

# An Exploration of One Girl's Experiences in Elective Physical Education: Why Does She Continue?

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*Participation in high school Physical Education (PE) contributes to the overall health of adolescents. However, many girls discontinue enrollment in PE as soon as the mandatory credits are met. Tailored PE courses designed to meet the needs and interests of girls may motivate them to continue participating in PE. This case study explored one girl's story of her past experiences in PE, as well as her current experiences in a tailored elective PE course. We explored how this girl's experiences with the course content, learning environment, and assessment affected her perceptions of PE. Findings emphasized the importance of variety within PE course content, a welcoming environment, fair and private assessment, and feelings of confidence, social safety, and competence for girls in PE.*

*La participation aux cours d'éducation physique à l'école secondaire contribue à la santé générale des adolescents. Toutefois, plusieurs adolescentes arrêtent de s'inscrire aux cours d'éducation physique dès qu'elles ont obtenu le nombre obligatoire de crédits. Des cours adaptés pour répondre aux besoins et aux intérêts des filles pourraient les motiver à continuer à s'inscrire aux cours d'éducation physique. Cette étude de cas porte sur le récit d'une adolescente qui raconte, d'une part, ses expériences dans le passé avec des cours d'éducation physique et, d'autre part, ses expériences actuelles dans un cours d'éducation physique adapté et facultatif. Nous nous penchons sur ses expériences relatives au contenu du cours, au milieu d'apprentissage et à l'évaluation pour voir dans quelle mesure ces facteurs ont influencé sa perception de l'éducation physique. Les résultats soulignent l'importance, pour les adolescentes suivant des cours d'éducation physique, de la variété dans le contenu des cours, d'un milieu accueillant, d'une évaluation juste et privée, et de sentiments de confiance, sécurité et compétence.*

## Introduction

Despite the physical and psychological benefits of physical activity (PA) being well known, many Canadian youth are not reaping the benefits of regular PA. Teens are much less active than younger children, and girls are less active than boys. PA significantly decreases with each increasing age group, and these gender differences appear at every age (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2011). The Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey in Canada showed that only 27% of females (grades 6-10) reported that they were physically active at least 60 minutes a day (Boyce, 2004). This dramatic decline in adolescent

girls' PA is an important public health issue. There is evidence that females with no history of involvement in PA during adolescence are significantly less likely to be physically active as adults (Tammelin, Näyhä, Hills, & Järvelin, 2003). This suggests that PA interventions targeting adolescent girls are needed.

School based physical education (PE) classes are well situated to help adolescent girls realize the benefits of PA as they are available to all youth, provide a structured context for PA participation and aim to foster PA for life. It has been found that mandatory PE courses can increase the number of days girls are engaged in sustained vigorous physical activity and strength building activity (Cawley, Meyerhoefer, & Newhouse, 2007). However, many adolescent girls have an aversion to PE in high school (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; van Daalen, 2005). This distaste for PE often starts as early as middle school (Gibbons & Humbert, 2008) and is evidenced by the fact that only 15% of girls in British Columbia elect to take PE in grades 11 and 12 once it is no longer mandatory. This is in comparison to the 34% enrollment by boys (N. Poeschek, personal communication, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

Several researchers (e.g. van Daalen, 2005; Gibbons, 2008) have focused on identifying the reasons why girls become disengaged in PE. For example, van Daalen (2005) found that girls experience enjoyment in PE when they are good at the activity; however, most of the time they feel they are not skilled enough at the PE activities offered. Additionally, there is often a perceived inequity between skilled and unskilled students in PE. This frustration can be increased when insufficient time is allotted between introducing a new skill and evaluating that skill (Gibbons, 2008).

There have been strong recommendations that PE programs should focus on promoting lifetime PA to enhance and maintain youths' health later in life. However, in Kilborn, Lorusso, and Francis' (2015) analysis of Canadian physical education curricula they found that the provinces that offer PE (over physical and health education) largely focus on the curriculum theme of movement skills while healthy living and fitness take on much lesser roles. Additionally, many PE programs tend to focus on competitive team sports (Fairclough, Stratton, & Baldwin, 2002; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Garrett, 2004) and according to van Daalen (2005), competition was one of the key factors associated with girls' decision to drop PE. Middle school girls can find this predominance of competitive team sports offered in PE dissatisfying and irrelevant to their current and future lifestyles (Gibbons, 2008; Olafson, 2002). From a sociological perspective, many researchers (e.g. Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Knowles, Niven, & Fawcner, 2014; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008) have suggested that the young women struggled in PE because PA countered the feminine identity created for them by society, particularly in male dominated activities. Similarly, Slater and Tiggemann (2010) reported that girls have the perception that it is not "cool" or feminine for girls to play sports. As well, several authors (e.g. Gibbons, 2008; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010; van Daalen, 2005) found that girls were subjected to teasing from their male classmates in coeducational PE and PA settings. Additionally, teachers were found to make assessment a public event, which further damaged the girls' already fragile self-esteem.

