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**Teachers' Experiences with Disengagement in Physical Education classes at  
Secondary School Level in the Perth Metropolitan Area**

Nuno M. R. Oliveira

This thesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters by Research in Education

Faculty of Arts and Education

Edith Cowan University

Submission date: 25 June 2014

## **Abstract**

Students' disengagement from school has been one of the major concerns in educational research (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). According to researchers (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn & National Center for Education Statistics, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks & Blumenfeld et al., 2004) the more disengaged the students are, the more likely they will be to fail academically and ultimately drop out. Although researchers have already identified several risk factors that can influence students' engagement (Fulton, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Newmann, 1992), very few studies have explored teachers' views of this educational issue. The same seems to be the case in Physical Education where the curriculum has been identified as one of the major factors that influences students' engagement (Alexander, 2008; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Garn & Cothran 2006; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Salee, 2000; Supaporn & Griffin, 1998; Smith & Parr, 2007). However, few studies have given voice to teachers in this matter. Thus, this research sought to explore the way Physical Education teachers experience students' disengagement at the class level and to ascertain their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature.

This research used a qualitative approach within an interpretivist theoretical framework, studying a total of four public schools and fourteen PE teachers. The data collection was conducted through individual semi-structured interviews which were guided by a theme list and recorded in a digital format. The data analysis consisted of coding the transcripts into different categories, identifying meaningful patterns.

The analysis of the data collected resulted in three main findings. Firstly, results showed that participants failed to recognize some of the factors identified in the

literature that typically influence engagement. This compromised their interventions and therefore their ability to re-engage students in PE. Secondly, participants focused their pedagogical adjustments at the lesson level and not at the curriculum level. Thirdly, teachers were more focused on the processes of learning than on learning outcomes themselves. They were aware of their short- and long-term goals but acknowledged that they could not achieve either of them due to a range of factors, including curriculum limitations.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i) Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
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Nuno Oliveira

Date: 25/06/2014

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This research project would have not been completed without the help of some special people. These people played a pivotal role in this project by providing me with their advice, encouragement, and by always showing their belief in me. Therefore I would like to honor those people and acknowledge their effort, commitment and support throughout this journey.

First and foremost I would like to thank my wife Joana Lucena for her tireless support, encouragement and unconditional faith in me. The challenges of this journey go way beyond the academic requirements for its completion and some of those challenges only you can understand. You have always been there for me, and I thank you for that. Amo-te (love you).

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I also would like to thank the school principals and the teacher-participants in this study. The school principals kindly allowed me to collect data from their schools. The recruitment process can be very time consuming and their quick responses made the process much easier. As well, I would like to thank and recognize the Physical



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Portuguese version of the last paragraph

Por ultimo gostaria de agradecer a minha familia do outro lado do mundo por todo o vosso amor e apoion. Um dos grandes desafios deste projecto foi estar longe de casa e das pessoas que eu amo. Obrigado por todas as horas no Skype a ouvir as minhas historias, onde justos partilhamos gargalhadas e algumas lagrimas tambem. Amo-vos a todos e independentemente da diatancia que nos separa, quero que saibam que estaram sempre comigo no meu coracao.

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## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter I provides a rationale for the present research. This chapter establishes the research aims and provides a brief description of the Physical Education goals as a compulsory subject in the Australia National Curriculum. As well, this chapter provides a quick overview of the place of Physical Education as a compulsory subject in schools and identifies some of the curriculum models available for PE. The last topic to be addressed is the significance of this study and its research questions.

Chapter II is dedicated to the literature review. The first section of this chapter presents a conceptual analysis of engagement which helps to create a theoretical framework for the discussion of this topic. The second section of the chapter explores the presence of students' disengagement in schools in general and also in the specific area of Physical Education. Later, the review turns its attention to the reasons for students' disengagement from school and from Physical Education in particular.

