

Positive Psychology and Quality Physical Education

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Help students lead the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life through physical education.

The use of best practices to motivate and inspire students intrinsically is critical to quality physical education and lifelong physical activity (Butler & Anderson, 2002; National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2003). Moreover, Lee (2004) recommended that quality physical education in schools create "an environment where students choose to participate in physical activity with confidence, enthusiasm, and a desire to learn" (p. 24). Consistent with quality physical education and inherent to positive psychology is the assumption that schools play a key role in the promotion of positive human development (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004; Harris, Thoresen, & Lopez, 2007). Given the need to create and sustain meaningful experiences for all students, the pursuit of positive psychology appears to be a natural match for quality physical education. The purpose of this article is to discuss concepts of positive psychology related to quality physical education. Specifically, the article integrates the positive psychology research with applications for physical educators.

In brief, "positive psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, p. 410) and is about valued experiences, growth, love, education, and play (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology and the scientific study of happiness refer to three paths or pursuits: *the pleasant life* (positive emotion), *the engaged life* (engagement), and *the meaningful life* (meaning). When individuals are aware of, pursue, and blend all three "lives," *authentic happiness* or *the full life* is more likely to be achieved (Murray, 2003; Seligman, 2002; Seligman et al., 2005).

Two pioneers in this field of study, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), provide the following description of positive psychology:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (p. 5)

Peterson and Seligman (2004), in their research, have further identified and used six overarching virtues and 24 character strengths associated with a positive psychology. The virtues and corresponding strengths include wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective), courage (authenticity, bravery, persistence, zest), humanity (kindness, love, social intelligence), justice (fairness, leadership, teamwork), temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation), and transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality).

Positive psychology is not a new or original concept, but rather a field of study that has gained credibility through the cumulative depth of empirical research (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In their progress report on the continuing growth of the field of positive psychology, Seligman et al. (2005) note the potential for positive psychology to improve our knowledge and application of how, why, and in what environments human development and flourishing occur. As Martin Seligman, past-president of the American Psychological Association (APA), stated in an invited address to educators at the 2003 APA National Convention, "If we can [in the schools] begin to teach people how to have more pleasure in life, how to have more flow in life, how to have more meaning in life, then positive psychology will have come of age" (Murray, 2003, p. 53).

The remainder of the article will review the positive psychology concepts of *the pleasant life*, *the engaged life*, and *the meaningful life* and relate these concepts to teaching physical education.

The Pleasant Life

The pleasant life involves experiencing positive emotions and personal well-being (Seligman, 2002; Seligman et al., 2005), and it is "a prerequisite of deep, transferable learning, and...a healthy mind and body" (Barnes, 2005, p. 392). Research supports a positive correlation between frequent positive affect and greater physical and mental health (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). These physical and mental health benefits include physiological adaptations, a variety of mind/body outcomes, and overall longevity (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

The pleasant life, and human flourishing, is characterized by happiness, empowerment, and resiliency (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). In a flourishing environment, the amount of positive affect (joy, interest, hope) is greater than negative affect (sadness, boredom, despair). Individually, in a relationship, or in a group, positivity needs to outweigh negativity (Fredrickson & Losada). It is this ratio of positive to negative affect that appears to have the greatest influence on the pleasant life and human flourishing.

In the physical education environment, practitioners can help children experience the concept of flourishing by setting a tone of positive affect on a daily basis. While physical educators acknowledge role modeling as a "powerful teaching tool," it is unclear whether this attitude matches actual behavior in the classroom (Cardinal & Cardinal, 2001, p. 35). From the students' perspective, the teacher's actions speak much louder than his or her attitudes and spoken words. Concrete gestures (e.g., a genuine smile) and lived examples of the pleasant life (genuine positivity, enthusiasm, and interest toward physical activity) by the physical educator are critical to the overall ratio of positive-to-negative affect in the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary for physical educators to focus on providing immediate, consistent, and encouraging motivational feedback to all students in the class. Whereas informational or task-specific feedback is critical to learning

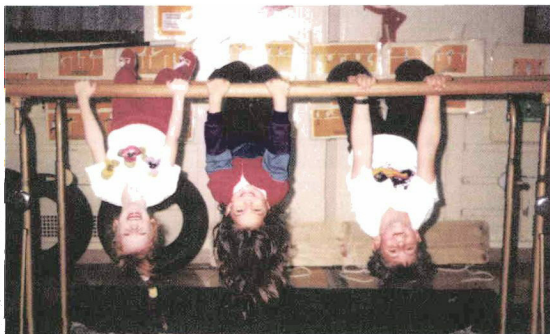
and development, motivational or encouraging feedback is critical to a flourishing environment.

