

SKILL IDENTITY: CREATING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

Many experiences in physical education class focus around competitive activities. Middle school is an important time for students, as they shape their physical identity. Creating a foundation of skill during these activities, may promote a lifetime of future physical behaviors. Therefore, attaining physical skill can create social capital, ultimately a form of social justice, as individuals may use this foundation to be physically active throughout their lives. During middle school, however, physical activity declines. This decrease in physical activity, perhaps, limits physical possibilities later in life. To examine this injustice, the term “skill identity” has been created. Skill identity acts as a new lens for educators to reflect on their practice. The following will be discussed: a) competitive activities and physical education class (skill, identity, and social justice and injustice), and b) identity, social capital, and justice (creating strong or weak skill identities, the teacher, and gender and race).

Keywords: skill identity, instruction, social capital, competence, social justice

Competitive Activities and Physical Education Class

Physical education class, K-12, may be the first time that students are exposed to physical activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Center for Disease Control, 2013), and if they are introduced in a positive manner, these activities may promote a lifetime of participation (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDCP], 2012; Chen & Hancock, 2006). In physical education class, the majority of activities that the students are exposed to may be competitive (Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004; Lund & Tannenhill, 2015). In these classes, the ultimate goal may be to gain a basic appreciation and understanding of these competitive activities (Siedentop et al., 2020). Competitive activities are widely used, and during their time in the gymnasium, pre-service and in-service teachers will instruct these activities. This instruction is guided by National Standards that allow for students to become physically literate, attaining both the knowledge and the skills to enjoy a lifetime of physical activity. State Standards in physical education are guided by these National Standards, however, within States, these Standards might vary according to the needs of the State (Society of Health and Physical Educators [SHAPE], 2013).

Within these physical education classes, the popular competitive activities that might be taught in the schools, but not exclusively, are basketball, baseball, soccer, softball, or volleyball. Competitive activities have a winner or loser and are played individually, or in teams. These competitive activities in physical education class can be structured through various curricular models (Dyson et al., 2004; Wallhead & O'Sullivan, 2005). These curricular models can promote sport in various ways and for various grade levels. Within these curricular models, competitive activities are often purported as a basis for sportsmanship, working with others, creating leadership skills, and preparing students for a competitive society (Brown & Grinski, 1992).

These models can vary. Traditional competitive activities focus on short periods of skill development, followed by full-fledged game play. This format is now changing, however, as newer curricular models can differ in objectives. Some models can range from highlighting personal responsibility (Hellison, 2011), to understanding all aspects of competitive sport through modified gameplay (Siedentop et al., 2020; Werner et al., 1996) or creating game experiences that allow for sport to be incorporated into other areas of life (Mandigo et al., 2009). These activities can be practiced outside of the gymnasium, and some of the fundamental skills learned can promote the health and wellness activities of an individual.

The sports that students learn in physical education class are an integral part of society (Coakley, 2015). Whether watching games on television, discussing those games with neighbors and friends, or playing various sports outside of physical education class as social activities, competitive activities are prevalent across nations (Jacobs & Wright, 2018). Understanding how to play a sport, and discussing sports, can open up worlds of social acceptance and future physical activity behaviors (Sallis et al., 2000).

Sport is prevalent in physical education class, and playing those sports depends on building a foundation of skill for all students. While competitive activities are commonplace in physical education class, physical activity declines after middle school (Scrabis-Fletcher & Silverman, 2017). This might be due to the fact that physical education does not have personal relevance in students' lives, and they may not have the skills to participate in certain activities (Beni et al., 2017). This is concerning as middle school is a time when students should be defining their future physical interests (National Middle School Association, 2003). Perhaps, how students are developing their skill foundation during competitive activities in middle school should be examined in a new way, so that students will be motivated to augment their skills. Therefore, a new term has been created, "skill identity." Skill identity can provide a lens to define the explicit, and sometimes hidden, ways in which students and teachers perceive and create identity in this formative time.

To identify injustice, and promote social justice, this paper will examine how skill identity might be formed by discussing the following: a) skill, identity, and social justice and injustice, b) creating strong or weak skill identities, c) the teacher, and d) skill, gender, and race.

