Getting to Know Your Students
The Importance of Learning Students' Thoughts and Feelings in Physical Education

JENNIFER FISETTE

A student-centered approach allows teachers to design lessons that meet the needs of all students.

Your class walks out to the field for the first day of a softball unit. A few students sprint ahead with their gloves, eager to play the game. Others talk among themselves and slowly make their way to the field, particularly to the right. On offense, these same students try to hit in the bottom of the batting order or get another student to bat for them. Based on your observations, do you perceive these students as not interested in physical education, disengaged, or resistant to your instruction? Have you ever asked yourself why these students want to play defensive positions where the ball is least likely to be hit to them, or do not want to come to bat?

Getting to know students and understanding their background and experiences are primary goals of effective teachers. But how can physical educators accomplish this?

This article discusses how teachers can get to know their students by incorporating various formative assessment methods within their instruction to foster self-confidence and a positive self-image, while enhancing students' valuation and enjoyment of physical activity.

Physical education places students in vulnerable situations, as most activities require students to participate in clothing that reveals their body and to demonstrate their competency in a very public arena. Within this public environment, students may have self-image and perceived-competence issues. For example, students may have self-image issues when they change their clothes in front of others in the locker room, because they may not want other students to see their body. Furthermore, they may not want to demonstrate in front of their classmates in activities such as softball, because the focus is completely on them when they are at bat. Teachers often assume that students are resistant to participating in physical education due to lack of interest, when in fact their apathy may involve complex feelings and attitudes about their abilities and body (Azzarito & Salomon, 2006; Fisette, 2009; Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Webb, Quennerstedt, & Ohman, 2008).

Students often select activities that they are good at in order to elicit positive feelings about their self-image and perceived competence. In addition, some students only participate fully when they feel comfortable with their peers, which sometimes means they engage only in activities when they are with their friends. To learn more about their students, teachers should consider giving them opportunities to share their experiences and express how they feel as participants in the public domain of physical education.
Who Are Our Students?
A first step in getting to know students is to learn who they are in different contexts (MacBeath, 2006). Are the students the same person in school, at home, and in the community? Do they know who they are? How do they feel when they are at school, particularly in physical education? How do they feel when they move and perform in physical activities? Do they understand why they value certain activities more than others? What factors influence their engagement and enjoyment of physical activity, both in and outside of school? The answers to these questions can help teachers get to know and understand their students in physical education. However, teachers need to be careful that students do not reveal too much. If students express themselves beyond the scope of their feelings, background, and experiences related to the physical education environment, then teachers should refer them to a professional who can appropriately handle deeper issues and concerns. The goal in getting to know one's students is to inform and differentiate their instruction to meet their needs and enhance learning opportunities.

Effective physical education teachers are better able to gain students' cooperation and respect when they get to know them as individuals. For this to occur, teachers need to give students a voice, and the first step in doing that is to create a safe space, a comfortable environment, in which they can share their thoughts and feelings.

Creating a Safe Space
Teachers can understand students' lives by investigating who they are inside and outside of physical education. For example, they might converse with their students; talk to other teachers, parents, and siblings; and attend extra-curricular activities within and outside of school. Then the goal will be to learn what students think and feel within the physical education context specifically.

Accessing students' voice is not an easy task. Unless teachers create a safe space for students to share their thoughts and feelings, many students may be hesitant to make themselves vulnerable. Teachers should consider developing a level of trust with students by taking their feelings seriously, keeping student information confidential, and maintaining anonymity when discussions are opened up to a group or class. For example, the teacher could make it voluntary for students to put their names on a written assignment, allow them to type their responses so their writing will not be recognized, collect students' work one at a time, or provide each student with a folder so they have a private place to store all of their work. As the teacher gets to know the students, one potential goal is to ask them what they need to feel comfortable and safe. This lays the groundwork for an integrative cycle: the more comfortable and safe students feel, the more willing they are to share their thoughts and feelings, which ultimately informs teachers on how to establish even safer spaces based on student input.