The positive relationships and personal connections that physical educators have with their students, and the relationships among students, will ultimately lead to a flourishing environment. It is therefore important for educators to facilitate an environment that emphasizes social praise and limits peer pressure. Practically, physical educators and students can collaboratively write, agree to, and post behavior guidelines for all to follow with an emphasis on positive relationships and respect. Most schools already have written behavior guidelines, though often unknown to students, that can be modified to fit the physical education environment. For this to work, physical educators are encouraged to model the desired behavior at all times, in the classroom, gymnasium, athletic fields, cafeteria, hallways, and even the school parking lot. Often easier said than done, this can be accomplished by greeting each student with eye contact and a smile. Simply connecting on a friendly level, yet not overly familiar, will increase the overall positive affect in the class. Being authentic and modeling positive and consistent emotions plays a significant role in the development of the pleasant life for both teacher and student (Butler & Anderson, 2002; Foster & Lloyd, 2007).

To truly live the pleasant life, the reality of life circumstances must be considered. Sad but true, for many students school has become a tedious, uninspiring, boring place to be (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). With the low levels of satisfaction predominant among most children in school, the effect of such apathy on lifelong learning must be considered (Barnes, 2005). In the classroom, a clear indicator of the absence of the pleasant life is boredom, frustration, humiliation, alienation, or fear (Barnes; Kelley, 2003). Physical educators are therefore encouraged to infuse practical and creative activities into every lesson (Barnes). The use of multimedia technology relevant to today's student (e.g., blogs, podcasts, and online videos) and physical activity technology (e.g., Wii Fit, heart-rate monitors, pedometers, and online fitness logs) for class lessons and out-of-class assignments are useful in motivating students to engage in physical activity. The more that students are able to engage in activities relevant to their current life circumstances, the greater the likelihood of a flourishing environment (Barnes).

A reflection question the author often asks his undergraduate students in physical education is "Where is the love?" Or to clarify, "Where has the love gone?" These reflections refer to the innate love for movement and play. For example, a baby's first step is an incredibly exciting moment, filled with overwhelming joy for parents and the child. In the prologue to his book *The Inner Athlete*, Dan Millman (1994) eloquently related these first steps to an Olympic athlete's quest for gold. The story emphasizes the baby's authentic happiness and perseverance. He follows this story with a description of a shift in our mentality over the course of life.

All of us were inner athletes in our infancy—our mind was



Children naturally love to play. Positive psychology seeks to preserve this zest for movement as children grow older.

free of concern or anxiety, focused on the present moment; our body was relaxed, sensitive, elastic, and aligned with gravity; our emotions were free-flowing expression, uninhibited, spontaneous. We begin life with nearly unlimited potential. Most of us, however, lose touch with our childhood aptitudes as we become burdened by limiting beliefs, begin to deny our emotions, and experience a variety of physical tensions. (p. xii)

Clearly, healthy babies love to move about, toddlers love to dance, and children love to play. Yet as they grow into adults, the zest for movement can become completely eroded. In reflections, the author's students often discuss their changing attitudes toward movement, physical activity, and in particular physical education. Those attitudes range from not wanting to break a sweat prior to the next class period, to boredom, peer pressure, and the influence of everyday stress.

The reality is that somewhere along the way a majority of adolescents and young adults lose the love for physical activity, as evident in the number of inactive adults. Case in point, think of or observe a typical early morning class of adolescents or young adults. With emotions being defined as the public face of feelings (Barnes, 2005), how many smiling faces do you see? Since "most children do not start out bored and detached" (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 28), are educators partially at fault for contributing to these emotions in schools?

Similar to their innate need to move, children also have a "raw impulse of interest" (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 34). One clear way of promoting positive emotions and developing the pleasant life among today's youths is through the experience of interest (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi). The experience of interest "is characterized by 3 qualities: (1) being caught up and fascinated, (2) enjoying what one is doing while (3) in a state of arousal or excitement" (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, p. 29). Since we have a limited capacity to pay attention to multiple emotions at one time (Harris et

al., 2007), if our students are interested in the lesson they cannot also be bored. When the development of interest is the focus of teaching and the appropriate social support is provided, children are more likely to feel empowered to take action (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi).

Positive psychology can help physical educators to develop these qualities in the classroom through tapping into this raw impulse of interest. In physical education programming, Butler and Anderson (2002) addressed the experience of interest through "inspiring students" to a lifetime of physical activity (p. 21). They recommended motivational strategies such as task-skill balance, goal setting and self-assessment, teacher's behavior and modeling skills, and teacher and peer feedback. Within these strategies, when positive emotions are present and verbal encouragement given, students are more

likely to be "generative and creative in their actions, more tolerant of others, and more receptive to new ideas" (Foster & Lloyd, 2007, p. 33).