Despite many PE programs failing to engage most adolescent girls, there has been research identifying promising PE practices that appear to meet the needs and interests of girls. Many successful PE interventions have increased moderate to vigorous PA in existing PE classes (Lonsdale et al., 2013). Several common factors unite successful PE programs: the curriculum focuses on lifetime physical activities (see Gibbons, 2014), the teachers foster a safe, positive,

inclusive, and respectful learning environment in the class, and the teachers add to a positive learning environment by acting as facilitator and role model by participating in the activities with the girls (Dudley, Okely, Pearson, & Peat, 2010; Pfaeffli & Gibbons, 2010).

A number of researchers have found that girls who feel positive about their athletic competence are more likely to be active, enjoy and engage in PE, and continue to enroll in elective PE courses (Gibbons, 2014; Fairclough & Stratton, 2005; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, & Rex, 2003). Gibbons (2010) also reported that through use of a student input course content survey, participants felt in control of their PE experiences. The participants expressed how they enjoyed choosing their activities because participating in these activities in turn motivated them, making the class more enjoyable. They found that a sense of competence could also be created through assessment. Since grades were not based solely on skill testing or skill comparison between classmates, but rather on individual effort and participation, this motivated the girls to put in greater effort.

As well, several researchers (e.g. Felton et. al, 2005; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Gibbons, 2010) found working in groups with their friends motivated girls to be active and made PE class more enjoyable. Additionally, a girls-only PE option, or at least some gender separate opportunities, makes it more feasible for girls to discuss some of the barriers they face in being physically active and to feel comfortable engaging in different activities. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) argued that part of this could be due to the fact that male games played in schools have much greater cultural status and value and therefore dominate co-educational PE.

Successful PE programs also link activities to those available in the community. Including guest instructors and field trips in the curriculum exposes girls to a variety of active role models and to a range of physical activities available within the community (Gibbons, 2009; Jones, Hoelscher, Kelder, Hergenroeder, & Sharma, 2008; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003; Webber et al., 2008).

Considerable research has been conducted to explore why girls disengage in PE and drop out and the promising practices that keep girls engaged in PE. Yet limited research has taken an in-depth look into the experiences of girls who are engaged and continue to enroll in elective PE. In this study, we examine the experiences of one girl who continued to enroll in a senior elective PE course tailored to meet her needs and interests. Hearing the girl's past and current experiences in PE allowed for a greater understanding of how the three parts of the teaching process—course content, learning environment, and assessment—affected her participation and continuation in PE.

## **Methods**

### **Case Study**

A narrative case study approach was selected because it offers an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013). A case study design is useful when an individual case can produce new insights that might be transferred to a larger group (Curry, Nembhard, & Bradley, 2009) and may provide useful insights into the experiences of a unique individual that can inform further research into ways of potentially improving practice (Radley & Chamberlain, 2001). This descriptive case study allowed us to depict a young woman within the phenomenon of elective PE. It allowed us to give voice to her individual stories of her personal experiences in PE. A case study approach offered a way of looking at how the young woman encapsulated her previous PE experiences and, importantly, how those events continued to shape her stories of PE today.

## **The Course: Girls Actively Living**

Girls Actively Living (GAL), the tailored PE course that was the focus of the study, was locally created and taught for the majority of the time by the first author as an alternative to the regular co-ed PE program in grades 10, 11, and 12. It addresses the specific needs and interests of females and was designed to provide knowledge and develop activities that promote long-term participation in PA. The course content develops students' knowledge of nutrition, wellness components, self-esteem, fitness training, and stress management in order to increase their own well-being; focuses on lifelong recreational and fitness activities such as skating, dance, martial arts, Pilates, racquet sports, yoga, boxercise, and aerobics; and utilizes community resources and facilities. Formative assessment is used regularly in order to provide students with feedback on their learning. The course emphasizes a social environment and having fun while being active. GAL began in the fall of 2007. At times since its inception it has quadrupled the number of girls enrolled in senior elective PE at the school prior to 2007.

## **The Participant**

Due to the specific population under study, a purposive sampling strategy was used "which in essence means that a sample from which one can learn the most is selected" (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2011). I (J. G.)<sup>1</sup> visited the tailored PE class to explain the research project and to recruit potential participants. Three girls volunteered to be a part of the original study. Amy was selected for this particular case study as she was in grade 11, was a repeat enroller (she participated in GAL in grade 10 when PE was mandatory and then made the decision to enroll in GAL in subsequent years when PE was elective), and provided rich and detailed narratives. She is considered an instrumental case as she helped us to better understand the issue of girls' enrollment in elective PE (Stake, 1995).

## **Reflexivity: The Researcher**

Patton (2002) suggests that a researcher's own reasons for conducting a study be explicitly stated in order to situate her personal biases during the analysis and narrative construction. Creswell (2013) uses the term "reflexivity" to describe the process of researchers positioning themselves in the study. As first author of this paper, my reason for pursuing this topic was that I have experienced the high dropout rate of adolescent girls in PE as well as the joyous experiences of some girls enrolled in elective PE as a student, teacher, and researcher.