Strategies for Gathering and Using Student Information
Giving students a voice will inform teachers and potentially provide students with a sense of belonging (Dyson, 1995, 2006; Graham, 1995). Talking with students is the simplest method of gaining access to their perspectives about physical education. However, accessing their insecurities about movement and the public display of their body is much more difficult. Ultimately, student needs will determine which strategies to use to get to know them better. Simultaneously, students will need to shift their own thinking (based on previous experiences in school, particularly in physical education) to allow themselves to share their personal feelings with the teacher. The teacher's most important task is to be sensitive to students' thoughts and feelings and to be thoughtful in how he or she gathers and uses the information. Teachers should explore which activities work best with which classes and students, how and when to implement them, and what to do with the information gathered. Six methods are suggested for gathering information: personal profiles, student snapshots, journal writing, participation identification, picture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1. Personal Profile Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Profile</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong> ______________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hometown</strong> ____________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Birth date</strong> _________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade</strong> ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Favorite/least favorite classes in school: ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Favorite hobbies: ____________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Favorite foods: ______________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Something you never have done, but would like to do: ____________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pet peeves: ________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What, if any, goals do you have for this school year? ______________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What are your goals/dreams for the future? _________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Students discuss their personal profiles.

identification, and drawings. These methods can be adapted to be developmentally appropriate for students of any age, and they can be aligned with any curriculum.

Personal Profiles. Since many students may feel uncomfortable playing and interacting with students they do not know well, especially at the middle and high school levels (Carlson, 1995; Derry, 2002; Fisette, 2009; Portman, 1995, 2003), personal profiles provide an informal space for students to talk about themselves. The teacher can include questions that are general and have nothing to do with physical education, or questions that are specific to physical education can be included (figure 1). The goal of this activity is for students to begin to get to know one another through each individual's own voice, not based on assumptions they may have made without talking to one another. Teachers can have students individually complete their personal profile and then share it with a group or team as a starting point for them to get to know other students in their physical education class. Personal profiles can also be used to inform teachers about their students at the beginning of the school year, or semester. Teachers can use the information to initiate conversations with the students as they begin to establish a rapport with them.

Personal profiles can also be tailored to help students better understand their own likes, dislikes, capacities, limitations, and medical issues. Depending on the content, these profiles may be shared with their peers, or kept confidential.

In response to questions about personal goals for the school year, a large number of students might indicate a desire to learn new activities. With this information, the teacher can offer new sports and activities that students have not experienced in physical education class, provided they align with the national content standards (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2004) and the school district's physical education curriculum. To find out which specific activities students would like to try, teachers may consider surveying students anonymously or talking individually to them about their previous physical education experiences and which sports and activities they engaged in, liked, or disliked.

Student Snapshots. To learn how students feel in specific situations, the teacher can have them complete a student snapshot form (figure 2). Understanding students' affective response to an activity helps the teacher to modify it in order to accommodate the enjoyment or fears that allow or prevent students from having a positive experience. Student snapshot forms can comprise one or more questions or statements that are appropriate for the lesson goals and objectives. It might include general questions that focus on an important national, state, or school event (e.g., political election, prom, field trips), questions that relate to activities outside of school (e.g., at home, in the community, extracurricular), or questions that are based on specific situations within physical education (e.g., checking for understanding on content, feelings about their team or playing a particular sport/activity, asking for feedback). Student snapshots can also be used as a form of assessment if the focus is on physical education content. Students also can be encouraged to use a camera to capture a visual snapshot of a specific moment that they can later reflect on based on their perceptions of the captured moment. Student snapshot forms can be used at the beginning of an academic year or semester; at the start, during, or end of a unit; or as an exit slip (Cone & Cone, 2005).

Here is an example of how student snapshots can be put to use. In reply to a question on how students felt their team was doing during a volleyball unit, the majority of students stated that their team was not working together and that a few students made all of the team decisions without considering other students' input. With this information, the teacher could observe the team dynamics during the next class and see why they were not working like a team. The teacher could then have a class discussion on the benefits of teamwork in game play, implement fair-play points for teams that work cooperatively (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2004), or use a personal and social responsibility rubric (Hellison, 2003). The personal and social responsibility rubric can be used by the teacher, or the students can self-assess their own level of responsibility. Furthermore, once these modifications have been implemented, the teacher can follow up with another student snapshot form inquiring about the teams' ability to work like a team. If the majority of students still feel their team is not working collaboratively, the teacher can have students provide input on different strategies that they think could be implemented to improve team cooperation.