In order for students in physical education to experience interest, they must first find something to be interested in (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). It is therefore essential for physical educators to provide opportunities to incorporate students' interests and strengths into the curriculum. A fun and rewarding activity that can be modified to address specific student interests, while also meeting national standards for physical education, is "Adventure Racing" (DeJager, 2006; DeJager & Himberg, 2008). Combining fitness concepts, a variety of physical activities, challenges, and cooperative games, teachers and students can collaborate in creating their own race format. Talking with students, learning about their likes and dislikes, asking about activities that they have not previously experienced in physical education, and incorporating this information into daily lessons may enhance the experience of interest.

Central to the development of interest are the everyday teaching moments and interactions that physical educators have with their students (Butler & Anderson, 2002; Cone, 2007). To enhance these moments, educators are encouraged to identify their passion, to be flexible, to explore, and to create an exciting, engaging, and relevant educational environment (Cone). Physical educators can ask themselves the following reflective questions to help foster this passion and authenticity in the classroom:

- How much positive affect do I personally experience on a daily basis? What most contributes to this?
- How do my actions portray genuine positivity, enthusiasm, and interest toward physical education?
- How do my students perceive my actions? What messages am I sending with these actions (or non-actions)?
- How would my students describe me? How would other faculty describe me?
- How authentic are my relationships with students,

faculty, staff, and parents?

- How interesting is my class? My lesson plans?
- How am I addressing the interests of my students?

Physical educators have the power to inspire students to be interested in a lifetime of physical activity. However, they cannot inspire unless they themselves are inspired. In order to influence the pleasant life in physical education, physical educators are encouraged to take the time to *reflect* upon their own passion for physical education. Following this reflection, a thoughtful *review* of personal strengths and challenges is recommended. The ultimate goal is to *revise*, as needed, attitudes and actions in order to further contribute to a flourishing environment.

The Engaged Life

A primary factor contributing to living the pleasant life is the amount of positive affect we experience on a daily basis (Maddux, 1997). What most leads to a higher ratio of positive affect is the "ability to become absorbed in whatever activity one is engaged in at the present moment, the ability to live in the moment and forget about the past, future, and self... It is the capacity for experiencing flow" (Maddux, p. 344). Experiencing this flow and being fully engaged in what we do is critical to our happiness and is also an integral aspect of intrinsic motivation in physical education (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

One way to integrate engagement into physical education is to acknowledge physical activity as a mindful process, rather than a mindless habit or desired future outcome (Maddux, 1997; McKenzie, 2007). Students are more likely to be engaged if they are cognitively focused in the present (Bandura, 2001). Engagement comes from being in the moment now, not from thinking about the future. If the sole focus of being physically active is some future outcome,

...then when we finally get there, when we finally arrive, when we finally have the hearts and lungs and bodies we have been working for, we will have no capacity for enjoying it because we will be focused on some new future goal or worried about losing what we have achieved. In fact, we might go so far as to say that the most important thing we are developing while exercising mindfully are not stronger hearts or stronger lungs, but the ability to live in the moment, to be fully engaged in the here and now. (Maddux, p. 342)

This is what engagement is all about—living in the moment, being mindful of what is happening, enjoying, and internalizing the positive emotions. With this type of focus, physical activity is no longer something that students need to do, but rather something that students want to do.

Physical educators can help students become more mindful during physical activity through the use of the experience sampling method (ESM), which prompts students to recognize their level of engagement at a given moment in time (Foster & Lloyd, 2007). The purpose is to discover how students are actually spending time in class and their level of engagement in different physical activities. Prompted randomly by a watch alarm, timer, cell phone, or other

handheld electronic device, students are asked to provide honest feedback on their current level of engagement. Depending on the grade level of the class and time available, the following questions (adapted from Foster and Lloyd) can be answered in an open-ended fashion or revised to include Likert-scaled answers:

- At the time of the prompt, what exactly were you doing?
- What is the goal or purpose of the activity?
- How interested are you in the activity?
- How much concentration do you need to participate in the activity?
- How much skill is required for you to participate in the activity?
- How challenging is the activity for you?
- How motivated are you to continue participating in the activity? Why?

The use of ESM can help both physical educators and students to become more aware of levels of engagement and recognize what activities are more or less engaging. Through increased awareness, physical educators can plan for, and students can participate in, more mindful activities.

