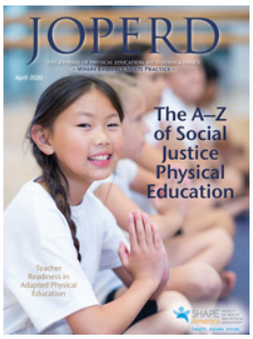

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The A–Z of Social Justice Physical Education: Part 1

Shrehan Lynch
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Jennifer Walton-Fisette

Social Justice Education

Hate has been plaguing our society; crime is increasing, and daily we see another malicious religious/race/ethnic/age/gender/sexual orientation/language-related offense. Politically influenced narratives glide around the media, often neglecting systematic patterns of inequities that have been working against minority groups for centuries. Individuals from the most dominant groups in society are afforded basic human rights, whereas environmental, political and economic structures work against the realities of many minority groups (see Figure 1). Critically oriented educationalists (see Blakeney, 2005; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Fernandez-Balboa, 1993; hooks, 1994) have focused on addressing social inequities troubling Western society, in

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order to create a more socially aware and morally responsible society that accepts rather than hates others. With a focus on diversity, acceptance and inclusion, education (including physical education) has an integral role to play in combating social injustice and creating a more equitable future for all students; such a task can be achieved through social justice education (SJE).

According to Chapman and Hobel (2010), teaching for social justice means facilitating educational structures and experiences where students can embrace and name their ways of knowing in the world through critical understandings of themselves, their communities, and their place in wider society. When social justice is the main aim of a teacher's pedagogy, it becomes encompassed within the larger umbrella of SJE. The literature on SJE ranges from philosophical/conceptual, practical, ethnographic/narrative, theoretical, and democratically grounded pieces (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). The practical strand speaks to this article considering our work was focused on providing examples of SJE for practitioners.

Table 1.
Five Top Tips for a Socially Just Physical Education Program

1. **Know your students**: take time to understand students' biographies and how they identify
2. Provide opportunities for **ownership**: allow students to be the creators of the curriculum
3. Allow students to create class **expectations** at the beginning of the school year and ensure they hold each other accountable
4. Practice **democratic principles**: implement weekly/monthly class meetings, where students can evaluate their HPE class
5. Move away from an authoritative figure to a **facilitator** in the class

Social Justice Physical Education

Social justice concepts in physical education are not a new focus. In fact, equality and equity issues in physical education have been a focus of a number of researchers and practitioners for over 40 years (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). In summary of the research findings, our institutions, such as schools and universities, reflect our society and the inequities that circulate it (Culp, 2016). As a result, the field of physical education is predominantly white, cisgendered, heterosexual and able-bodied; thus, professionally, physical education lacks the cultural diversity that reflects our student population (Harrison & Clark, 2016). Due to the lack of diversity within the profession, physical education continually replicates a curriculum that is Eurocentric, elitist, individualist, masculine and competition-focused (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993) and reproduces the culture of gendered, racist, sexist and ableist practices (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019).

Practitioners should learn about equity in physical education during teacher education; however, many teacher educators do not teach about SJE or sociocultural issues at all (Hill et al., 2018; Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2020). Consequently, Flintoff (2018) urged the physical education profession to provide strategies and actions for more inclusive spaces for students in our discipline. What is needed, however, are more strategies as to what SJE looks like and how it can be enacted within our classes on a daily basis, along with plans to ensure that we do not perpetuate inequity. While social justice advocates attempted to encourage SJE by providing reflective questions on strands of oppression (see Figure 1) in a recent blog (Lynch & Landi, 2018), we wanted to share more detailed SJE ideas for physical education. What follows is an A–M of SJE in physical education (Part 1); the suggested list is by no means exhaustive of every element of SJE but can be seen as a starting point. By using your professional judgment, you will be able to recognize whether the ideas and strategies outlined are appropriate for your teaching space, and it is up to you to decide what is appropriate for your context and individual students' needs. If you need a quick reference guide, see Table 1, which provides an overview of our five top tips. Importantly, the language identified within this article should be seen as relevant for the time; it is not static and will evolve over the years. Therefore, see the A–Z as evolving language concepts; for definition overviews of the most used words in SJE, see the ABC social justice glossary (Department of Inclusion & Multicultural Engagement, Lewis & Clark College, 2014).

