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Teachers emotional connections to physical activities as a mediating pedagogical factor for constructing health and physical education curriculum

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Abstract

In the following review I attempt to discuss emotion as an important and increasingly researched phenomena in secondary school physical education. First, I will provide a brief treatment of emotion from a sociological perspective. Following this I will examine the emotional dimensions that are an integral part physical activity engagement. Following this I will use Hargreaves's theory of teaching as an emotional practice to further discuss the issues and research at play with respect to how secondary school physical education curriculum and content are socially constructed. I take up this review over the increasing concern of the mismatch and disjunctures between wider contemporary physical activity engagement and the curricular offerings in secondary school physical education.

Keywords: Emotion, teacher emotion, emotion and physical activity, curriculum

Introduction

Teacher emotion is increasingly being recognized as an integral aspect of pedagogy in school physical education. I begin this review by discussing the theoretical roots of emotion as understood from a sociological vantage point. Next, I discuss the role that emotions play in people's engagement with physical activity. Third, I discuss teaching as an emotional practice and the research that has been done in physical education specifically, what this means for teachers' emotional connections to physical activity, wider physical activity culture, and what this means for all interested participants in secondary school physical education. I conclude this review by explaining how teacher emotion with specific physical activities strongly mediates what content and physical activities are included in the school curriculum and what this might mean for a pro-social and meaningful physical education experience for contemporary adolescents.

A Sociological Theory of Emotion

A significant aspect of Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1993) ^[1, 2, 3] theory of the socially developed habitus points to the deeply embodied aspects of the various social fields one inhabits. While not explicitly communicated in his theory, regular discussion of dispositions, meaning, aesthetic taste, manners, relaxation, tempo, violence, and toughness, point to the emotions that are integral to life experiences. Although Bourdieu does not explicitly state the role of emotions in the formation of dispositions and constitution of fields, other scholars do, including Dewey (1958) ^[4], who said, "Emotion is an indication of intimate participation, in a more or less excited way in some scene in nature or life; it is, so to speak, an attitude or disposition which is a function of objective things" (p.390). Similar to Dewey (1958) ^[4], many scholars have studied and positioned emotion as an inextricable and holistic part of life (Denzin, 1984; Shilling, 2005; Simmel, 1971) ^[5, 6, 7]. Specifically, experience in life has "continuity" between the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of our being (Dewey, 1958; Wilber, 2000) ^[4, 8]. As such, emotions are felt in our bodies, fixated on in our minds, and often occur in relation to others (Denzin, 1984) ^[5]. Scholars position emotional affect as functioning in one of two ways, as a trait or as a state (Fridja, 1993; Wilber, 2000) ^[9, 8]. Emotional traits are considered stable patterns of affective response that hold across time and contexts (Wilber, 2000) ^[8]. Emotional states are, in slight contrast, seen as shorter lasting,

alterable, and bounded by time and context (Wilber, 2000) [8]. The ways in which we perceive and experience emotional states will be affected by the emotional traits we embody, and vice versa (Wilber, 2000) [8]. Emotions are felt when we are faced with and engage in a vast array of social practices, including physical activities (Shilling, 2005) [6].

Emotion and Physical Activity

Despite the highly rationalized structures that have been imposed on a wide range of physical activities, the zeal with which many people continue to pursue participation is quite significant (Shilling, 2005) [6]. In fact, we might be hard pressed to find another set of social practices so many people are attached to in contemporary times (Shilling, 2005) [6]. One reason given for this reality is that participation and engagement in physical activity has been documented to evoke a wide range of emotions (Laker, 2003; Shilling, 2005) [10, 6]. Elias and Dunning (1986) [11] suggest that participation in physical activity provides people with opportunities to experience a range of emotional satisfaction, and is a space where people can pursue their own “quest for excitement” (p.3). Shilling (2005) [6] proposes that physical activities are a good fit for this quest because they are associated with motility, sociability, and mimesis. Motility involves the complete immersion in an activity where the sense of self is lost or experienced in a deeply pleasurable way. In this way, physical activity engagement allows some of us to ‘escape’ from the everyday realities of life (Laker, 2003; Shilling, 2005) [6, 10]. Some examples might include: experiencing a runner’s high, feeling a profound sense of transcendence while surfing, or entering a deeply meditative state while practicing Hatha yoga (Bonheim, 1992; Sheehan, 1978) [12, 13]. These examples might also be described as holistic sensations where the participant is completely tuned into the task at hand, something Csikszentmihalyi (1990) [14] calls “flow.”