I really enjoyed PE throughout high-school. I was very competitive and played on numerous school and community sports teams. I was able to compete with the boys in elective senior PE. I remember wondering at the time why more girls were not in senior PE (there were four of us). I simply believed other girls were lazy and not athletic and that is why they chose not to continue in PE. It was not until I graduated from high school, and I started my university education to become a PE teacher that I began to think that perhaps there were other reasons for the girls' drop-out rates. I had one professor (S. G.) in particular who made me think that it was not the girls' laziness or lack of athleticism that caused them to drop out of PE but perhaps a foundational issue within PE itself that disengaged them. When I graduated and became a full time PE teacher, my experiences led to the creation of GAL and my interest in exploring the topic of girls in PE as a researcher.

## **Procedures**

The participant was asked to recount her past experiences with PE and her current participation. The participant described the personal story of her experience and her views of PE based on her experience. An interview guide was used with the participant to capture patterns of experiences in PE. The interview questions were generated and organized based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) four directions (inward, outward, backward and forward) by asking about her feelings, interactions with others, her past and present PE experiences, and her future PA plans. Following are five of the main queries from the interview guide:

Please tell me about your experiences with physical education class in elementary and middle school (inward and backward).

I would like to hear about your experiences in PE 9 and 10 (inward and backward).

Please tell me about your experiences in Girls Actively Living (inward, backward and forward).

Why do you think some girls don't take PE after grade ten (outward and forward)?

What do you do for physical activity outside of school (inward and forward)?

In order to help ensure that the participant was as relaxed and comfortable as possible during the interview, the meeting was held in the familiar setting of the school. The interview lasted twenty seven minutes during the GAL block. After the first interview, J. G. asked the participant to review her transcript and offered her a second interview to clarify the transcript or discuss any more of her experiences in PE—Amy did not feel she required a second interview, but she did make some additional notes on her transcript. J. G. used a digital recorder and Audacity software to record the interview. In addition to the interview and follow-up regarding Amy's transcript, J. G. also observed Amy once a week in the physical setting of the course, interacting with classmates and participating in the physical activities. During these observations J. G. acted as both a participant as observer when she would participate in the same activities as Amy, and sometimes as an observer as participant when she would watch the class but not participate (Creswell, 2013). J. G. also had numerous conversations with Amy before, during, and after the GAL lessons. J. G. recorded field notes during, or immediately after, her observations and conversations with Amy. The quality of a case study is enhanced through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information such as documentation, interviews, and direct observation (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). All interviews, conversations, and observations occurred between September and January of the school year.

## **Analysis**

Good case study research involves a description of the case as well as themes that the researcher has uncovered in studying the case (Creswell, 2013). During the interview Amy told her story. J. G. transcribed the interview material and then rewrote the transcript to place Amy's stories within a chronological sequence. The narrative was constructed to follow a plot line for presentation and consistency when reading each experience. The timing of events and the context were also incorporated as key elements of the narrative. The narrative was structured

around Amy's past and present PE experiences within elementary, middle, and high school PE and the reasons she continued in elective PE. The retelling centered on Amy's experiences within elementary, middle, and high school PE, from both a personal and social perspective, allowing for a broader, more holistic view of her experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

The findings of a qualitative investigation should illustrate a balance between the researcher's interpretations and supporting quotations from the participant (Morrow, 2005). A narrative strategy was used to write the research text in which the participant's stories are presented, and the researcher's interpretations follow. The narrative was examined for themes that addressed the research questions regarding the three parts of the teaching process—course content, learning environment and assessment. Analysis of themes contributes to a stronger understanding of the complexity of a case (Creswell, 2013). Analysis was approached from the perspective of seeking informative and actionable answers to the research questions. Rather than pulling pieces from the story out of context, we sought key themes from the experiences as the participant related them. By using the participant's own words, which were more colourful and distinctive, we were able to communicate the unique particularities of what the experiences in PE were really like for Amy.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The narrative begins with a description of the young woman. Then Amy's past experiences in elementary, middle, and high school PE are presented, followed by her current experiences in GAL, and her PA outside of PE. In order to address the research questions, the PE experiences are focused around course content, the learning environment, and assessment. After the narrative, we have provided our interpretations of the narrative told.

#### **Amy: A Narrative Account**

Amy is a quiet 16-year-old girl who is currently in grade 11 at Hemery High School. She is thin and her skin is very pale, almost translucent. Her shoulder length blonde hair is dyed bright pink in areas. I saw Amy in the hall the morning prior to our first interview and smiled at her. I noticed that she and her friends hang out in the hall in front of the theatre. This area is quite different from the main commons where the "popular" students tend to gather. When talking to Ms. Litto, she told me that Amy failed GAL the first time in grade 10. However, she also informed me that Amy has recently had a turn-around and is performing much better this time in the course. To me, Amy seems responsible and conscientious. I only had to wait 30 seconds in the gym before Amy appeared immediately after the bell, prepared for our interview.

I had a feeling that Amy was quite nervous during our interview as she cleared her throat numerous times and often looked down at her hands. She mostly responded to my questions with really short answers. This nervousness was consistent with what I witnessed during my time in GAL—away from quietly chatting with her one friend in the class she stuck mostly to herself and appeared shy. There were, however, times during the interview and my other conversations with Amy that she appeared really confident; holding her head high and maintaining consistent eye contact. Our interview was brief, under 27 minutes in length due to Amy's short answers, but I also had many impromptu conversations with her and a follow-up chat after I received her transcript changes and additions. Between our interview, our

conversations, and my observations of her in GAL, I felt that despite her shyness, I had the opportunity to learn quite a lot about Amy over the course of five months.