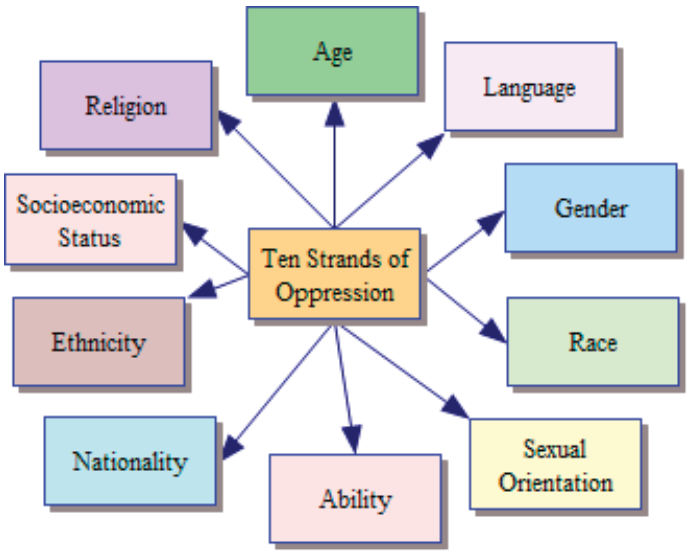

Figure 1.
Social justice education, ten strands of oppression

The A–M of Social Justice Physical Education

A – Ability Awareness. Every human has unique abilities, which are special to them. This means our students are gifted in many different ways, such as emotionally, socially, physically and cognitively. Predominantly in physical education, physical ability is most valued, with those who are not considered motor competent labeled as "low ability" or "disabled" and those who are competent movers typically labeled as "high ability." An ability awareness educator recognizes that low/high ability does not take into account the range of abilities that students can offer. For example, if a student could not physically perform an overhead clear in badminton, they may be able to explain it, draw it or teach it to others. Thus they are an *able* student. Finding out exactly how

students are able to showcase their abilities is essential, rather than labeling individuals in categories of "can" and "cannot" or "competent" and "incompetent." An ability-aware educator would consider teaching the concept of ability to students, to help them reframe assumptions about those who are considered "incompetent" or "unable" through creating an inclusive context where focus is not heavily on ability. As an example, teachers could invite local community-based Paralympic teams into their gym or cover a multitude of inclusive sports such as seated volleyball, goalball, and blind running as part of their units (not in isolation). To learn more about (differently) abled curriculum ideas, see *Teaching about Social Justice Issues in Physical Education* (Walton-Fisette, Sutherland, & Hill, 2019), which details a number of learning experiences that can be implemented.

B – Be Aware of Your Bias. In order to engage fully in SJE, an understanding of our own bias is imperative. It is important to be aware of both our explicit (conscious) and implicit (subconscious) bias and how this impacts our teaching, because, ultimately, we can reproduce the very things we are trying to teach about. Explicit bias occurs at a conscious level and encompasses attitudes and beliefs about a person or group (https://perception.org/research/explicit-bias/). Implicit bias, on the other hand, refers to unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that influence our understanding, actions and decisions (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). Being aware of explicit bias allows it to be consciously controlled or checked in a way that minimizes the impact on students. However, implicit bias needs to be identified and understood before it can be mediated through a variety of strategies. Therefore, an important first step is finding out what your implicit bias(es) may be. Visit the Project Implicit website at Harvard University to take a series of tests on a variety of different biases: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/. Once you have identified your bias(es), you could visit the Kirwin Institute website at Ohio State University for information and strategies for mediating your implicit biases. Being aware of our bias(es) is an important step in SJE.

C – Co-constructing Curriculum with a Community of Learners. Applying SJE means incorporating democratic education principles. This can include negotiating the physical education curriculum with students and encouraging a community feel among learners. By giving students voice and choice over their education, they can gain a sense of responsibility and ownership in their physical education class. This can be achieved through class meetings to decide physical education activities, then voting on choices. The participatory aspect of student voice and choice means that students are able to embody what a democracy looks and feels like. However, educators should ensure that each student's voice is respected and listened to and that voting is equal and equitable (see E). In some cases voting should be kept anonymous. A class survey is a tool that can make voting anonymous. Educators can find out what activities students want to do in physical education, collaboratively design a plan for the next semester, and then review the implemented curriculum afterward to see how it could be improved. Refer to the Institute for Democratic Education in America (Bennis, n.d.) for additional resources to learn more about co-constructing the curriculum.