Skill Defined

To participate in competitive activities, students should have a foundation of skill (SHAPE, 2013). The honing of skill is a key factor in creating a physically literate person (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2013). Part of creating physical literacy is demonstrating and understanding ability. Each student might have a specific ability in an aspect of fitness, i.e. physical strength, endurance, and/or flexibility (Henry, 1968). In physical education class, ability allows a student to participate and succeed in an activity. If, however, those abilities are not coupled with a certain motor skill, these specific abilities might not be used or even

realized, nor connected for broader use in competitive sport or physical activities of everyday life. For example, if a student has strength or endurance, but is never taught to throw or kick correctly, the connection might never be made that the ability they have in strength or endurance can be used in a broader physical activity or sport context, such as throwing a baseball or being able to run for an entire soccer game without tiring. The connection to a motor skill may have a direct impact on later physical activities, as students become adults and choose to lift weights or run marathons (Lima et al., 2017).

Motor skills impact physical movements as well as psychological aspects, including self-confidence and perceived competence (Hulteen et al., 2018). Skill can be linked to forming beliefs about a competitive activity that might affect participation (Loprinzi et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2015; Silverman, 2017). During competitive activities, students are competing against others, and, therefore, skill can be considered a social construct, allowing people to join in certain competitive activities (Evans, 2004). Thus, having skill, and using various abilities in a group activity, can allow a student to create both a place and an identity within that group. Inclusion or the ability to be able to complete a physical activity is a form of self-efficacy (Farrington & Farrington, 2005), as the student is able to enhance motor skills as they participate in the activity (Bailey, 2008).

Inclusion and having opportunities to develop motor skills erases the injustice that low motor skilled students may experience by not being able to fully partake in sport, nor by being successful (Lysniak, 2020). These motor skills can be used in adulthood and transferred to various physical activities. The ability to participate creates equal opportunities for each and every student and allows for a just environment in the gymnasium. Creating participation is a form of social justice. Denying these opportunities can create a form of injustice, as students may not have the foundation in adulthood to participate in future activities.

Identity Defined

How identity is shaped is difficult to define. Sociologists have suggested that identity may be context specific (Goffman, 1978), and as students assimilate into a group, identities are shaped. Identity is linked with culture, with the day-to-day interactions with school and students in the social setting, and with students' character, which is shaped by their experiences (Noonan, 2019). Identity can shape a feeling of belonging in certain groups, can be tied to a student's place in that group, reflects how the group perceives them, and creates a foundation for their identity in the group. This created identity may not fit within a specific group, and therefore, the student does not consider themselves a part of the group (Evans et al., 2019). At times, however, students' identity and group connection cannot be formed, and when these differences cannot be resolved, there may be emotional consequences (Heerdink et al., 2019) that may negatively shape their skill identity in the future.

Social Justice and Injustice

By teaching each motor skill so that students experience success in physical movement, allows them to form a strong physical identity for an active adulthood. This physical foundation is ultimately a form of social justice. Social justice allows a fair distribution of educational opportunity, or in this case, physical opportunity (Sen, 2008). Recognizing and eradicating all forms of unequal treatment and creating an identity that incorporates skill denotes social justice.

The health concerns that can occur due to physical inactivity have been discussed as social injustice (Lee, & Cubbin, 2009). Not creating a foundation of skill that students can use in everyday life might be a form of injustice. Injustice can, also, be caused by unfair treatment.

According to Mikula (1986), lack of recognition in everyday performance or effort might create this injustice, or when promises and agreements are not met. In the latter, injustice occurs when promises of creating a basic foundational level of skill for activities are not fulfilled. Thus, when disparity in skill can be addressed, social justice can be attained (Braveman, et al., 2005).

Social justice is met when teachers help their students form a strong skill identity that can be carried throughout their lives. The injustice of broken promises to develop skill, leads to a lack of recognizing students' performance in competitive activities and may result in a lack of skill improvement (Mikula et al., 1990).

Identity, Social Capital, and Justice

Creating a sense of identity within a group, and belonging as a member of a group, can be seen as a form of social capital, an entry into a world of future social connections. In addition, social capital is a relationship among people in the group that allow the group to function effectively (Bourdieu, 1996). In competitive activities, skill can become a type of capital and can create passage to social circles, in this case, entry into game play, or a place on a team. Being accepted into a group, however, is complex and convoluted. Groups, or teams, can be shaped by the unconscious decisions that shape behavior (Bourdieu, 1998).