The engaged life occurs when students "are happy not because of what they do, but because of how they do it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 826). In developing the engaged life, it is important for physical educators to consider and match the demands of the task with the students' perceived skill levels and unique strengths (Mandigo & Holt, 2006; Seligman, 2002). This task-skill balance creates an optimally challenging experience, which, in turn, may further enhance the pleasant life through increased feelings of positive affect (Mandigo & Holt).

Physical educators can create this balance between task and perceived skill level by using process- or mastery-oriented goals and creating opportunities for students to choose activities that are perceived as challenging. Choosing challenging, yet achievable, process goals will further activate and contribute to mindfulness while also providing opportunities for students to experience success. Mandigo and Holt (2006) recommended using age-appropriate terminology such as "just right" when helping children choose these optimally challenging activities (p. 181). The phrase *comfortably challenging* sums up well this approach and is helpful in describing optimal challenge when choosing a level of intensity for most cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular fitness, and flexibility activities.

In another self-reflection exercise with students, the author asks "Are you happy?" Students typically respond with variations of the following, "I'll be happy when class is over...during basketball...when I'm with my friends...when I finish writing this paper." He then follows-up with, "Yes, but are you happy now?" This is often a much more difficult question to reflect upon. Today's students and our culture as a whole appear to have a "preoccupation with the notion that happiness is something we attain in the future by enduring hardships and making sacrifices in the present" (Maddux, 1997, p. 344). However, this does not always have

to be the case, as Eastern philosophies teach "that happiness and contentment is not something to be earned in the future...but something to be discovered by becoming immersed in life in the present moment" (Maddux, p. 344). If we are always looking for happiness down the road, then we truly are missing the opportunity for happiness in the experiences we are currently living.

Another way in which to create opportunities for engagement may be for physical educators to put the *play* back into the *playground*. The terminology we often use to describe physical activity, *working out*, says it all (Maddux, 1997). For many, physical activity, exercise, and even sport participation is perceived as work often pursued with some future outcome in mind. In such, participants try to disengage as much as possible from the actual activity, oftentimes mindlessly moving through the motions, all but eliminating the potential for flow to occur. Schneider (2001) noted, "whether or not some particular activity is 'play' is determined not by the nature of the activity...but rather by the attitude...towards the activity" (p. 156). According to Twietmeyer (2007), "the term 'play' [is] an attitude, a joyous spirit...Play, in other words, is an end in itself" (p. 202).

Engagement in physical education, including this shift in philosophy from outcome to process, is well summarized by Prusak and Vincent (2005),

The time is long overdue for the physical education profession to overcome its fixation on traditional product assessments and accept the notion that the process is our product. Holding kids accountable for the process of getting active, rather than results on a fitness test, will be more effective in the long run. Everyone can succeed at being physically active, and fitness is a byproduct of engaging in physical activity. Therefore, pursuing activity for its innate appeal can result in significant health benefits. (p. 27)

Promoting engagement based on feelings of autonomy, personal control, optimal challenge, and overall well-being are all effective ways in which to enhance the quality of physical education programming and to support lifelong physical activity (Alderman, Beighle, & Pangrazi, 2006; Biddle & Chatzisarantis, 1999; Mandigo & Holt, 2006; Prusak & Vincent, 2005). Specifically, focusing on individual strengths and motivating students toward self-determined behavior that makes them feel competent, in control, and connected to others is essential to the pursuit of the engaged life and a lifetime of physical activity (Kilpatrick, Hebert, & Jacobsen, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

Physical educators can help students to embody these emotions through implementing a voluntary, structured, behavior-change program. Students can be given the choice of changing any behavior related to their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or social health (e.g., eating habits, study routine, or sport training program). To facilitate change and engagement, it is important to determine process goals with an emphasis on personal choice, a task-skill balance, and social support. With opportunities to analyze their current behavior, plan for change, execute change, and evaluate

and reevaluate behavior, students will more likely experience feelings of engagement in physical education.

The Meaningful Life

The meaningful life involves the pursuit of happiness outside of oneself, with an emphasis on the greater good of society (Seligman, 2002). Critical to this third route to authentic happiness is establishing and maintaining flourishing communities that promote pleasant and engaged lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Given the need to create and sustain meaningful experiences for all students, this pursuit of positive psychology appears to be a natural match for quality physical education.