D – Diverse Forms of Assessment. Assessing in physical education is important to demonstrate student learning in different domains. Traditionally, physical educators often fall back on using standardized tests, product tests, and assessments that focus on the psychomotor domain. However, as suggested by Cochran-Smith (2004), a more appropriate practice is to embed diverse forms of assessment into our classes. A social justice educator incorporates and prioritizes assessments within the social/emotional and affective domains to avoid an overreliance on psychomotor assessments (e.g., learning journals about class relationships or individual whiteboards to reflect on how fun the lesson was). If we assess in many different ways, we provide all students the opportunity to show us how they learn best. Engaging parents/guardians/caregivers in the learning journey of their children through the use of alternative assessments, such as portfolios, can help to raise the visibility and importance of physical education (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019). Visit Seesaw (https://web.seesaw.me/) to learn more about a learning tool to engage and communicate with students and parents/guardians/caregivers about their journey in physical education.

E – Equality versus Equity versus Liberation. These terms mean different things but are often used interchangeably. Figure 2 provides a great visual that illustrates the difference in these terms. Equity means providing everyone with an opportunity to be successful. Equality means fairness or treating everyone the same. If we provide everyone with the same, we cannot be equitable. Thus we need equitable teaching spaces. Liberation means including everyone and removing all barriers, which combines equality and equity. To explain this further, we might say we want all students to be able to run a mile, but some students do not have sneakers. To be equitable we would provide those who needed the sneakers, but some students might think this is unfair. To make the mile run fair, we could give everyone the same starting line. But to give everyone the opportunity to be successful, we could say that there is no time restriction or stipulate how the mile should be done so students could skip, walk, hop, jump, bike, swim or run! Taking it one step further, to liberate students, the activity might not be to run a mile at all; students could select their own distance or whether they want to do running in the first place (see C). To ensure whether a school is really promoting equality, equity or liberation, consider checking the school's policy documents for key terms (e.g., equitable). An inclusive school will promote liberation and acknowledge that more should be done to provide every student with the opportunity to be successful.

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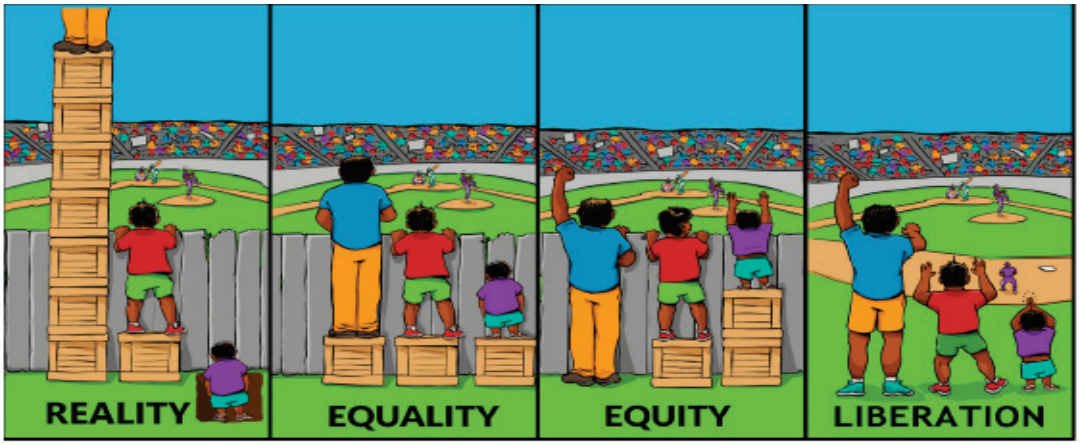

Figure 2.
The difference between the terms equality, equity, and liberation, illustrated;
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F – Fat-phobia. There is continual disagreement about the overall purpose of physical education. Some scholars have argued the purpose should be to spread health promotion messages and combat the "obesity"[1] epidemic; others suggest the need for physical education to be educative and focus on critiquing norms circulating health and physical culture. Those who adopt SJE principles fall into the latter and seek to question health norms that seemingly ignore sociocultural issues that affect a person's ability to engage in healthy behaviors, such as taking part in physical activity. Largely those arguing for health promotion seek to address "overweight" and "obese" bodies to become "slender," "slim" and "toned" for the good of the nation. Physical education has adopted this discourse and privileges bodies that conform to normative standards. Subsequently, many educators see those who deviate from the norm as lazy, unmotivated, gluttonous and in need of remediation. In order to create a safe and inclusive space for all students, educators must be conscious that they do not advocate for thinness and promote fat biases toward students (see B), and ensure their physical education program does not promote a normative view of the human body. To ensure all students feel comfortable in class, educators should attempt to love everyBODY in class despite their unique body size. They might want to relax their attire policy and allow students to dress how they feel comfortable and ensure that images shown to students display an array of body types. To learn more about how a fat bias can affect your teaching, read and access the resources within the Do You Love EveryBODY? blog (Lynch, 2018) that provides resources on this topic and also highlights physical education professionals sharing their anti-fat biases.