To begin the interview, I asked Amy to recall her past PE experiences in elementary school. She smiled and spoke first of the course content: “We played lots of really fun games.” I prompted her further to see if she could remember any particular games:

Yeah, we would play, I guess it would be a type of laser tag, we’d turn off all the gym lights and put out like the big mats, and ... set them up and one person would have a flashlight and they’d go around looking for people ... It was a lot of fun.

I asked Amy if she could remember any further details about the course content in elementary PE and she recalled the following: “We’d play badminton and floor hockey, I remember playing floor hockey a lot, we’d even have like a team for floor hockey ... and we had like a school floor hockey team, and same with basketball ...”

When I asked Amy about the variety in course content in elementary school PE, she told me that the emphasis was mostly on games rather than on sports or fitness and that she enjoyed this focus: “I liked it mostly when we played games, I wasn’t really big on like a lot of the sports like soccer.” I asked her why she did not enjoy the sports as much and she explained, “I’m not really good at a lot of sports and some sports I just don’t really like.” When I asked her if she remembered any dance in elementary school PE, she replied, “we might have done dance. I remember always not liking it, so we probably did it in elementary school too.” She did remember dance as part of the middle school PE curriculum and did not enjoy that portion of the course. When I asked her if there was anything she did not enjoy about the structure of middle school PE, she replied, “um, I don’t know, just some things ... like the dances we learned I didn’t really like.” Amy explained that the course content focus shifted from mostly games in elementary school PE to a concentration on team sports in middle school PE. When I asked about the difference between elementary and middle school PE, Amy explained that they spent “about the same amount of time on each sport” and that the focus was largely on “team sports.”

When discussing the course content, Amy told me that the students had some choice in the activities offered during elementary and middle school PE, but that the decisions were mostly teacher-driven: “I think some days we got to choose and other days the teacher would be like, okay we’re doing this today.”

Amy had touched on her perceived competence when discussing the sports in elementary school PE, but after discussing the elementary PE course content in more depth, I asked her to discuss physical competence further: “Um, I was really good at floor hockey because I played hockey [outside of school], but soccer I wasn’t always really good at, but I was also okay at basketball.” I then enquired further about dance as she had previously mentioned a dislike of dance. I asked her to clarify if she simply disliked it or if she did not feel skilled in it, and she responded, “I just don’t really like it.” Amy’s level of perceived physical competence remained consistent as she moved from elementary to middle school PE. I asked her how good she felt at the team sports in middle school PE and she explained that “[she] was okay at them.”

After discussing course content and competency, the topic of the learning environment in Amy’s early PE experiences emerged. She described her elementary PE learning environment in a positive light: “It was enthusiastic definitely. ‘Cause you know, we were kids, and we’re always enthusiastic about a lot of things ... we’re learning other things that aren’t like math or science or something, so we’re playing games pretty much for us.” When I asked in what way her

elementary teachers contributed to this positive learning environment, Amy responded, “they were happy about it. They were calm if we didn’t listen really.” However, Amy felt a little different about the learning environment in middle school PE. I inquired about how the learning environment differed in middle school in comparison to elementary: “It was a little less enthusiastic, and if we didn’t listen the teacher would get a little bit less calm ... Her tone would change.” Amy did mention that there were positive aspects of the learning environment in middle school PE. She explained that sometimes the teacher would arrange the teams for the various activities, and other days the students had the opportunity to form their own teams.

As for assessment in her early PE experiences, Amy recalled that it was “mostly just participation.” I clarified that this meant that basically if they were running around and playing the game that they received a decent mark and she responded, “Yeah.” When I prompted her further to see if she could recall any other aspect of assessment in either elementary or middle school PE, she repeated her earlier statement, “mostly just participation.”

Once Amy reached high school, she enrolled in the regular co-educational PE program in grade 9. I asked Amy to think back three years and recall her experiences in the PE 9 class. She responded first with discussion of the course content: “Um, they were okay. We didn’t really do a lot of games, sometimes we’d play like benchball or dodgeball, but it was mostly sports and runs.” I asked Amy if she liked or disliked this activity structure and she replied, “I don’t like running. Some of the sports were okay, but I didn’t like running.” Amy explained that the teacher largely determined the activities in PE 9 and the focus was mostly on team sports and fitness. I asked if the runs were the main fitness activity and she nodded and added, ‘and we’d [also] do like the BEEP test and fitness training.’ Amy, as in most of the interview, preferred to offer short responses when I inquired about PE 9. However, I prompted further on the topics of course content and her perceived physical competence in her first year of high school PE. She told me that she felt somewhat skilled in football, “but in grade 9 [they] didn’t do floor hockey or anything”—a sport that she felt skilled in during previous PE experiences. I asked Amy to think back and try to remember all of the activities they did in PE 9. She remembered, “basketball, soccer, football, rugby, I think baseball, and I think lacrosse were the sports we did.”