Schools, and specifically physical education, may serve as an ideal environment in which to promote the meaningful life (Clonan et al., 2004). For example, in the fight against the national epidemics of inactivity and obesity, physical education offers a clear benefit to society (Butler & Anderson, 2002). Through the process of lifelong physical activity, students may have a positive social influence on the actions of others (i.e., family, friends, and community) and may thereby impact national health conditions. In addition, and distinct to our field, physical education provides opportunities for teachers and students to see "the value of human lives beyond our own...[as] play and games are a unique arena of experience that allow us to see both human fraternity and human vulnerability" (Twietmeyer, 2007, p. 204).

The intimate relationships formed through shared physical and emotional challenges unique to physical education certainly have the potential to foster a sense of community in classrooms and beyond. This sense of community, and the quality of interactions within, enables students to develop a concern for others (Twietmeyer, 2007). Through these experiences, virtues of humanity, justice, and temperance may develop that include character strengths of kindness, love, social intelligence, fairness, and teamwork (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Physical educators can create this sense of community and develop character strengths by integrating cooperative activities and games, character education, and adventure programming into the physical education curriculum. These programs emphasize supportive relationships, peer mentoring, and the modeling and reinforcement of positive behaviors. In addition, a daily focus on rewarding, positive behaviors that are not based on competence (i.e., fair play) is critical to establishing a sense of community.

Social interest and the constructive goals of human behavior (Lemire, 2007) are integral to the development of positive institutions and a sense of community. According to Lemire, the four primary constructive goals of human beings are involvement (social interest, equality, and cooperation), encouragement (social support and love), improvement (betterment for self and society), and accomplishment (contributing to self and society). To enhance the meaningful life, physical educators can orient the learning environment toward these constructive goals. For example, when students

are provided with a cooperative learning environment, feel unconditionally supported and loved, learn the knowledge and skills needed to change and improve, and are able to take action and achieve success, they are more likely to engage in goal-directed or purposeful behavior such as participating in physical activity. When students strive toward these goals, motivation is both personal and social, further contributing to the meaningful life.

Authentic Happiness

Central to experiencing authentic happiness is the capacity for agency and the development of initiative (Larson, 2000). Agency refers to actions done intentionally, and it is evident when students believe in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their thoughts and actions within the world in which they live (Bandura, 2001). Linked to agency, initiative includes the ability "to mobilize one's attention, one's mental powers, on a deliberate course of action, without being deterred" (Larson, p. 172). Similar to positive emotions, in order for initiative to develop, people need to pay attention to the moment, rather than the expected outcome.

A focus on intrinsic motivation, engagement, and sustained effort is critical to building initiative and experiencing authentic happiness (Larson, 2000). Students often have success developing initiative when a task-oriented approach is combined with an emphasis on personal choice and constructive goals (Butler & Anderson, 2002; Lemire, 2007; Solomon, 2006). In addition, when students are engaged in activities that are perceived as interesting, challenging, and providing feelings of pleasure, they are more likely to internalize their actions (Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005). This internalized or self-determined behavior is integral to authentic happiness.

Physical education and the process of lifelong physical activity provide numerous opportunities for these elements to emerge. Within the framework of positive psychology, sparking initiative and getting students excited in physical education and for physical activity is the key. In their original introduction to the science of positive psychology, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted, "The quality of current experience is the basic building block of a positive psychology" (p. 8). Physical educators are clearly in a unique position to contribute to and promote this movement of positive psychology. Authentic happiness through physical education is possible when educators and students practice and experience pleasant, engaged, and meaningful lives.

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state regulations related to physical education. In addition, a school in the Bronx, New York, recently kept on a girl's soccer coach even though he openly said he really wanted to coach boys and was not interested in coaching girls.

As current president of NAGWS, I had the wonderful opportunity of being a guest at the White House, in June 2009, for a celebration of 37 years of Title IX initiated by President Obama. The panel discussion was moderated by Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor to the President and Chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls (a new commission to address the concerns of women) and attended by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Billie Jean King, star athletes, scientists, and scholars (see the entire event on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqLeg7eunsA>).

I even got a chance toward the end to mention the importance of quality physical education and of empowering girls by offering them opportunities in sport. The critical message is that we have made progress, but we still do not have fair and equitable opportunities for all. It is imperative for all of us to continue diligently demanding equitable opportunities. And with the continued questions related to the financial viability of NAGWS, a recommitment needs to be made by AAHPERD and its membership to the value of such an organization and the continued work that needs to be done.

We have seen with our own eyes that the real and tangible support for girls' and women's sport waxes and wanes. It is not a given and it is not consistent. Attacks on the importance of and urgency for sport and physical activity for girls and women come from internal and external sources. For over 110 years, NAGWS, in various forms, has been one consistent, never-ending and never-yielding resource for this mission. Now is not the time to let this organization slip under, nor to lose the "sport aspect" of the unique NAGWS focus.

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