachers incorporate activities that reflect “what’s hot” or relevant in student culture or in the students’ neighborhoods and communities.

Similarly, the teachers stressed a cognitive understanding of the process of learning: that everyone can learn, but everyone learns things at different rates and in different ways. Teaching students that the learning process can look different for different people reinforces that all can learn, given the right time and support. They offer a variety of activities in their programs to appeal to diverse students, offer choices among activities or instructional tasks within units, and use a variety of approaches to learning, especially by including technology. Using different forms of technology facilitates work at the student’s own pace, and encourages students with different interests and skills to contribute through online research, video production, writing and statistical applications in class.

**Six Ways to Increase Student Engagement in Physical Education and Physical Activity**

Researchers have identified a number of socio-ecological factors that influence student engagement in school: activities, tasks, tools, people, places and student-directed learning (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). These factors are targeted by the physical education teachers in this feature as they design or modify programs to engage their students in sport and physical activity. These six factors may help other middle school teachers focus on practical changes to make if they want more of their students to learn, enjoy and build regular physical activity into their lives.

**Provide a Wide Variety of Activities.** Teachers are aware that building in a variety of activities keeps students’ attention. They vary the sports and activities in the program, teach many different motor skills, and, as often as possible, offer students choices. They develop strong community connections to help extend their activity facilities, but also to convey the message of lifelong learning in their neighborhood and to help keep their units relevant. The teachers bring in activity experts from the community and find ways to involve families. Matching at least some of the program activities to community resources and community traditions will help to build relevancy. Inviting families to celebrate and to participate in special physical education–related events is also great for public relations and makes physical education more meaningful to students.

**Vary the Instructional Tasks.** To keep physical education interesting and to allow students to progress at their own pace, middle school teachers offer choices among instructional tasks. They are well aware of the vast developmental differences among their students, and they expect to see rapid and uneven changes in growth and maturity. All three teachers reward effort, persistence and concentration on personal bests rather than competition and social comparison. Teachers work to ensure that each student experiences success in physical education activities and pay attention to avoid the frustration, low self-efficacy and low self-esteem that students sometimes feel and that leads them to gradually withdraw from participation in school activities (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Teachers are ready and able to differentiate the tasks students need to practice in order to become competent. They offer choices so that all students have a good chance at success.

**Use Instructional Tools and Technology that Students Like.** Teachers use tools that are part of the student culture. They expect their students to be interested in technology that can also address psychomotor and cognitive objectives. Pedometers, heart-rate monitors, Wii games, dance and exercise games, video analysis, web-based assignments, laptop applications in class — these are all skillfully managed by middle school students and can help connect them to physical education content. Technology is an essential link to student interests and culture.

**Pay Attention to People, Partners, Teams and Groups.** The social pressures of being an 11- to 14-year-old student can make physical education programs unbearable for some students. Teachers are especially cognizant of the influence that social interactions have on students’ willingness to participate, the stress that marginalized students endure, and the power of opportunities within physical education programs to practice tolerance and leadership. Teachers arrange units and tasks so that students can work with a buddy or supportive group, or with extra teacher attention; they break up the class in groups to ensure that students work simultaneously in stations or on small teams so that each may practice the task at a pace, level of difficulty, or intensity that will provide successful experiences. They also extend invitations to encourage students to assist their peers and younger students and to engage in community service.

**Take Advantage of Different Places to Enjoy Physical Activity.** The teachers are also sensitive to the value of linking instruction to authentic places within and beyond school by using field trips to neighborhood bowling alleys, health clubs, golf courses and parks. Jessica Shawley and her colleagues conduct field trips and virtual field trips to acquaint the students — and, by extension, their families — with the recreational services available in the community. All of these teachers emphasize doing physical activity outside of school. Facility time and sufficient equipment for multiple classes, teams and clubs can be found if teachers partner with other colleagues in school, and increasingly reach out to community agencies and funding sources. Physical education teachers often seek additional time, space and equipment in their communities and through grant writing.

**Student-directed Learning.** Instruction that is based on students interacting cooperatively and critically with others is becoming increasingly important to keep students active and engaged in middle school. The teachers featured here are aware of the power of building student ownership and encouraging student input on instructional decisions. They facilitate opportunities for students to express and listen to opinions, questions and ideas. Through careful grouping strategies, cooperative curricular approaches, and through current technology, they encourage students to direct their own learning. They set stations, group projects and collaborative...
team structures to provide more independence than more traditional kinds of instruction — avoiding teacher-centered, whole-group instruction when possible — to empower and keep their adolescent students engaged.

Conclusion

The research on physical activity patterns suggests that unless people develop a positive disposition toward physical activity as children and adolescents, doing so as adults will be difficult (Institutes of Medicine, 2015). Thus, school-based programs where students have fun doing physical activity are a central component of the National Physical Activity Plan (Bornstein & Pate, 2014). Arguably, the middle school years are the most important phase of socializing people for lifetime physical activity. In the past decade national public health institutions have come out strongly in support of physical education and school-based physical activity programs as an essential partner for combating obesity, preventing related health issues, and supporting prosocial development and academic performance (Basch, 2011; Castelli, Glowacki, Barcelona, Calvert, & Hwang, 2015; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2010). Schools are now recognized as the most practical and efficient context for promoting physical activity and educating the public to adopt a physically active lifestyle (Beighle & Morrow, 2014). But how do we ensure that students will attend, participate and stay engaged in physical education and school-based sport and physical activity long enough to benefit from those programs? Despite the national support for school-based physical activity, we know that not everyone enjoys physical education or chooses to participate in sports and physical activity programs. We also know that simply offering opportunities for physical activity does not guarantee that students, especially adolescents, will participate.

We have much to learn from outstanding physical education teachers who specialize in middle school programs. The teachers in this feature define their work in terms of the long-term goal of persuading each of their students to incorporate physical activity and personal health-related fitness as a sustained lifestyle choice. They are less focused on motivating students to fit into a one-size-fits-all curriculum. They are also keenly aware of the vulnerabilities and potential of their 11- to 14-year-old students at this watershed moment in their schooling and in their overall human development, and they design and deliver their physical education and school-based sport/physical activity programs accordingly.

The construct of student engagement helps summarize the strategies these teachers use and may help explain why these strategies work. The ultimate purpose of this article and of this special feature is to help teachers and teacher educators understand how to plan and provide middle-school programs that resist students’ disengagement from physical education, and to build on factors that support affective/emotional, behavioral and cognitive engagement in sport and physical activity. Student engagement concepts may help professionals to review policies and organize physical education and sport experiences that build on both the intrinsic and socio-ecological factors that support behavioral, cognitive and affective/emotional engagement in physical activity. Middle school is the time in students’ lives when they begin to gain a sense of who they are, and caring and inclusive programs just may help students to adopt a love of physical activity as one important facet of their identity, and may perhaps slow or reverse the trend toward disengagement.

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