

The Influence of Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Student Engagement in Physical Education

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Introduction

Today, public schools in the United States (U.S.) average less than the recommended physical education (PE) minutes per week (85-90 minutes versus the recommended 150 minutes) and less than 30 minutes per day of recess (Kern, et al, 2018). Furthermore, schools with greater concentrations of low socioeconomic status (SES) students offer considerably less time for both PE and recess (Kern, et al, 2018). In addition, lack of resources for low income families in general decrease physical activity (PA) opportunities for children. This fact is especially true for people who have limited access to green space or the financial means for extracurricular physical activities. Furthermore, access to green space is not the only issue. PA in lower SES urban communities tends to consist of inexpensive sports that require minimum equipment, such as basketball, track, or baseball because they can easily be played on outdoor playgrounds and sandlots (Coates, 2013). Children must have safe outside access in order for there to be a difference in PA levels. If a park is available to the community in a disadvantaged neighborhood but is unsafe to walk or play in due to high crime, it is unlikely to provide an optimal context for infusing habitual PA into daily life (Terre, 2009).

Recently, steps have been taken in attempt to lessen these disparities in our country. In several U.S. cities, mixed income housing is linked to newly created mixed income schools (Lipman, 2012). This movement can explain the combination of Section-8 low income housing made available in middle to upper class neighborhoods in Chicago. Fernandes and Sturm (2010) stated:

Hispanic and Black children were less likely to have a gymnasium at school than White children (49.1 and 76.1% as compared to 82.0%). Children from low-income households and for whom it was unsafe to play outside were also less likely to attend a school with a gymnasium (p. 4).

Children in urban communities that lacked safe green space for PA and community funding for school PE facilities suffered the most (Fernandes & Sturm, 2010). Fernandes and Sturm (2010) stated: “Schools with a high percentage of minority children were more likely to report an inadequate playground. Children from low-income households or from racial/ethnic minorities were also less likely to have an adequate playground at school” (p.4).

At a local, Chicago elementary school, I was able to engage with students, staff, and community members to learn how community dynamics promoted diversity and inclusiveness within their neighborhood and school. It is important for schools to provide safe, adequate spaces for urban children to participate in PA. Furthermore, it is recommended that schools and communities remedy the disparity between cultures and celebrate diversity. Therefore, there is a need to implement culturally relevant physical education (CRPE) in schools in order to connect curriculum with the most disadvantaged students. During this community learning experience, I found that culture and community impacted the way curriculum was designed. In order to create relevant content particular to the students at this school, teachers must fulfill the three needs of the “cultural relevance cycle” (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011, p. 49). The purpose of this paper is to describe how PE teachers utilized the three steps of the cultural relevance cycle to engage students in PA and PE at one CPS Elementary School.

Cultural Relevance Theory

According to Flory and McCaughtry (2011), the cultural relevance cycle consists of three core needs: “1) Knowing community dynamics; 2) knowing how community dynamics influence educational processes; and 3) implementing strategies that reflect cultural knowledge” (p.49). The main focus of the cultural relevance cycle is care and how it relates to community and teachers’ pedagogy. “Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogical practice that facilitates and

supports the achievement of all students” (Flory, 2014, p. 98). The cultural relevance cycle involves effective teaching and learning in a culturally supported, student-centered environment where students’ strengths are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote achievement (Flory, 2014).

Culturally relevant teaching requires teachers to develop relationships with students and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), when students and teachers know more about one another, children develop a greater commitment to learning due to the commitment of their teacher. Bridging the gap between the teacher and students is a significant element of the cultural relevance cycle. It is important that teachers identify cultural distance between activities they teach and activities that might be relevant to students. These activities should be accessible in the student’s home or community and could be done with minimal equipment (Flory, 2016). “Culturally relevant activities are those that resonate with the students’ family and the community identifies, those to which students have access in their immediate community, and those that have the resources necessary to participate” (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011, p. 27).

Results

While conducting this community mapping project, I visited a CPS Elementary School located in the heart of an affluent neighborhood in downtown Chicago just a few blocks away from an area known for its gang violence and neglect. These well-known projects of the city included low income housing. The closest park to the school consists of a few metal benches, a fountain, and small flower gardens with a coffee stand. Though the area lacks green space, it boasts exorbitantly priced merchandise stores. It is a neighborhood surrounded by large, high

rise, residential towers with two bedroom condominiums priced between \$500,000-\$700,000 and million dollar townhomes mixed in with section-8 subsidized housing.