Journal Writing. Journals are used to record information for personal or academic purposes (Ballinger & Deeney, 2006; Parker & Hellison, 2001). Journaling in physical education provides students with a private space to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Most often, notebooks or binders are used as journals in school; however, other methods, such as computers and digital recorders, can also be used. Since teachers want their students to be moving during class, journal writing can be incorporated in a way that fits the physical education curriculum and context (Grosse, 2005; Holt/Hale, 1999; Steffen & Grosse, 2003). For example, journal writing may be limited to the first or last five minutes of class or assigned as homework. This can be done daily, once a week, or every other class. Teachers can provide students...
TGM emphasizes small-sided games to enhance students' what students should do when they have the ball (on-the-ball skill. students to reflect on how they would assess their skills in feel good about themselves.

Students' perceptions of themselves in physical education today? How do you feel your team is performing during this unit? What is or is not working well on your team? How do you like the activity you are playing? What factors affect your enjoyment of the activity? How did you feel about your body throughout the class period? These questions range from general to more personal and private questions. The nature of the questions will depend on the goal of the activity and on the trust and rapport that the teacher has developed with his or her students.

Student responses can inform future journal prompts, group or class discussions, lesson planning, and instruction. For example, at the end of a team handball lesson, students responded to the journal prompt, "What factors affect your level of participation and enjoyment of team handball?" Collectively, students stated that the top factor that influenced their participation and enjoyment was that they were not good at team handball. With this information, the teacher can implement various strategies to increase opportunities for students to be successful. For example, if the focus of the lesson is primarily on skill development (isolated from the game form) or on large-sided games, the teacher can consider using student-centered curriculum models such as the sport education model (SEM) or tactical games model (TGM). The TGM emphasizes small-sided games to enhance students' tactical awareness and game performance and focuses on what students should do when they have the ball (on-the-ball skills) and when they do not have the ball (off-the-ball movements), which increases students' overall game involvement (Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2003, 2006).

Another method that teachers can implement is to follow up on a previous journal prompt with another by asking students to reflect on how they would assess their skills in an activity, how they feel when they participate in the activity, and what they believe might help them improve their skill. If students would likely be more honest and forthcoming with their responses by maintaining their anonymity, the teacher could have them turn in a reflection without including their name. Depending on the method or path the teacher chooses, the ultimate goal is to create a safe and comfortable learning environment in the hope that it will provide more opportunities for students to be successful and feel good about themselves.

**Participation Identification.** Students' perceived competence and ability affect their willingness to participate and their level of engagement in physical education (Corbin, 2002; Paxton, Estabrooks, & Dzewaltowski, 2004). Many students determine their intentions to participate based on past experiences with similar physical activities in other settings (e.g., recreational sports, after-school sports, other physical education classes). Engaging students in a participation-identification activity (figure 3) can give teachers insight into students' perceptions of themselves in physical education and could inform their instruction. The teacher could create a worksheet with definitions and criteria that students might demonstrate in physical education. Students then select the definitions (e.g., varying skill levels) they identify with the most and write an explanation for their selection. The definitions in figure 3 were based on Griffin's (1984) six styles of female participation in team sport activities; however, adaptations have been made so that the definitions are more gender neutral. Teachers can also formulate definitions that fit their own curricular goals and objectives. This activity can be conducted at the beginning of an academic year or at the start of a unit. If this activity is implemented at the start of a unit, definitions that are specific to the unit can be used to get more detailed information.

For example, during a badminton unit, a teacher asked the eighth-graders to complete the participation-identification activity. The majority of students defined themselves as "average skilled" (skill level), "sometimes involved and engaged in physical education; other times hangs back from the action" (level of involvement), and "mostly interacts with classmates of the same gender" (social interaction). Based on the students' perceived competence, level of involvement, and their interactions with classmates, the teacher could inform the instruction. For example, if the focus is to increase students' perceived competence within a badminton unit, the teacher can design tasks within the lesson that emphasize appropriate skill execution and decision-making so that students will play against one another (i.e., attacking the opponent) instead of just volleying back and forth. The students can work in small groups (ranging from 3 to 6) where there are two to four performers and one or two assessors. The assessors can complete a peer checklist based on the critical elements of a skill, such as the overhead clear or smash. This will give students an opportunity to receive feedback about their
game performance and provide them with a more accurate assessment of their skill level. Furthermore, the performers can complete the checklist after they finish the practice session and assess their own performance before reviewing their peers' feedback.