I asked Amy next about her feelings on the learning environment in the co-ed PE 9 program. She replied that it was “more focused on what we did and a different tone definitely, especially if we were being loud.” She then clarified that the learning environment was more serious than her previous PE learning environments.

Amy explained that assessment in PE 9 relied once again mostly on participation, but that her performances on runs were also assessed: “You had to get a certain time for runs and if you didn’t do the run you’d have to re-do it or if you didn’t get a certain time, you’d have to re-do it sometimes.” As Amy had mentioned numerous times her dislike of running, I asked if her grade dropped because of her performance on runs and she responded, “yeah, it really did (laughing).” Amy also mentioned that she completed tests on the sports they covered in PE 9 and that the results on these tests also attributed to part of her grade. She explained that there were “questions about how the game was set up or how the sport was set up ... the roles ...” on these tests. When I asked if she felt this form of assessment was fair she responded, “it was fair; it lets the teacher know what you learned from it.”

After co-ed PE 9, Amy enrolled in GAL twice in grade 10, as opposed to enrolling in the regular co-ed PE10 course to meet the requirements, and again in her current grade 11 year. Amy readily offered why she has taken GAL three times:



'Cause the first time I took it in grade 10, it was the same semester, but I broke my arm in November ... So I had to do it again, and now, I failed that one because I didn't really show up a lot of the time, so I'm doing it again.

Amy's and my discussion then moved to her current experiences in GAL and how they compared to her previous experiences in elementary, middle, and co-educational high school PE. She explained that GAL is "kind of like elementary and middle school, but a little different because it's still a little bit more serious, but also relaxed and fun." I asked Amy if she could explain the learning environment of GAL further; I inquired about what it "felt like" to be in the class. She explained: "Some days it's nice if you like what we're doing that day, it's nice to do, but some days it's like some things you don't want to do, but you end up kind of having fun." Amy and I then progressed on to discussing the course content in GAL and how it compared to her previous experiences in PE: "Instead of running we go on like walks and we go on field trips and we do fun games." I then asked Amy if games were a large focus in GAL then and she shook/nodded her head in a "sort of" fashion and said "it's more fitness, like keeping up your heart rate and stuff. Keeping healthy I suppose." I then asked Amy about the amount of student versus teacher choice in the activities offered in GAL: "We get to choose where we go for field trips, most of the time, like she'll put some of the things, but she chooses the activities ... but we all kind of as one decide where we're going to go for field trips." Amy explained that GAL has participated in a number of field trips: "Swimming, skating, they went rock climbing, (thinking) what other things do we do ... bowling." Following up on the list of field trips, I inquired about the variety of activities offered in GAL. Amy explained that there is a large variety of activities offered in GAL. She explained the structure of activities to me: "yeah we usually do like one a day for some sports, and sometimes we focus a little bit more on them, like two days at most." This was in comparison to PE 9 where "[they'd] do sports for a week ... depending on if [they] were outside or inside which week."

I then prompted Amy to discuss her perceived level of physical competency in the activities in GAL. She explained that she felt "pretty good" at most of the activities offered. She especially enjoyed "four-corner soccer," an indoor version of soccer that has four teams and goals. However she felt "not skilled (laughing) at yoga and Pilates." When I asked if she still enjoyed these activities despite feeling a lack of competence in them, she responded, "(shaking her head) no, I don't really like them (laughing)."

I asked Amy to apply an emotional word to describe the learning environment in GAL and she responded, "calm, but kind of serious because she wants us to listen and learn how to do it properly." I then inquired about the unique feature of the learning environment in GAL; the fact that it is a girls-only course. I asked Amy if this feature changes the learning environment of PE for her and she responded, "Yeah." I asked her if she had a problem with the co-ed environment in PE 9 and she replied, "yeah because [guys would] excel at a lot of things, and they'd just be more ... what's the word?" I suggested "dominant maybe?" Amy agreed, "Yeah." I enquired if there were any negative consequences of being part of an all-girls PE class such as cliques, and Amy shook her head no. She told me that there was "not really" any negative talk amongst the girls. Amy explained that Ms. Litto helped to create this positive learning environment in GAL by having the girls participate in teambuilding exercises. When I asked Amy if the students or Ms. Litto arranged the groups for the teambuilding activities, she explained that sometimes the students chose the groups and sometimes Ms. Litto chose them, in Amy's words, "just to get us more spread out and with different people."

As for assessment in GAL, Amy told me it is similar to what it was in elementary and middle school PE: participation. When I asked her if her grade in GAL was based on anything other than participation, she responded “um ... nope.”

In talking to Amy and Ms. Litto, I learned that Amy is currently trying to receive her grade 10 (mandatory) PE credit because she failed GAL 10 last year due to her lack of attendance. However, she told me that she plans to take GAL again next year, in her grade 12 year, as an elective course: “I do like doing PE so I’m probably going to do it next year as well.” Amy said that she would take GAL again next year rather than co-ed PE because she likes it and “it’ll get [her] more active.”