Sociability refers to meaning and enjoyment that comes from playfully engaging with others. These social bonds can enhance one’s identity through the emotional sense of community, sisterhood, or camaraderie that is felt (Dunning, 1999) [15]. Some examples might be: bonding during a road trip with sporting teammates, celebrating with your team after winning a hockey tournament, or playing a round of golf with friends. Mimesis includes the arousal and experience of strong affects in spaces where this is acceptable and encouraged. The results of these experiences usually involves the buildup and release of emotional tension, albeit, in ways that may or may not be acceptable to that context. Examples of this might be loudly cheering, yelling, or crying during or at the conclusion of a contest, or engaging in anti-social arguments with opponents, officials, or other stakeholders.

What can be concluded is that engagement in physical activity is an emotional affair. Drawing from Dewey (1958) [4], Denzin (1984) [5], and Wilber (2000) [8], I see emotions enduring with people as they live, impacting the formation of their dispositions, and informing their cognitive perspectives of various physical activities (both favorable and unfavorable). If engaging in physical activities is an emotional affair, teaching these same activities is likely to include a range of emotional characteristics.

Emotion and Teaching Physical Education

Scholars have positioned teaching to be a very emotional practice (Hargreaves, 1998; McCaughtry, 2004; McCaughtry *et al.*, 2006a, 2006b) [16, 17, 18, 19]. Hargreaves (drawing heavily from Denzin, 1984) [5] has outlined four specific points that

explain the emotional nature of teaching in schools. These are: one, teaching is an emotional practice; two, teaching and learning involve emotional understanding; three, teaching is a form of emotional labor; and four, teachers’ emotions are inseparable from their moral purposes and their ability to achieve those purposes. Below I will describe how each of these points related to more recent research on teacher emotions and curricular content.

First Hargreaves (1998) [16] establishes that, while a cognitive and technical practice teaching is also an emotional practice. He says,

As an emotional practice, teaching activates, colors, and expresses teachers’ own telling, and the actions in which those feelings are embedded (i.e. teachers’ inner streams of experience). Likewise, as an emotional practice activates, colors and otherwise affects the feelings and actions of others with whom teachers work and form relationships. Teachers can enthuse their students, or bore them. (p. 838)

A key facet of this point is that physical education teachers enter the profession with a lifetime of emotional connections and comforts with *specific physical activities* and specifically sport content (mostly team sport). Partial evidence can be seen in its presence in the secondary curriculum (Fairclough & Stratton, 1997; Fairclough, Stratton, & Baldwin, 2002) [20, 21], as well as in the desire of those who enter physical education to coach (Ojeme, 1988; Spittle, Jackson, & Casey, 2009) [22, 23]. Indeed, this was found to be the case with one group of teachers that loved sport so much they simply could not bring themselves to teach anything outside of this narrow range of content (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013) [24]. Similarly, another group of teachers viewed their selection of curricular content through the lens of their own gendered identities, which strongly leaned toward stereotypical and hyper masculine dispositions that generously lent itself to being ‘comfortable’ in teaching sport (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2015) [25].