If the focus is on level of involvement, the teacher can establish specific game conditions that engage all students (e.g., singles game play on half of a court instead of doubles play) with the hope that the conditions will minimize student opportunities to "hang back from the action." Understandably, this tends to be easier to establish in a badminton unit, compared to volleyball or invasion games that are faster paced and usually have more students per team. The key is to emphasize small-sided game play and off-the-ball movements in addition to on-the-ball skills to increase students' overall game performance and perceived competence. On an individual level, students can respond to specific journal prompts or student snapshots to learn more about why they tend to "hang back from the action." Could it be that they do not like the activity? Are they not on a team with their friends? Do they have low perceived competence? Do they feel their classmates are dominating game play? All of these could be factors that influence students' level of involvement in physical education.

**Picture Identification.** As they say, "A picture is worth a thousand words." The picture-identification activity provides students with a visual representation of students engaging in physical activity (figure 4). The objective of the activity is for students to select a picture they identify with the most and that best depicts how they feel about physical education. The picture-identification activity can be conducted individually as a written assignment. The activity can also stimulate small-group discussions about how the picture they selected best illustrates who they are in physical education. For students to be able to identify with or relate to the individuals in the pictures, careful consideration needs to take place when selecting the pictures for this activity. The pictures used should (1) be developmentally appropriate; (2) show students engaging in individual, team, and partner activities; and (3) represent all social identities (e.g., race, gender) within the school community. At least 15 to 20 pictures should be used to provide a variety of activities and identities (e.g., girls/boys, engaged/disengaged, team/individual sports). Number the pictures so that students can record the number of their selected picture on the identification sheet. This activity gives students an opportunity to reflect on, learn about, and explore who they are as individuals within the physi-

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**Figure 3. Participation-Identification Activity**

1. Carefully read the descriptions below. In the table, circle the description that best describes your skill level, level of involvement, and social interaction in physical education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Level</th>
<th>Level of Involvement</th>
<th>Social Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am highly skilled.</td>
<td>I am highly involved and engaged in PE and am often assertive in games/activities.</td>
<td>I interact with boys and girls in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am average to highly skilled.</td>
<td>I am regularly involved and engaged in PE and am sometimes assertive in games/activities.</td>
<td>I mostly interact with the boys in the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am average skilled.</td>
<td>I am sometimes involved and engaged in PE, other times I hang back from the action.</td>
<td>I mostly interact with the girls in the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am low to average skilled.</td>
<td>I am rarely involved or engaged in PE. I try to keep away from the 'action' of the game/activity (i.e., I try to be invisible).</td>
<td>I am ignored by my classmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am low skilled.</td>
<td>I do not engage or participate in PE. I do not change my clothes, am frequently absent, have a note to be excused, or go down to the nurse.</td>
<td>I do not like to interact with any of my classmates.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Based on the descriptions you circled above, how would you best define your overall engagement in physical education? Be specific and detailed.

*Definitions are adapted from Griffin (1984).*

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cal education context. Furthermore, the activity creates an opportunity for teachers to learn about their students and for students to get to know one another.

For example, suppose most girls at the middle school level selected pictures where the students were “laying back” from the activity. With this information, the teacher may consider trying to understand why students do not actively participate in physical education. To keep the topic more global for the entire class, yet confidential for each individual student, teachers can pose a scenario by creating a student snapshot or journal prompt. With further probing, students expressed that they do not get right into the action if they are not good at the activity, do not like the activity, or if they feel that the other students in the class do not pass them the ball. Based on this information, the teacher can give activity choices to students, allow students to select their own partners or teams, formulate small-sided games to increase students’ level of involvement, implement the SEM so students can engage in various roles and responsibilities within the game, and allow students to develop their own activities.