G – Gender Equity. Providing the same opportunities for each gender is essential to SJE. In physical education we see gender inequity through the curriculum itself, but also in the class structure. The class structure can force students into complying; not all students conform to the binary categories of male and female yet are forced into selecting one of those two categories for physical education classes. Many physical education programs across the world continue a tradition of single-sex physical education classes, which can create an uncomfortable situation for those who are gender non-conforming. The physical education curriculum itself can also provide inequitable gendered situations, by only offering traditional conservative activities — for example, offering male class activities such as American football, basketball, cricket, rugby, soccer and baseball, and offering female class activities such as dance, gymnastics, yoga, netball, softball and volleyball. These traditionally gendered activities create a norm that males should carry out masculine, aggressive, power-like sports and females should continue the tradition of taking part in activities that promote females as "aesthetically beautiful creations." Teachers can promote gendered practices in their language by saying slurs such as "don't throw like a girl" or "boys don't cry, man up." This binary thinking is dangerous in physical education and can haunt students throughout their life. Students, despite their identity preferences, should be offered access to all types of activities. When beginning at the start of the academic year, teachers should have students introduce themselves by their name and their pronouns. For example, this may look like, "Hi, my name is Sahim and I use he/him/his pronouns." This is a simple way to show transgender/nonbinary students that you acknowledge their presence. Furthermore, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) have provided some excellent guidelines for teachers (GLSEN, n.d.).

H – Heteronormativity. The notion of heteronormativity is pervasive within physical education, as it is within society in general. Heteronormativity is the view that endorses heterosexuality as the "normal" or indeed a natural sexuality expression (Landi, 2018). Understanding how the notion of heteronormativity is present in physical education and the ways in which it is manifested in homophobia is important for SJ in physical education. Students who identify as LGBTQI and/or gender non-conforming often do not find physical education to be a safe and welcoming space (Ayvazo & Sutherland, 2009). Including curricular choices that are not gendered, being conscious of language when teaching or talking with students, using images that are inclusive of athletes who identify as LGTBQI and/or gender non-conforming, and examining policies to ensure inclusivity of all students can help to create an emotionally and physically safe environment for students who identify as LGBTQI and/or gender non-conforming. For more resources on this topic, see GLSEN (n.d.) and PFLAG (2019).

[1]Similarly to Wann (2009), we use the quotation marks as scare quotes to emphasize the word's unwarranted status.

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I – Identity. Understanding our own identity is integral when engaging in SJE. Not only does exploring self-identity allow you to gain an awareness of how your life experience has influenced who you are, but it is crucial in providing insight into how self-identity influences your teaching and interactions with students. Reflecting on past experiences that have shaped your current identity is a good way to start this process. Completing the social identity wheel (LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, 2017a) and the personal identity wheel (LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, 2017b) will provide you with a tool to explore different facets of your identity. Taking this further, you can use this information to reflect on how your self-identity influences your teaching in terms of teaching styles, choice of units, classroom expectations or rules, dress policies, discipline strategies, feedback, class climate, and so on. Understanding how your self-identity influences your interactions and expectations of students is important to consider. Is your classroom a place where all students feel safe, valued and heard? Figure 1 identifies 10 strands of oppression that can be used to guide your reflection on this question as it highlights the importance of understanding intersectionality. Are there students who identify with certain strands who might not feel as safe, valued or heard within your classroom?