The second point that Hargreaves (1998) [16] discusses is the emotional understanding that is involved in teaching. He says, “Because it is an emotional practice which involves relationships with others and which seeks to shape those relationships in particular ways, teaching also necessarily involves and depends upon extensive degrees of *emotional understanding*” (p.838). This understanding requires that we as teachers are able to “reach inside our own feelings and past emotional experiences to make sense of and respond to someone else’s” (Hargreaves, 1998) [16]. In this case, if a teacher and their students do not share the same emotional experiences and connections with specific content or physical activities, it is likely that attempts at vicarious understanding might be inaccurate and provide a set of specific examples or principles that could be utilized during informal and formal conversations between students, teachers, and additional stakeholders (Hargreaves, 1998) [16]. The work by McCaughtry (2004) [17] and his colleagues (Ferry & McCaughtry 2013; 2015; McCaughtry *et al.*, 2006a, 2006b) [24, 25, 18, 19] has demonstrated that teachers’ own emotional connections with content and their perceptions of students’ emotional responses to be a significant factor when they chose to teach particular physical activities. This work has revealed that students can be the most vocal critics to the inclusion of content with which they are not familiar or comfortable or find meaningless (McCaughtry, *et al.*, 2006b) [19]. This finding is compounded by the reality that teachers can be significantly uncomfortable when teaching unfamiliar content (McCaughtry, *et al.*, 2006b) [19], or content that they believe puts in jeopardy their ability to put on ‘pedagogical performances’ that might run counter to

their gendered identities (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2015) [25]. This work has provided invaluable insight to how teachers navigate emotional understandings between themselves, their students and the content they teach.

The third point that Hargreaves (1998) [16] makes is that teaching is a form of emotional labor. He says, Teaching involves immense amounts of emotional labor. Not just acting out feelings superficially like pretending to be disappointed or surprised but also consciously working oneself up into a state of actually experiencing necessary feelings that are required to perform ones job well. (p. 840)

Due to the unique features of the physical education setting what kind of labor might we expect to take place as it pertains to how students respond and receive the physical activities presented to them by teachers? How would this dynamic of emotional understanding affect or alter the kind of emotional labor that these teachers would undertake? Just as students who are more skilled get the brunt of attention from teachers (Portman, 1995) [26], or students displaying ‘types’ of ability in line with what the teacher values get higher grades, it seems reasonable to expect that students with whom the teacher has congruent emotional understandings pertaining to specific content would also receive more positive affirmation from that teacher. At this point this remains mostly speculation and findings from data with relatively small settings. A significant set of studies point to the role that outdoor and adventure activities and more culturally relevant curriculum can positively impact the kinds of emotional labor undertaken by teachers and experienced by students (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014) [27, 28].

The fourth point that Hargreaves (1998) [16] discusses is the moral purposes that shape teachers’ work. Hargreaves (1998) [16] demonstrates that the moral actions of teachers are based on emotional as well as cognitive forms of understanding. When these purposes cannot be achieved, a number of emotions may be felt, as well as reasons assigned for their occurrence. Anxiety, guilt and other negative emotions can be directed towards oneself if teachers believe that their efforts are the reason students are not learning or successful (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; McCaughtry *et al.*, 2006a) [29, 18]. Other negative emotions, such as frustration, anger, or blame can be directed at students if a teacher perceives a lack of learning is the result of their own shortcomings (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2015; McCaughtry & Rovegno, 2003; Sanford & Rich, 2006) [25, 30, 31]. Just as McCaughtry and his colleagues (*et al.*, 2006a) [18] discussed teachers’ understanding students’ emotional and cultural connection to basketball was one significant factor shaping the content “tightrope” that they walked, where leaning too far to one side presented significant problems, the emotional dynamics between teachers, students, and particular physical activities may play a role in how teachers feel and perceive their efforts are received when addressing particular moral purposes. At the same time teachers and students alike have reported positive emotional dynamics, especially when the curricular content is taught in a way that is meaningful and beneficial for the parties involved (Ferry, 2011; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014) [32, 28].

Conclusion

To conclude, teaching is a moral endeavor, and Hargreaves four dimensions helps us better understand how the emotional connections teachers have with curricular content can help us better understand in what ways these states and traits may impact the experiences of both students and teachers in school physical education. Future work (especially larger

ethnographic studies with adolescent youth) need to be conducted to develop a more complete picture of the emotions that are experienced by all stakeholders, and the role that curricular content may play in mediating that experience and fomenting a meaningful educational experience for all students (Chen, 1999) [33].

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