If students are accepted within the group, these unconscious decisions might solidify a position within the group (Engström, 2008). As students and teachers make these unconscious decisions, identity is slowly formed, and social identity within the group is gained, taken away, or modified. Identity within the group, such as having skill, is a type of capital. Having capital might influence how students view their place and fit into that world (Dumais, 2002) of competitive sport. Successful and unsuccessful experiences can serve to shape perceptions and actions socially in the group, how they are perceived by the group, and how the group acts towards students (Crossley, 2001; Wacquant, 2005). This shaping of identity within a group is powerful when discussing competitive activities, as skill can shape identity, and identity can shape skill. Competitive activities can be powerful conduits to shaping both skill and identity. If students do not have a cognitive or physical understanding of these sports, they might not be able to either discuss these sports, or participate in these sports in the future. As the goal of physical education is to allow a lifetime of physical activities (SHAPE, 2013), and sport is prominently used, recognizing and strengthening skill identities is one-step closer to achieving this goal of inclusion in the group, full participation in the activity, and social justice.

Creating Strong and Weak Skill Identities

Middle school is an important time to create both motor skill and identity. This basic understanding of motor skills can be transferred to other sports and activities (Mitchell et al., 2013). Skill, and the ability to perform that skill, is an integral part of any physical modality (Dumais, 2002; Evans, 2004). Children start to accurately analyze their own ability when they reach the age of twelve (Roberts, 2001). Being able to analyze their own ability and physical competence, and then improve skill, can be the key to unlocking the gate to social acceptance and a desired commodity for those that attain skill (Craft et al., 2003). For example, if a skill needs agility or endurance, understanding how to develop those abilities would be important. Conversely, students that have not recognized their abilities, and have not attained the required skill, might not be able to unlock this social acceptance within the group.

If one were to observe a physical education class taking place, there is a shared identity in the class. It could seem that students are excited and having fun. Yet, while it may seem that

students are engaged and might take part in different types of activities in physical education, not all students are experiencing those activities in the same way. The unconscious decisions that students make can have deep ramifications on the creation of skill identity. For example, the split decision of who is passed to and who is not during gameplay (Bernstein et al., 2011), and who is seen, and who is invisible (Bernstein, et al., 2014), can have profound effects on a student. If a student does not have skill, the team players, unconsciously, might not want to throw the ball to that student. Conversely, if a student has more importance in the group, the student has more opportunities to play. As capital is built, so too identity is formed. Therefore, understanding how to play, being able to play, and being able to build social connections after play creates both skill and identity. Without skill, students cannot join the activity and might not find their place in the activity. Having skill, or not having skill, can shape lifestyles and values, and one's identity.

Students who participate in competitive activities in physical education class have different skill levels. The way a teacher structures how students practice in a physical education class may shape a basic level of perception for the student (Bourdieu, 1998). This difference can create students' skill identities within an activity that is offered. Students with different skill identities have different experiences in physical education class (Bernstein et al., 2015).

The activity that is presented is meant to create an experience, where students participate together in the class. However, this can also highlight differences in students' performances within that activity (Scrabis-Fletcher & Silverman, 2017). Therefore, the activity that can bring students together might also create disparity (Evans et al., 2019). A class soccer game is an experience that the students do together, as the game is the focus for the students. Students are all having different experiences (Leisterer & Jekauc, 2019), however, because of their different skill identities; this 'shared' experience becomes delineated, as students only 'see' their skill or lack of skill. Thus, a student starts to define their skill identity as one that "can do" or one that "cannot do." The former indicates a sense of justice, by supplying an educational opportunity; the latter, a sense of injustice, by denying the promise of obtaining a foundation of skill, and incurring the future consequences, such as negative self-perception and the inability to join in activities (Ada et al., 2019).

A strong skill identity in physical education class is a form of capital, a bargaining chip that students can use to enter into play. When they enter into play, this shapes their experience and forms the foundation for their identity. This identity is created by the skill-building context that the students are placed in as they develop skill. Sometimes students might not have the skill, to participate in an activity that is presented (Hunter, 2004). A student, who has lower skill, often is creating that skill identity as they do not receive adequate, appropriate practice trials during a competitive activity (Verner-Filion et al., 2017). If a student is placed in a game-like situation without having created a strong skill identity, that student may be unable to participate (Lyngstad et al., 2016), thus, weakening their skill identity even further.