When observing Amy in class I noticed that she had one friend in GAL that she most often chatted and participated with. I inquired about her other friends’ opinions of PE: “Some of them don’t really like it.” Amy explained that her friends do not really talk about why they do not like PE. I then asked if any of her friends were enrolled in PE and she said, “Um ... they are I think, I know Chloe who’s in my class is.” Chloe is enrolled in GAL with Amy and when I asked if any of her friends were enrolled in co-educational PE she said “no.”

Amy explained that her main source of exercise outside of PE consists of walking. She told me that she had no outside encouragement from family or friends to continue in GAL, that it was simply a personal decision: “Um ... no, I just like it sometimes.” Amy stated further that she did not discuss her decision to continue with family or friends. I then asked Amy if any aspect of GAL has inspired her to become active outside of school: “Um ... kind of ... I know I’m going to like rock climbing when we go; it’s something I’m going to want to do.”

### **Interpretation and Reflection on the Narrative Account**

What struck me most about Amy during our conversations is how “her face and eyes came alive when she talked about participating in fun minor games in both elementary [school PE] and GAL. It makes me wonder if she longs for innocence; a second childhood.” Despite the fact that she used to play competitive hockey outside of school, within PE, Amy explained that she enjoys activities that are recreational and fun rather than competitive. Although she mentioned fitness activities, it was the “fun games” that she seemed to value throughout her past PE experiences and currently in GAL. As for the rest of the course content in GAL, Amy expressed that she disliked participating in dance, Pilates, and yoga. Although these activities make up a large portion of the GAL curriculum, Amy still really enjoys the course and plans to sign up for it again next year. This suggests that perhaps the games offered and the general learning environment in GAL are more important to Amy than the focus on lifetime fitness activities.

In our discussions of PE learning environments, it became clear that Amy defined a positive learning environment by the demeanor of the teacher. She constantly referred to her teachers as “calm” or “less calm” in her descriptions of the learning environments. This illustrates the large role her PE teachers could play in creating a welcoming learning environment. Amy compared the learning environment of elementary school PE to GAL because she said it is also “relaxed” and “fun”; however, she also described it as “a little bit more serious” because there are high expectations of her as a participant in the course.

When it came to assessment in GAL, it was Amy’s perception that it was based wholly on participation. This perception of assessment was fairly consistent throughout her past PE experiences as well. However, in talking to Ms. Litto I learned that the girls are also assessed on a few assignments, one example being a Create-a-Dance project where they are required to

create, practice and perform their own dances. Despite not remembering all of the assignments, Amy still described the assessment in GAL as “fair.”

### **Themes in the Narrative Account**

Within our case study, we looked across the individual narrative to inquire into themes that could be discerned from the stories of this girl’s experiences in PE. In this shift we wanted to offer a deeper and broader awareness of the experiences of this young woman in elective PE. Our aim in presenting these themes is to consider what is common to her experiences in relation to participants in other research.

We read the narrative through a number of times while keeping in mind our research questions regarding the course content, learning environment, and assessment in GAL as well as Amy’s experiences outside of PE and her perceptions of PA in general. While initially we identified a number of themes, as we worked with them we realized there were many intersections and overlaps, and we could best represent the complexities of the narrative in relation to the research questions in four themes.

#### **“Then the next day’s something different ... it’s a surprise”: Variety and Cooperation within Course Content**

This first thread tied together Amy’s discussions on the variety of activities she experienced during PE as well as the value she placed on cooperative activities over competitive team sports. The narrative account speaks clearly to the importance of variety in PE course content. Amy spoke favourably of the course content offered during elementary school PE. The required provincial curriculum from kindergarten to grade seven defines five categories in course content: Alternative-Environment Activities, Dance, Individual and Dual Activities, Games and Gymnastics (BC Ministry of Education, 2006). Amy remembered the course content was heavily focused on the Games category as she explained many of the “fun games” they played. Despite the limited course content described in elementary PE, Amy recalled the activities in a positive light as they were seen as fun and cooperative as opposed to competitive.

Moving into middle school and high school PE, the curriculum in grades eight to ten divides the PE course content into three activity categories: Rhythmic Movement, Individual and Dual Activities, and Games (BC Ministry of Education, 2008). Amy described the course content in middle school and her early co-educational high school PE experiences as once again focused heavily on the Games category, and specifically on team sports. However, unlike the games played during elementary school, these team sports were competitive in nature. This is consistent with literature that found that competitive team sports are predominantly offered in middle and high school PE (Fairclough et al., 2002; Gibbons, 2008). Amy expressed that she was “not really good at a lot of sports.” Some researchers argue that an almost exclusive use of team sports in PE is not an effective way to encourage a lifetime of PA because team sports not only require a great deal of organization and large numbers of people, but also account for only a small portion of the activities in which adults actually participate (e.g. Corbin, 2002; Fairclough et al, 2002). Therefore, the majority of the activities Amy experienced during elementary, middle, and early high school PE could not be considered lifetime activities.

