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To cite this article: Dana Perlman & Collin A. Webster (2011) Supporting Student Autonomy in Physical Education, Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 82:5, 46-49, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.2011.10598628](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2011.10598628)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2011.10598628>



Published online: 26 Jan 2013.



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Supporting Student Autonomy in Physical Education

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Self-determination theory offers the key to influencing students' physical activity habits.

Physical education can be a personally rewarding experience for children and adolescents. It also has the potential to help students acquire the skills, knowledge, and values to achieve and maintain a healthy lifestyle by regularly participating in physical activity. However, not all students enjoy physical education, and motivation to learn in class tends to wane as children reach adolescence (Mowling, Brock, Eiler, & Rudisill, 2004). Students who lack motivation or whose motives are maladapted to desired program outcomes are more likely to feel unsatisfied with their learning experiences, be disengaged in class, and be truant from class (Ntoumanis, Pensgaard, Martin, & Pipe, 2004). For these students, physical education falls short of meeting its potential.

The problem of unmotivated students in physical education is not new, and substantial research has been done to try to find a solution. Recently, this research has drawn on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) to tease out variables related to motivation. Studies within this theoretical frame have clearly demonstrated that student motivation is influenced by the extent to which autonomous learning is supported in class (Ntoumanis, 2001, 2005; Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Autonomy support is a powerful mechanism in student motivation because it facilitates self-determination, which, as will be discussed, has more staying power than other behavioral regulators. Self-determined students are motivated to learn because they possess an internalized desire to do so, not because they feel pressure from external sources, such as guilt, threats, tangible rewards, or other extrinsic incentives. External motivators can be effective in the short term as long as they are present, but they lose their effect once removed or when the goal is long-term maintenance of a behavior. Given the overarching goal of physical education to foster lifelong participation in physical activity, it is essential for teachers to understand self-determined motivation and to explore pedagogical strategies for enhancing autonomous learning.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is a viewpoint of motivation among individuals who possess a desire to improve themselves by engaging in behaviors that they deem important or meaningful for personal development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For instance, a self-determined physical education student would engage in learning tasks that are relevant to long-term physical activity behavior because he or she values being active. The SDT provides a multifaceted explanation of student motivation. Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) described SDT and student motivation through a three-phase linear process that includes (1) social climate, (2) psychological needs, and (3) motivational levels.

Social climate refers to the development and implementation of an environment that supports students' psychological needs. The social climate is strongly influenced by the individual in an authoritative position (e.g., the teacher), and it can be classified either as autonomy supportive or controlling (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). An autonomy-supportive environment focuses on instruction that supports students' feelings of volition, control, and choice. Conversely, a controlling environment focuses solely on the completion of instructional goals through external measures (e.g., rewards, guilt).

As exposure to and engagement in a specific social climate occurs, students begin to perceive a level of support for three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Autonomy is the perception of choice and control over a specific situation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence has been defined as the perception or feeling of success within a physical education setting (Deci, 1975). Relatedness means being socially connected or accepted by peers and teachers (Baumeister & Leary 1995). The combined level of satisfaction of all three basic needs is what influences higher levels of motivation and self-determination the most (Deci & Ryan, 2004).

Vallerand (1997, 2001) classified individual motivational levels using a hierarchical model that defines student motivation as intrinsic, extrinsic, or amotivated. The highest and most beneficial is intrinsic motivation. A student who is intrinsically motivated will participate in an activity for purely internal reasons, such as for enjoyment, to accomplish a task, or to learn something new (Deci & Ryan, 2004). Extrinsic motivation (beneath intrinsic) is when activities are completed for external reasons (e.g., threats, rewards; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Finally, amotivation is a complete lack of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2004). Amotivated students tend to find excuses not to participate (Ntoumanis et al., 2004).