Once these skills are mastered, however, it is important that they are practiced in modified game-like situations (Hastie et al., 2017). These modified game situations can build the students' skill identity, and as skill increases, full-fledged game play can be an option. Therefore, the examination of students that have, or do not have, skill to participate in activities becomes a key component of shaping future skill identities that might lead to prospective behaviors, as well as affective consequences.

Skill identity may be tied to students' perception of their place in the class, and how they can participate. The student might blame herself, or himself, for being unsuccessful (Bernstein et al., 2011). A student lacking the competence to engage in an activity can become a barrier to enjoyment (Garn & Cothran, 2006). When a student perceives that she or he is not competent or

successful in an activity, that student is unlikely to want to engage in that activity. If they feel that they cannot take part in an activity, they often hide or feel embarrassed, withdrawing from the task all together (Dyson et al., 2004). A lack of competence in a sports-based program can lead to embarrassment and negative experiences.

When a student is able to play a sport, they are viewed by other students, perhaps unconsciously, as having competence, meaning having the skill to complete a task successfully in game play. These students may also have more opportunities to play within that competitive activity (Metzler, 2017). Solmon et al. (2003) found that middle school students, who had positive feelings about their competence, were more engaged in the activity, had positive feelings regarding the activity, and exhibited higher levels of motivation. When a student is able to perform a task with competence, as reinforced by the unconscious play decisions of the group in physical education class, that student often is willing to persist at the task. When a student successfully masters a task, this encourages the student to continue with this activity and even pursue mastering more tasks. Therefore, perceived competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002) plays an important role in creating a strong skill identity. When students experience success, they increase their skill identity and begin to enjoy physical education.

Skill and the Teacher

Skill identity can be attained through various instructional variables that create successful learning opportunities for students, such as time, appropriate practice, modified game play (Hastie et al., 2017), as well as skill progression and accountability (Ward et al., 2015). It is necessary that instructors look at these variables, which focus on creating skill identity in activities. Teachers, often highly skilled players themselves, might be perpetuating the situation of full-fledged and highly complex game play (Harvey & O'Donovan, 2011). These teachers are highly familiar with the competitive activities that they are instructing, as they themselves experienced various sports at a young age. Their skill identity took place during childhood and shaped their behaviors and instructional practices (Dumais, 2002). These teachers, having had very strong experiences and skill identity with competitive activities, might reproduce activities according to their own experiences (Rovegno, 1994). They might often want to share their successful sports experience with their students by placing them into game play, because they assume that will enable them to develop skill (Bernstein & Herman, 2014), as they themselves did. While this is done with good intentions, the students might not have the skill identity that the teachers had; some of the students might not enjoy the activity, nor develop skill while placed in these full-fledged game situations.

Teachers are aware of students' skill level in physical education class (Mahedero et al, 2015); however, they might be unaware of how they shape skill identity. It could be argued that the skill identity of the teacher, at times, might differ from that of their less skilled students, whom they instruct. Teachers need to be aware of the impact of shaping skill identity can have on their students. Being aware of this difference might be the first step in creating a more socially just learning environment. The replication and regulation of these competitive activities can be controlled by the physical education teacher (Fernández-Balboa & Muros, 2006) and creates the perception of how subjects should be taught (Bourdieu, 1996). Thus, the way that physical education is replicated by the teacher (Cronin & Armour, 2015), in turn, shapes not only students' experiences in a subject, but their skill identity within that subject as well.

During game play, teachers might be drawn to give their attention, at times, only to the highly skilled students, thus resulting in a form of unintentional blindness (Mack & Rock, 1998) to low skilled students. The perception of skill, or lack of skill, may shape teachers' interaction

with and preconception of students in competitive activities (Hay & Hunter, 2006). The very activities that are meant to create a skill identity, might actually accentuate differences in what, or what not, the students are able to do in the full-fledged and complex world of game play. The activities that might have created structure in the teachers' lives (Bernstein & Herman, 2014) might, or might not, be having the same effect on all the students in the class.