While observing at the school, I witnessed a variety of events throughout the academic day such as morning recess, PE classes, general education classes, and afternoon recess. I was able to converse with students, faculty, externally hired staff, and local police and business owners. Three themes emerged from this neighborhood school:

- Outside cultures were brought into the school and diversity was celebrated;
- SES played a role in overall PA, particularly after school; and
- PE teachers created an inclusive environment with PA relevant to all.

Celebrate Culture and Diversity

The first theme demonstrated how well PE teachers got to know their students. Not only did they teach to the culture of the students, but teachers brought students' culture into the school to help them better understand their peers and social structure (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Each morning Principal Green and another friendly adult greeted the students. They were offered "breakfast in a bag" and milk boxes upon entry. Dean Hernandez explained free breakfast and lunch were provided to all students regardless of income status. This opportunity coincided with the inclusive theme in which no students were singled out, but each was provided free meals regardless of their SES. Inclusiveness was further displayed by a large mural painted in the main hall displaying cartoon children of all races holding hands as a sign of unity and other artwork displaying country flags around the world.

Dean Hernandez and staff further communicated this theme of inclusiveness and felt that SES differences impacted the classrooms in a positive way by creating diversity. Dean Hernandez explained the school is an International School and part of the curriculum is for everyone to share their own culture with others and celebrate it. I was curious how SES affected

students' dynamic with each other and teachers. Dean Hernandez explained some kids live in expensive condos in the area and others live in Section-8 housing, but it did not matter. He mentioned about 45% of Caucasian students and about 20% of the overall student body were from low income housing. I wondered how living situations impacted students' ability to learn in the classroom. He said usually children who misbehaved were from divorced parents and stated, "Broken homes create broken kids." One teacher explained the best way to keep students engaged in classroom activities was to find something that interests them. Teachers should create fun and engaging lessons with much hands-on experience to help all learners succeed.

When asked about the important SES factors to take into consideration when creating lessons for students, Dean Hernandez said the number one priority is to teach inclusion for all: include everyone, do not single out students, and teach diversity. To illustrate his point, he explained if a Muslim student wants to share a holiday, invite them to do so. If a Jewish student wants to educate the class about their culture, embrace the idea and allow them to share. Teachers should give students opportunities to share their customs. Dean Hernandez suggested PE teachers become familiar with the cultures and backgrounds of students by sending home a questionnaire, in the student's native language if possible, the first week of school. This survey might increase chances to become familiar with students from a parent or guardians' perspective and a way to get to know the family. By learning this information, PE teachers can introduce relevant content to their students in order for them to bring home and share with friends and family.

SES and Overall PA

In the second theme, cultural distance among students was recognized by teachers and other adults of authority.

Most teachers who come from middle-class backgrounds likely attended schools and grew up in a U.S. society grounded in cultural ‘normalcy.’ These teachers are likely to encounter students who are ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically much different than themselves in urban schools” (Flory, 2016, p. 431).

As I arrived at the school grounds the first day, I noticed a brand-new play lot in front of the school with a slide and elaborate jungle gym. The gate entrance was open and there were a number of students, of all ethnicities and styles of dress, playing together. Fancy cars and taxis dropped off students and there were a few bicycles on a bike rack. Officer McLean and Mr. Ramirez, the crossing guard, stood on the corner interacting with parents and traffic. The style of dress varied from many Caucasian mothers with Louis Vuitton bags and small dogs to very few African American (AA) parents with jeans worn below the waistline.

Inside the gymnasium, I was able to converse with the PE teacher and a number of fifth grade students from different classes. Students who were Caucasian and Asian tended to live in high-rise buildings in the neighborhood or gated community and participated in many physical activities outside of school. Several students spoke of taking private tennis lessons at nearby country clubs. According to their brochures, these country clubs boast \$200 monthly fee memberships per person along with a \$500 initiation fee. One female Caucasian student told me she lives and shops in the area with her parents, is a member of the country club with her family, and attends an elite Ninja school. This athletic facility is for children and mimics the show *American Ninja Warrior*.

In contrast, a number of AA students mentioned living in Section-8 housing and did not participate in any PA after school. One student explained she danced in her room for PA. A Latina student, who mentioned she lived outside of the school district, played tag in the kitchen with her siblings after school. The only structured physical activities these students participated in were during school PE. Unfortunately, PE was only offered once a week for sixty minutes on

a rotating schedule giving minimal opportunities for children to be physically active. Recess was offered in thirty-minute increments and alternated every two weeks between the rooftop play area with limited space and the play lot with the jungle gym in the front of the school.