J – Justice Leads to Joy. Justice in its simplest form is being fair or just. In education, justice is demonstrated in schooling through the telling of real history truths such as employing a curriculum that details Christopher Columbus "invading" the United States, not "discovering" the United States. Justice is also exhibited through a school name or mascot, its structures, and its policies. For example, is your school or football team named after someone or something that is culturally insensitive? As an educator, the norm should include speaking out when recognizing injustice and subsequently inequitable practices. It is through advocating for justice that social justice educators are able to make structural changes in schools. When changes are made, students can experience more joy at school, knowing that their space is equitable, and educators want to make their experience meaningful and purposeful within inclusive settings. As an example, you might investigate the schools' discipline statistics and recognize that minority students of color are frequently excluded from school to alternate provisions or that they are over-disciplined; thus the schools' discipline policy could be considered Eurocentric and non-inclusive. Second, you might notice that your school does not have gender-neutral bathrooms and locker rooms, therefore, the school structure would need to be addressed to be fully inclusive. Lastly, investigating the staff diversity could be an insight into recruitment practices. You might find that all the administrators at your school are white or all male, but the teachers are all black/brown or female. This could indicate an inequitable recruitment practice or the need for more positive discrimination practices. For policy implementation ideas, see Green and colleagues (2015).

K – Knowledge of Minority Groups. Educators teach in diverse settings, with students, teachers and administrators from different cultural groups than their own. Many of these students, teachers and administrators may come from minority groups who have been treated differently depending on policy, economics and societal discourses. As a SJE educator you should seek to become informed of cultural norms circulating each minority group, along with understanding a group's history. When teachers engage in cultural awareness, they increase their cultural fluency, which can avoid offending students and their parents/guardians and build teacher-student relationships. As an example, encouraging Thanksgiving celebrations (or similar holidays) when you have Native American (and indigenous populations) in your class can be particularly insensitive and hurtful to students. The Manataka American Indian Council have overviewed "The REAL Story of Thanksgiving" (Bates, n.d.), which was designed to inform teachers of the historical distortions taught within schools. Within physical education, having cultural awareness might involve knowing that students who identify as Muslim may be celebrating Ramadan and fasting during particular months of the year (these change yearly) or that Jehovah's Witnesses typically would not celebrate Christmas, Easter or practice yoga. Knowing this information allows teachers to have more valuable exchanges with students and understand their cultural norms. To learn more about different minorities, see Teaching Tolerance for classroom resources, professional development, and further study: https://www.tolerance.org/topics.

L – Language/linguism. A SJ educator is cognizant of different ways of communicating with students who are English language learners (ELL). Although it is not reasonable for teachers to learn the languages spoken by all of their students, it is reasonable for teachers to learn key words or phrases to enhance their communication with students. There are also other strategies that can be used to aid communication, such as visual demonstrations, word walls (with appropriate translations), use of cue cards (pictorial and/or translated), peer translators if available, and the use of Google Translate. While communicating with students who are ELL can be achieved through hard work and creativity, the concept of linguism, which is discrimination based on a person's language, is also important to understand. Modeling different communication strategies with students who are ELL can also help to foster understanding and acceptance with peers who are not ELL. For more ideas and resources for communicating with students who are ELL, see Support Real Teachers (n.d.).

M – Media. The power of media in the lives of the youngsters and youth that we teach is increasing every day. Generation Z and millennials have been immersed into a culture where technology is normalized, and for some students the digital has become part

of their embodied self. The particular influence of social media on students' body image is important to understand for a number of reasons. Students who have a body type that is not celebrated or promoted in a positive way on social media often face negative comments and/or bullying in physical education. Indeed, students who seem to fit the "ideal body type" also often struggle with their body image. These students may feel inadequate or turn to unhealthy means to gain their "ideal body," whether that be steroids/human growth hormones or eating disorders. A SJ educator focuses on helping students to celebrate their bodies to provide some balance to the influence of social media. Providing body-positive images and media in physical education that shows the strength, grace, power and difference of people (including well-known athletes) is one way to celebrate different body types. An example unit is covered in *Teaching about Social Justice Issues in Physical Education* (Walton-Fisette, Sutherland, & Hill, 2019), which outlines the differing ways to teach about a "strong body" using media examples in an inclusive, yet stereotype-disrupting way.

Summary

As educators, it is vital that we see our role in making the world a fairer place as part of our job (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993). Taking steps toward being a socially just teacher is vital not only for our own growth and development as teachers, but for the sake of the students we teach. Creating an environment where all students feel safe, valued, respected, cared for and heard should be the goal of physical educators. Within such an environment is where our students can flourish and develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to be healthy and active over the lifespan. We have provided examples of how using a SJE approach within physical education as a start in making spaces more inclusive and socially aware. This article has included A–M, so look out for Part 2, which will see you through the rest of the alphabet. And remember, SJE is fluid; it is constantly changing. For additional ideas and lesson activities, please look out for *Teaching about Social Justice Issues in Physical Education* (Walton-Fisette, Sutherland, & Hill, 2019).

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