Skilled players have the tools to join physical activities, since they have the capital to be able to play (Crossley, 2001). This capital can be used in many future physical activities in the students' lives and can be carried over in a type of cultural participation, which shapes skill identity (Dumais, 2002). While all teachers want students to succeed, it might be easier to focus on the skilled students, rather than those who are low skilled, especially during the complexity of full-fledged game play (Bernstein & Herman, 2014). To counter this tendency, teachers should have systematic accountability measures in place to assess skill (Baumgartner et al., 2007; Lund & Tannehill, 2015). These accountability measures, for example, could include rubrics and task cards to ensure student participation.

At times, teachers may not use assessment; however, National and State Standards can guide instruction. Physical education teachers, thus, can review their instruction to improve its effectiveness to meet the needs of all their students. This could augment the possibility of student success in sport. Most importantly, teachers need to realize that students' skill identity is being shaped and be acutely aware of their own actions in the gymnasium. This awareness will be the first step in shaping students' strong skill identity. These steps are important for reforming injustices that may be occurring in these activities.

Skill, Gender, and Race

Society and groups can construct identity, and this definition can be fluid in nature (Butler, 2002). There has been discussion regarding this fluidity in identity and gender (Hughes, 2010). A student's athletic contributions are a direct result of competence and skill in activities. This competence and skill is shown in women's sports achievements after Title IX, as well as, girls' participation in sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2002). There is an inherent contradiction, however, between the increase of female accomplishments and the decline of participation in physical education after middle school. Examining this decline in physical activity has shown that females, especially black and Hispanic students (CDCP, 2006), follow this trend.

It has been argued that the physical education curriculum is based historically on a model focused on middle class, elitist, male values (Bailey et al., 2009). In a recent study, students' reported how ethnic and cultural differences cause tensions during students' interaction in activities, such as sport. In these tensions, power relations, such as skill identity, can become apparent (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2018). There is still a substantial lack of research regarding the beliefs that minority girls have about sport, and how those beliefs can translate into participation (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Gao et al., 2008).

Certain physical activities can also carry gender boundaries, and students do not want to be stereotyped in what is perceived as gender specific activities (Solmon et al., 2003). Although the foundation of physical education activities might be built on this male value model (Bourdieu, 1996), this might be changing, as there are shifts in societal advancement that are reflected in physical exercise. Skill level, and thus skill identity, rather than gender, is linked to the way a student might feel about activities in physical education (Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). In fact, skill alone may be what indicates whether males or females participate in competitive physical activities in the future (Goudas et al., 2001).

Girls that focus on the skill components of a sport may tend to have a higher level of skill identity. Thus, girls who practice skills in physical education class might have more opportunities to play in authentic game-like situations (McKenzie et al., 2004). Increasing enjoyment and participation in physical education class, due to the increase of skill, can strengthen skill identity. Teachers create this delicate world of building skill, and build social capital, and ultimately social justice for their students. Therefore, it necessary that teachers are aware of task presentation, and how it relates to both relevance and student enjoyment during physical education class (McCaughtry et al., 2008) of both the activity and acquisition of skill identity.

The way teachers' structure task presentation, and how explicit the teachers are with instruction, can be related to student achievement (Silverman, 2017). Wright (1997) states, however, that the attention students receive during instruction can be directly related not only to students' specific skill, but also to their gender. In other words, girls might be overlooked due to gender in certain activities, and be doubly overlooked, if they are girls without skill. If girls do not have the skill to compete in certain sports, it could have negative effects in terms of their participating in physical activity later in life (Allender et al., 2006). These skills can be used in any physical activity or sport, or as a form of capital used to gain entry into a world where that form of capital is admired (Bourdieu, 1998; Hunter, 2004).

Conclusion

Middle school is an important time for students to define themselves and their place in the world. Part of this takes place during physical education class, as students take part in competitive activities. Skill identity is a key to unlocking doors of entry, not only in physical activities during physical education, but also to activities later in life. While skill is often looked at in an isolated manner, this paper discussed how it can also shape identity. How can we challenge both students and teachers to move forward to make those important connections that will be a key component in shaping both physical activity and shaping a strong skill identity for all students? In creating a strong skill identity, this will ultimately lead to a more socially just learning environment for all students.

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