Drawings. Some students prefer to express themselves through drawing instead of verbal or written communication (Cone & Cone, 2005). Drawing activities can be implemented in the physical education curriculum in multiple ways (figure 5). Drawing activities can be used at the beginning of the academic year, semester, or unit; in small groups to get students to work with one another; or as a form of assessment (formative or summative). First, there must be a purpose for having students draw in physical education (e.g., self-expression, stimulate conversation). Second, a specific topic should guide the students with their drawings. Lastly, students must explain what they drew and why they drew their picture in relation to the selected topic.

For example, the body is a central focus due to the public nature of physical education. Since the body is a sensitive topic to discuss and share with others, students could draw their interpretation of their own body and perceptions of the ideal female or male body (Azzarito & Solmon, 2006; Connell, 2008; Fisette, 2009; Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Webb, Quennerstedt, & Ohman, 2008). Addressing body issues can be a difficult and challenging task, because many teachers do not incorporate body education or social issues into the physical education curriculum. But since the body is on public display in physical education, it is important for teachers to create a space where students feel comfortable and safe to discuss aspects of their body and of the socially constructed female and male body.

Consider this example: in written responses based on drawings of their body, most students said that their pictures mainly represented their body weight and size. More specifically, the girls categorized themselves as being skinny, in between skinny and fat, or needing to lose weight, whereas the boys centered their responses based on the amount of musculature they had. Teachers can use this information to initiate class discussions centered on student perceptions of the socially constructed female and male bodies. Students can be asked to bring pictures from magazines, newspapers, or the Internet that represent their gendered perceptions, particularly in relation to body size and shape. On a more individual and personal level, teachers can use journal writing as a safe space for students to discuss these topics in more detail, since they will most likely not wish to talk to
their peers about their own body. If the teacher has created a comfortable and safe environment, he or she can continue to ask questions in an attempt to get at the root of why they view their body the way that they do.

The next steps will depend on the teacher. The teacher may only want to provide a safe space for students to reflect on themselves, or may want to educate students about socially constructed bodies through activities that deconstruct their current perceptions and beliefs. Some teachers, however, may feel that this topic is too sensitive to discuss in physical education class despite the fact that these issues are prevalent in the mind of middle and high school students, particularly in physical education due to its public nature (Azzarito & Solmon, 2006; Connell, 2008; Fisette, 2009; Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Webb, Quonnerstedt, & Ohman, 2008).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the instructional modifications that teachers make will be based on the assessment method implemented and the information provided by the students. The examples presented here are a sample of the assessment methods and modifications a teacher might implement within his or her instruction. The teacher might consider selecting units of instruction that align with student interests, adjusting progressions within a lesson or unit based on students’ perceived competency, minimizing opportunities for students to be on public display by having them engage in small-sided games and volunteer for demonstrations, establishing lessons that focus on personal and social responsibility in addition to skill development and game play, and providing learning opportunities within a lesson or unit that focus on body issues. These assessment methods can also be aligned with all six national standards (NASPE, 2004). It will be up to the teacher to determine which standards and assessments to focus on within a unit of instruction.

Effective teachers who use a student-centered approach are able to design lessons that meet the needs of all students. By implementing the methods provided in this article, teachers place the focus on the learner. Accessing students’ thoughts and feelings can enhance students’ learning experiences and guide physical educators to know and teach the whole student. For students to become engaged in physical activity inside and outside of school, teachers need to reach out and guide physical educators to know and teach the whole student. For students to become engaged in physical activity inside and outside of school, teachers need to reach out and provide them with learning experiences that foster positive feelings about their self-image and abilities, and about physical activity itself. The activities described in this article will, it is hoped, provide teachers with insight into how students think and feel when they participate in physical education. As students share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the teacher will be able to create a learning environment based on what is best for the students, with the hope that they will become lifelong movers.

References


to physical activity mediates the relationship between perceived competence and physical activity in youth. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 75(1), 107-111.


Jennifer Fisette (jfisette@kent.edu) is an assistant professor in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University, in Kent, OH 44242.

Subramaniam

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Prithwi Raj Subramaniam (psubramaniam@ithaca.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Physical Education at Ithaca College, in Ithaca, NY 14850.