Once in GAL, Amy described the course content consisting of a variety of lifetime activities. These activities included dance, yoga, and Pilates and many other activities from both the

Rhythmic Movement and Individual and Dual Activities categories. According to Fairclough et al. (2002), these types of activities are only occasionally offered or ignored altogether in typical PE programs. The authors define lifetime activities as those that may readily be carried over into adulthood because they generally can be pursued individually or with others, require little structure or organization and minimal equipment. In Amy's words, she described the focus of activities in GAL as: "more fitness, like keeping up your heart rate and stuff. Keeping healthy I suppose."

The weekly field trips Amy described in GAL were obviously important her. These field trips offered a sense of choice and variety she had not experienced in previous PE courses. Most of the field trips she described could be considered lifetime activities such as swimming, bowling, aerobics, and dance. These excursions into the community in order to explore further PA opportunities have been identified as important for girls' enjoyment, engagement, and participation in PE programs (Gibbons, 2014; Jones et al., 2008; Webber et al., 2008).

Competition has been found to be one of the key factors associated with girls' decision to drop PE (van Daalen, 2005). Amy does not participate in organized physical activities outside of school, and this could be an explanation to why she does not desire competition in her PE class. Barnett, Cliff, Morgan, and van Beurden (2013) found that one notable point of difference between the adolescents in their study who participated in organized sport and adolescents who did not was their respective attitudes to competition. Members of the organized activity groups spoke of competition as a motivating factor, noting that some individuals thrive on this competition and that this keeps them involved and focused. In contrast to this, one female member of the non-organized group argued that toning down the emphasis on competition against opponents and emphasizing the more social aspects of involvement in activity may well increase the participants' engagement in PA. It appeared that the lack of competition in GAL increased Amy's motivation and engagement in the course. Finally, the teacher's choice to deemphasize competitive activities in GAL also helped to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment as discussed in the next thread.

### **"It's okay to be weird and have fun": A Fun and Welcoming Environment**

This thread reflected the environments that Amy valued throughout her PE experiences as well as some environments that made her feel vulnerable. Amy described the nature of the environment in GAL, as well as some of her previous experiences in PE, as "fun." Amy often used this term, "fun," in conjunction with terms such as "warm, enthusiastic, and relaxed," and "nice." This suggested to us that when her teacher and peers welcomed Amy, she became relaxed and was able to have fun and become enthusiastic about the activities without the fear of ridicule. This sentiment is similar to the Gibbons (2009) study where the young women valued feeling safe and included in their PE class.

Some researchers discuss the importance of participating with friends as a motivating factor in PE (Felton et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2009; Gibbons, 2010; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Whereas Amy mentioned enjoying having friends in the course, she did state that she would enroll in GAL again even if her friends did not. This suggests that the overall environment of the course is more important to Amy than having friends in the class.

One aspect of the environment valued by Amy is the fact that GAL is a girls-only course. She found that this aspect allowed her more opportunities to participate, and she felt more comfortable without boys in the class. This finding is similar to other qualitative inquiries into

all female PE classes (Felton et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2010).

Throughout my conversations with Amy, the importance of the teacher in creating a positive environment became abundantly clear. She spoke highly of the teacher of GAL. Amy explained that Ms. Litto had specific strategies to help encourage a warm and welcoming environment. Ms. Litto acts as a facilitator, and this has been found to contribute to a positive environment (Dudley et al., 2010; Gibbons, 2010).

### **“It’s all pretty fair”: Fair and Private Assessment**

The third thread reflects the fact that Amy felt the effort-based assessment focus throughout her PE experiences was fair. It has been found that effort-based assessment can create a sense of competence. Girls in the Gibbons (2010) study felt that since grades in their PE course were not based solely on skill testing or skill comparison between classmates, but rather on individual effort and participation, this motivated them to put in greater effort.

One aspect of assessment that Amy experienced prior to GAL of which she had strong feelings of distaste toward was running. In particular, she really disliked being assessed during a fitness testing week using a running test called the BEEP test. What the running assessments she described had in common was that they were public; Amy was on display for the other students to judge. Amy’s dislike of these public assessments is consistent with the findings of other studies (Gibbons, 2008; van Daalen, 2005) that found that girls were dissatisfied with their PE experiences due to the public nature of performing skills and being evaluated in front of their peers. However, this narrative reveals that public assessment is only a piece of the puzzle. Amy described some public assessments throughout her years in PE that were not negative experiences for her—these assessments evaluated skills or knowledge in which she felt competent. Therefore, the fear of public assessment was the combination of feeling unskilled or unprepared and then performing the skill in public. It can be posited that if a girl feels fit, skilled, and knowledgeable in an activity, public assessment would not be such a harmful activity for her self-esteem.