Chapter III outlines the research design used to conduct this study. This includes the research's theoretical framework (interpretivism) and its methodology. The methodology first describes the participants, the materials and the recruitment process. In addition, this chapter outlines the data analysis and collection process, as well as the rigour used to assess its validity and reliability.

Chapter IV is dedicated to the presentation of the results of this study. The data are organized within four main sections which correspond to the four main research questions. At the end of each discussion point the researcher provides a summary of the main findings

Chapter V is devoted to the discussion of the results of this study. The main purpose of this chapter is to interpret the research results and to answer the four main research questions. The chapter is organized around the four research questions and, at the end of each topic of discussion, a summary is provided. Each summary outlines the research findings and the answer to each research question with links to previous research.

Chapter VI is dedicated to the summary of the research findings and main topic of discussion. This chapter brings the discussion to an end and presents a comprehensive summary of the main research findings. As well, this chapter addresses some of the limitations of this research, along with suggestions for future research in this area.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chapter I is devoted to the introduction of the research aims. This chapter includes a description of the Physical Education goals in the Australia National Curriculum and provides a brief discussion about the place of Physical Education as a compulsory subject in schools. As well, this chapter refers to the existence of traditional and alternative curriculum models for PE. The last topic to be addressed is the significance of this study along with its research questions.

#### **Research Aims**

The aim of this study was to explore Physical Education (PE) teachers' experiences with disengagement at a lesson level, as well as to ascertain their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature regarding student engagement. It also aimed to consider how curriculum models in use might influence engagement. Contemporary literature highlighted several limitations and possible reasons why teachers fail to engage students in PE classes. Nevertheless, few studies explored PE teachers' awareness of such educational issues. This raises some questions regarding PE teachers' ability to recognize some of the main factors that influence engagement and that might effectively deal with disengaged students in their classes. This study endeavors to provide a better understanding of the way teachers deal with disengagement at the lesson level also to suggest what curricular initiatives might help teachers enhance engagement in PE classes.

#### **Physical Education and the National Curriculum**

According to the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012), PE sits in the Australian National Curriculum as a combined area of Health and Physical

Education (HPE) Studies. Therefore, the discussion of the subject's goals will include both Physical Education and Health Studies. As well, it is important to state that the Health and Physical Education Curriculum has been under development since February 2011 by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). According to ACARA, the new curriculum is to be published by December 2013. The curriculum goals presented here were based on the latest ACARA curriculum publication.

According to the Curriculum Framework K10 available on the Department of Education website (ACARA, 2012), Health and Physical Education is a compulsory subject in Australian Schools from Foundation to year 10. The curriculum then acquires an elective status in Years 11 and 12, as in "senior secondary years, students have flexibility to make curriculum choices reflecting their interests and post-school pathways" (ACARA, 2012, p.4).

### *Curriculum Goals*

As stated by ACARA (2012) in the document "The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education", the Health and Physical Education Curriculum is framed by two strands: the Personal, Social and Community Health (Health), and Movement and Physical Activity (Physical Education). The two strands aim to create a balanced approach to health-related and movement-related learning areas. Even though Health and Physical Education are combined into a single learning area, the document states separate aims for each strand. With regards to the Personal, Social and Community Health strand, school HPE is expected to:

"...enhance students' knowledge, understanding and skills to support a positive sense of self, to effectively respond to life events and transitions and to engage in lifelong learning that promotes health and wellbeing." (ACARA, 2012, p.8)

Concerning the Movement and Physical Activity strand, students are expected to:

“...develop movement competence and confidence in a range of physical activities in a variety of contexts and environments by building upon the important foundations of play and movement skills. In movement and physical activity contexts, students will develop and refine their communication, decision-making and self-management skills, and learn to manage risk and take responsibility for their own and others’ safety.” (ACARA, 2012, p.9)

The main purpose of the HPE learning area is to promote the development of self-sufficient students who are capable of managing their own health and well-being throughout their lives by being actively involved in physical activities (ACARA, 2012). In other words, the subject’s main goal is to enable “children and young people to promote their own and others’ health, well-being, safety and participation in physical activity across their lifespan” (ACARA, 2012, p.7). According to the same document, the HPE curriculum goals were established by taking into consideration the latest research, that suggests that this learning area “should take into account a preventive health agenda” (ACARA, 2012, p.3).