In the community, I spoke with Officer McLean and inquired about how the neighborhood impacted children playing outside and what types of physical activities she saw children doing. Officer McLean thought families in impoverished areas were more likely to let kids play outside, especially in the summer because they did not have air conditioning. She said wealthy people are more cautious with crime and thought underprivileged families were more accustomed to it. She said these families do not have money to pay for extra activities like organized sports and felt this issue was especially true when they could not afford air conditioning. Officer McLean mentioned she worked all over the area and observed wealthier, 10-year old children taking sailing lessons. In contrast, she explained the less fortunate might only have a ball or bike to play out front in the street.

CRPE for All Students

The third theme showed how PE teachers created strategies to bridge cultural distance among students and between students and teachers. According to Flory (2016), PE teachers should avoid limiting their curriculum to team sports, include a variety of challenging activities that require little or no equipment, and connect PA to the values of students and their families. The PE teacher, Mr. Smith, was energetic and enthusiastic while greeting his students and playing upbeat music during warm-up. He consistently provided positive feedback and ideas about staying active after school. Mr. Smith discussed how students could do push-ups and sit-ups while watching their favorite cartoons. During class, he allowed students to choose partners.

Surprisingly, race and social class were not an issue in this PE environment. I observed an athletic AA girl partner with an athletic Caucasian boy who both scored the best on the fitness test with 80 sit-ups and maximum number of push-ups. I observed an AA boy with a Caucasian girl, an AA boy with AA girl, a Latina with a Caucasian girl, an Asian girl with a Caucasian girl, and one AA boy by himself. This boy was paired with my project partner and also did very well on the fitness test. Students were each given golden beads at the end of class as a reward. Mr. Smith explained the school-wide policy of handing out beads if the entire class was well-behaved.

Mr. Smith expressed there were a number of consulates in the area so his school received students from all over the world. He felt diversity was amazing and did not affect students socially as everyone in his PE classes played together. Throughout his seventeen years of teaching at this school, he watched behaviors change over time. When the local projects were fully occupied with residents, students appeared a little “rougher” and some students still have that background. They might demonstrate this “roughness” more when they come from lower income families; however, children seem to play together and he encourages that positive behavior.

Mr. Smith felt it is necessary for PE teachers to speak with parents and homeroom teachers to learn about student backgrounds in order to create a safe learning environment. In his gymnasium, he encouraged students to contribute ideas for class activities. He let students decide which exercises they would do for their warm-ups every day. He shared the ten attributes of the school and how students can accredit their behavior and actions towards these attributes. For safety reasons, it was necessary to reduce class sizes from sixty students to less than thirty

because the class was too chaotic at sixty. The reduction in class size increased participation and he exclaimed, “Hard work is contagious, beauty of a small class.”

Finally, I asked Mr. Smith how he provided for students with special needs. He said he tried to get students to participate to the best of their ability and made modifications as needed. For example, during tag games, he allowed a wheelchair bound student to travel the court twice before being tagged while others could be tagged their first time down the court. During basketball, Mr. Smith lowered the basketball rim to enhance success of making a basket. He proudly said there were always modifications to make to ensure students were included in all activities.

Discussion

It is the job of the PE teacher to learn each unique cultural identity of her students, local activity opportunities, and financial constraints embedded in the community. This information will help build PE curriculum around the context of the students (Flory, 2014). In this school, the cultural relevance cycle was implemented by teachers who demonstrated sensitivity to students’ needs regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religion, SES, or language (Flory, 2016). Community dynamics influenced educational processes and a variety of strategies were implemented that reflected this cultural knowledge as inspired by the cultural relevance cycle (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). PE curriculum was diversified and culturally appropriate for students who could not afford outside PA. Students of all SES were encouraged to participate in PA outside of school that required little to no equipment. PE diversity should include activities that incorporate outdoor/indoor, competitive and noncompetitive, and individual and group activities designed to promote moderate to vigorous PA (Flory, 2014).

Limitations and Future Implications

Because this study was a part of a class project, limitations included a small sample size within one school and community, without comparison to others, and minimal time spent in the school during one semester. The study was also limited to minimal classroom observations and informally speaking with adult volunteers as they dropped their children off at school or moved quickly about during their workday. Due to the class project, we were unable to record interviews in order to further investigate qualitative responses.

The cultural relevance cycle was well developed in this school and several positive practices were demonstrated. It was clear students' background and cultures were celebrated and diversity encouraged, especially in the PE curriculum. This school also demonstrated an inclusive environment. However, there is need to increase more organized PA for students of low SES backgrounds before and after school. Instead of charging students a fee, school programs could be developed on a volunteer basis as to offer more PA for students unable to afford programs outside of school. More PA opportunities could be implemented throughout the day, in classes other than PE. For example, interactive programs could be created to help math and science teachers develop a more hands-on approach, thus promoting students to physically move throughout the day.

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