### **“It just boosts up my ability and confidence”: Confidence, Social Safety, and Competence**

Amy commented on how she felt confident, socially safe and physically competent in GAL, forming the final thread. Amy felt confident enough in GAL to participate, and this participation led her to become more physically competent, and this competence in turn allowed her to gain even more confidence. This positive feedback loop is described by Susan Harter’s modified Competence Motivation Theory (Harter, 1992, 1999). This model demonstrates how two primary competence clusters of domains—physical appearance, peer likeability and athletic competence, and scholastic competence and behavioral conduct—can impact feelings of self-worth both directly and indirectly. Therefore, feelings of competence in these domains may lead to the overall enhancement of self-esteem in adolescents. Harter suggests that mastery engagement and attempts to build a youth’s perception of her competence, in turn, influences a girl’s persistence in a task (Harter, 1988). In essence, a girl’s perceptions of competence influence whether she will maintain engaged in an activity. Feeling socially safe is also a part of this cycle because Amy had to feel safe and supported (i.e. a positive learning environment) in GAL in order to try, fail and try again to develop competence and confidence. A similar

phenomenon was described by Lyu and Gill (2012); they investigated the relationships among perceived physical competence, body image, and peer acceptance. They found that for adolescent females (aged 11 to 14), perceived peer acceptance simultaneously predicts body image and also predicts perceived physical competence, which in turn predicts body image. Since Amy felt socially accepted in GAL (due to the welcoming environment), her confidence and perceived physical competence perhaps increased, which in turn then increased her social acceptance in the course.

Amy felt fairly competent throughout most of her PE experiences. She did however state that she felt more competent in elementary school PE than in co-educational middle and high school PE. This finding is similar to Knowles, Niven, and Fawcner (2014) who found the girls in their study felt more comfortable in their environment at elementary school where perceptions of competence were high when engaging in PA. These authors and Marsh (1987) suggest that individuals compare their abilities to those of their classmates and use this social comparison as a basis for forming their own self-concept, and this can be called the "Big Fish Little Pond Effect" (BFLPE). BFLPE is prevalent in the latter stages of elementary school where children have no standard of comparison except their regular classmates. During elementary school Amy was the big fish and she was comfortable with who she was physically and what she could do in her little PE pond.

However, in later years, there were certain activities in which Amy perceived herself as incompetent. She identified soccer, dance, Pilates and yoga as activities in which she did not feel skilled. Interestingly Amy described really enjoying GAL despite the fact that a large portion of the course's curriculum consists of activities such as dance, Pilates and yoga in which she lacks perceived physical competence. This contradicts the finding by van Daalen (2005) that participants reported only enjoying PE when they were good at the activity. The finding in this study suggests that the variety in course content and the fact that she felt safe and welcomed by the learning environment in GAL was enough for Amy to remain engaged and confident in the course.

As discussed previously, Amy valued the same-sex environment of GAL. Studies have found that girls in same-sex classes have higher perceived physical competence. For example, Lyu and Gill (2011), who investigated levels of perceived physical competence, enjoyment and effort in PE class, found that females in same-sex classes had higher perceived physical competence and physical self-worth than female students in co-educational classes. For Amy, she too reported feeling more competent in the activities offered in GAL than in previous co-educational PE activities.

## **Conclusions**

Amy's stories of her PE experiences illustrate the point that experiences of youth have the potential to shape the content and nature of PE. Amy valued the chance to discuss issues in her interview and proved to be highly reflective regarding her experiences. She had several insights that strengthened the findings of this research and could be a valuable resource for educators trying to improve motivation and participation in PE. Amy's narrative highlighted the importance of developing a PE learning environment that is welcoming and fun, offers a variety of course content, assesses student learning in a fair and private manner, and builds a girl's sense of competence and confidence.

Several directions for future research emanated from the results of this study. Firstly, the use

of case studies in PE requires further exploration of the stories of girls who did not continue to enroll in elective PE. Secondly, of interest would be to conduct case studies of girls after high school, to examine the impact a tailored elective PE course made on their lives after graduating. Thirdly, narratives of girls who choose to continue in traditional, rather than tailored, elective PE courses would shed further light on girls who find success in the traditional PE paradigm. Finally, while this study explored the stories of one young woman in PE, not all adolescent females would tell similar stories. Therefore, the stories of further adolescent girls need to be told and listened to in order to broaden this area of research. Involving girls from different cultural groups such as First Nations and girls with different sexual orientations may potentially increase the diversity of the inquiry. Additionally, an ethnographic study of an entire girls-only elective PE course would provide insight into the collective story of a population of girls in PE.

In conclusion, other research has stressed the importance of a variety in course content, a welcoming environment, fair assessment, and perceived physical competence in increasing girls' participation in elective PE, and this study is not so unique in identifying this. However, this study is unique in that the narrative case study approach offered an in-depth way of looking with one young woman at the meanings of these experiences for her in more detail and importantly how her early formative experiences in PE continue to shape her current experiences in PE. In this way the stories of PE she holds now continue to shape her decision to continue in elective PE.

In order for girls to feel welcome, want to participate and enjoy PE, their stories need to be told. The girl in this study was willing to share her stories of her PE experiences because she was provided a comfortable, safe space where she could have her voice heard. Adolescent girls, such as Amy, have an understanding of how they think, feel and behave in PE; thus, their stories need to be told, heard and ultimately responded to. The girl in this study shed light on how her experiences with the course content, learning environment and assessment in a tailored elective PE course inspired her to continue enrolling in PE after the mandatory credits were achieved. Listening and responding to narratives of adolescent girls' PE experiences can help improve the PE experiences for other young women. This may encourage them to continue in elective PE, thereby helping to reverse the trend of declining physical activity levels for adolescent girls and possibly allow them to become active and healthy adults.

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### Note

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