#### *Western Australia HPE Curriculum Framework*

According to the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCASA) in Western Australia (1998), HPE is mainly focused “on a holistic concept of health” (p.114), which consists of the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of health. As stated in the Western Australia Curriculum Framework, the five dimensions of health are conceptualized in an integrated approach to ensure students’ health, well-being and active lifestyle.

The Curriculum Framework organizes the outcomes of HPE in five integrated areas. The first is “Knowledge and Understanding”, which refers to the students’ knowledge and understanding of the concepts of health and physical activity. The second is “Attitudes and

Values”, which relates to the students’ ability to demonstrate attitudes and values that promote their personal, community and family health, as well as their participation in physical activity. The third is “Skills for Physical Activity”, which refers to the set of skills required for participation in physical activity. The fourth is the “Self-management Skills”, which relates to students’ ability to make informed decision about their health and ways to promote an active lifestyle. The fifth and last learning outcome is “Inter-personal Skills”, which refers to the students’ to the set of inter-personal skills necessary to create effective relationships for participation in sport activities.

As well as clearly linking HPE to health and well-being, SCASA also refers to the importance of this subject to help students deal with the challenges of a modern society: “The Health and Physical Education learning area empowers students to critically evaluate the opportunities and challenges associated with living in modern society” (p.114). Thus, one of the aspects that has become clear in the analysis of the HPE Curriculum Framework is that, both national and state curriculum authorities (ACARA and SCASA) highlight the importance of making HPE contemporary and relevant in schools by linking its goals to a preventive health agenda.

### **Past, Present and Future of Physical Education in Schools**

The presence of PE as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum was a topic of discussion addressed by Tinning (2012) in the paper, “The idea of physical education: A memetic perspective”. According to Tinning, the purpose of having PE as a compulsory subject in schools has changed over the decades. The conceptual changes of PE and its educational purposes are greatly dependent on the social context in which the subject is embedded: “ideas that best fit the institutional agenda will win” (Tinning, 2012, p.120). In

other words, the purpose of PE in schools will always respond to contemporary contexts and imperatives.

In the mid-twenties, multi-activity and sport-based forms of PE emerged, which had a focus on skill development. Kirk (2006) refers to this idea of PE as “sport-technique”, where great focus is given to the technical aspects of the game over the performance of the sport activity itself. This approach to PE is strongly based in the assumption that “the teaching and learning of sport techniques (most often called ‘skills’) are of such central importance that these activities define the purpose of physical education”(Kirk, 2010, p.45). The issue is that the “sport-technique” is a concept that “has been highly resistant to change until today” (Tinning, 2012, p.122). From Tinning’s perspective, the “sport-technique” curriculum (which is the most commonly used curriculum in schools today) is losing relevance in a society increasingly focused on health concerns.

As suggested by Tinning (2012), one of the new possible focuses of PE in schools could be what the author calls the “obesity epidemic”. As stated by Tinning (2012), the obesity epidemic is one of the most recurrent health issues in modern society, which might be a new source of support for the presence of PE in the national curriculum - by changing the focus of the subject from sport-techniques to obesity prevention. He asks whether this shift may present an opportunity. “If we ignore this current social issue...we might be losing the best chance we have to legitimize our subject in an educational environment that is increasingly challenging the place of physical education in the curriculum” (Tinning, 2012, p.123). These claims by Tinning seem to be in agreement with ACARA’s and SCASA’s preventive health agenda.