As a framework for understanding motivation, SDT identifies the primary motivational influence of the teacher as a key to an autonomy-supportive climate. In physical education research, students' perceptions of autonomy support have been associated with satisfaction in all three psychological needs (e.g., Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007; Vierling, Standage, & Treasure, 2007), more self-determined motivation (e.g., Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005), and a wide range of desired learning outcomes (e.g., Hagger, Chatzisarantis, Barkoukis, Wang, & Baranowski, 2005; Koka & Hagger, 2010). The critical importance of supporting students' autonomous learning in physical education has therefore been well established. Yet, to date, the physical education literature lacks guidance with respect to delineating strategies that teachers can use to support student autonomy. The question that begs to be asked is "What can a teacher do to create an autonomy-supportive climate?"

Creating an Autonomy-Supportive Climate

At first glance, the idea of supporting student autonomy might seem unrealistic given that school environments are built on principles of control, such as rules for student conduct and expectations for students to defer to the teacher's authority (Deci & Ryan, 2004). But it is important to understand that, within a structured environment, the learning climate can provide opportunities for choice, initiative, problem solving,

and other experiences that support students' autonomy and can foster self-determined motivation (Reeve, 2006). Moreover, learners will more likely choose to follow the teacher's directions if their internalized values are consistent with what they are being asked to do. Autonomy does not have to be synonymous

with independence, as children and adolescents are often autonomously dependent on adults for direction, guidance, and decision making (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The key to supporting autonomy is communication that reassures students that their volition as learners can be exercised to achieve class objectives.

The work of Reeve and colleagues in the general education literature offers the most comprehensive conceptual framework to date with respect to defining autonomy-supportive pedagogy (Reeve, 2006; Reeve, 2009; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). These works organized autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors into five behavior classes: (1) nurture inner motivational resources; (2) provide explanatory rationales; (3) use informational, noncontrolling language; (4) acknowledge and accept negative affect; and (5) demonstrate patience. Below, each of these behavior classes will be described in more detail, with examples of how they can be applied in physical education teaching.

Nurture Inner Motivational Resources. This involves identifying and capitalizing on students' internal motives to make learning experiences more personally relevant and rewarding. Specifically, teachers "find ways to coordinate the instructional activities they offer with students' preferences, interests, sense of enjoyment, sense of challenge, competencies, and choice-making" (Reeve, 2006, p. 229). Tapping into each student's inner motivational resources is not a realistic objective for all physical education teachers. However, an alternative strategy is to identify a common resource shared by most students in a class. For example, many children and adolescents today enjoy and have considerable experience using portable technologies, such as laptop computers and MP3 players. Designing learning tasks that make use of such technologies is one way teachers can incorporate students' interests, sense of enjoyment, and competencies into class experiences. Technology-based tasks in physical education might include having students use computer software to create instructional videos for performing movement skills learned in class, edit videotaped games to make a "highlights"

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video emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of sport, or compose music to support varying rhythms and beats reflected in a student-created dance. Other common motivational resources shared by groups of students might include activity preferences and interests in popular culture. Teachers should consider surveying their classes to learn students' curricular preferences (e.g., team games, sports, and individual vs. team activities) and personal interests (e.g., hobbies, favorite movies, television shows, music) and draw on this information to design and integrate more meaningful and motivating learning experiences in physical education.

Provide Explanatory Rationales.

Rules and directives are necessary for the smooth functioning of any school-based learning experience. However, teachers have different ways of approaching the communication and justification of their management system to students. Some teachers rely on power-asserting rationales to respond to students' questions about why rules are important or why they are being asked to do something. For example, during game play, students may begin to complain about the rules. A controlling teacher would rationalize the rules for students by saying, "That's just the way the game is played, so keep going." Conversely, an autonomy-supportive teacher would rationalize the rule by explaining its importance. For instance, the teacher might say, "These rules help us stay safe...I know that it is a bit different from what you might be familiar with, but we do need to play safely." Notably, explanatory rationales can also be used when communicating the importance of a learning task to the overall success of playing a game, performing a dance or gymnastics routine, or achieving any other "big picture" outcome that students are working toward. An explanation of why the teacher's rules, requests, and assigned tasks are important can help students understand the logical reasoning behind the structure and flow of class activities and, in turn, promote the internalization of values that are consistent with the teacher's expectations for learning and behavior.

Use Informational, Noncontrolling Language. The words and style of communication used in a physical education setting are critical in the teaching-learning process. A controlling style of instruction uses guilt, pressure, and deadlines to get students to accomplish tasks (Reeve, 2006). For example, teachers may say, "Do this or you will get a zero if you don't participate." The purpose of controlling language is to guide student behavior, but in the end students do not learn why participation is important and may become less motivated as the lesson progresses. On the other hand, autonomy-supportive language can still guide student behavior, but it relies on statements that allow for flexibility and are information laden (Reeve, 2006). For example, to address a student who is not engaged in an activity, the teacher could modify statements that use words like "should" or "have to," and instead use words like "may," "could," or "might."

Students need time to work out solutions, acquire new skills, and feel successful as learners in class.

A simple change in the way statements are delivered to students can have a positive influence on the perception that autonomous learning is being supported. In addition, teachers should take advantage of opportunities to provide students with information-rich performance feedback. When feedback targets specific aspects of student performance and provides useful information about what the student did well

or needs to improve on, the student gains increased control of his or her learning experience by virtue of acquiring and taking ownership of the knowledge he or she needs to be successful as a learner.

Acknowledge and Accept Negative Affect.

In any class, student behaviors can dictate the teacher's style of instruction or communication. Teachers attempt to create a safe and pedagogically appropriate environment through the use of rules and guidelines, but at times students may not comply with, understand, or appreciate the flow of the lesson and the requirements asked of them. These instances can lead to expressions of negative affect from students and leave teachers with having to figure out how to handle such expressions. Take the example of a student who is demonstrating negative body language (e.g., head down and depressed facial expression) and lackluster effort during class activities. A controlling teacher would probably resort to pressuring language and threats to motivate the student to try harder, or may simply ignore the student without concern for why the student has chosen to disengage from the learning process. On the other hand, the autonomy-supportive teacher will investigate the student's negative behavior. The teacher may approach the student and ask, "What is wrong?" allowing the student to communicate his or her feelings. The teacher might empathize with the student (e.g., "I understand what you are going through") and, when appropriate, accept the student's feelings (e.g., "Let me see what I can do change this"). Students need to feel justified in experiencing diverse emotions, because it is a natural part of the learning process and, more broadly, life at school. It is important for teachers not to stifle students' expressions of negative affect and instead help them to channel negative feelings through more positive outlets. Daily journals, class discussions, and brief periodic meetings with individual students are examples of such outlets.

Demonstrate Patience. Students need time to work out solutions, acquire new skills, and feel successful as learners in class. The learning process can be challenging for students because of the many internal and external factors that compose the learning environment. Feeling tired from staying up too late the night before, feeling anxious because of an impending test, being distracted by classmates who are off task, and being asked to perform a challenging skill in physical education are only some of the many factors that can influence students' level of focus. Teachers must be willing to provide students with every opportunity for success without

losing patience too quickly and abandoning faith in students' ability to succeed. Providing adequate time for students to answer a question before issuing the correct response and allocating plenty of practice time are two important ways to demonstrate patience and to yield to students' learning needs. Pacing the lesson in accordance with these needs will also enhance students' control over their learning and increase their level of success. Demonstrating patience also consists of being a good listener. Webster (2010) recommended several teacher behaviors that can be used to this end, including maintaining eye contact with students when it is their turn to speak, being still and not multitasking while a student is expressing himself or herself, letting students finish what they need to say and not interrupting them, and checking to make sure the message received was indeed the message the student intended to communicate.

Conclusion

Experiences in physical education should be designed to promote commitment to, enthusiasm for, and competence in lifelong physical activity participation. Part of ensuring that physical education will accomplish this goal is for teachers to take the necessary steps to satisfy students' basic needs as learners. Based on research about self-determination theory, this article was intended to provide teachers with an overarching framework for infusing instructional techniques that support students' need to feel autonomous, which can facilitate self-determined motivation and can lead to numerous benefits for students in physical education. It is hoped that the recommended behaviors discussed here will be viewed as easily adoptable and adaptable to the myriad of contexts in which physical education teachers work.

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