Kirk (2006) suggested that the future of PE in schools can only follow one of these three possibilities: it can be removed from the national curriculum, suffer a radical reform or remain the same. If PE continues to offer “more of the same” (sport-technique curriculum),



the subject will run the risk of extinction due to its lack of social relevance. Kirk (2006) refers to the current PE curriculum as “the Saber-tooth curriculum”, one in which teachers are still insisting on teaching students “stone-age skills” that are no longer relevant for their lives. According to Tinning (2012), in order to ensure a suitable future for HPE it is imperative to create a curriculum that is relevant for students and fits the contemporary physical culture.

### **The Multi-Activity Sport Based Curriculum and its Alternatives**

According to Alexander and Penny (2005), despite its limitations and well documented lack of relevance to many young people, school PE, in the form of the multi-activity program (MAP) is still flourishing in Australian schools. As described by Kirk (2002), in the MAP curriculum students are usually exposed to approximately 12 different “*traditional*” sports per year such as, soccer, volleyball and basketball. This approach to PE is based on the assumption that, if students are exposed to a great variety of sports, they might find an activity they like and pursue that activity into their adult lives (Kirk, 2002). However due to the wide selection of sports, students are only exposed to each sport for short units of work of about 4-6 weeks, limiting their opportunity to learn (Ennis, 1999). Moreover, some of the most traditional sports taught in the MAP curriculum are no longer relevant in to young people (Tinning, 2012). These features of the MAP are the source of some of its limitations, placing “on the margins of the curriculum, struggling for contemporary educational relevance” (Alexander & Penney, 2005, p. 288). The MAP curriculum seems ill-equipped to meet the needs of today’s young people.

It is not as if the MAP constitutes teachers only option for delivering PE programs. There are alternative curriculum models available. One is the Sport Education model (Siedentop, 1982) - also known in Australia as the Sport Education in Physical Education Program (SEPEP, Alexander & Taggart, 1995). This model simulates many of the features of

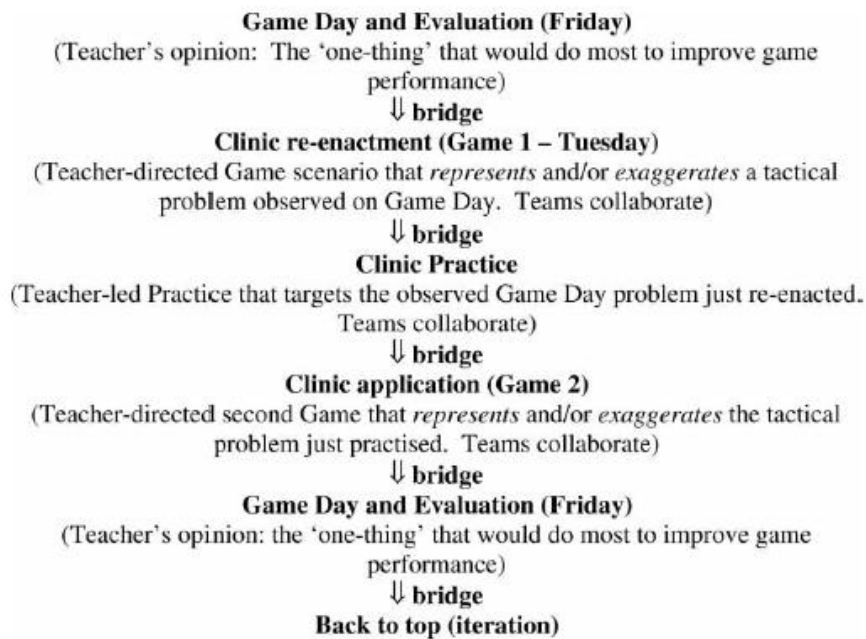
junior/community sport by creating a season of sport conducted in part by the students themselves and played in matched, mixed ability teams over the course of a term. Another alternative is the Clinic-Game Day (CGD) model (Alexander & Penny, 2005). The CGD organizes its sport activities in groups of two lessons of PE per week over the course of a ten-week term, which results in a total of at least 20 sessions of PE per sport activity. Moreover, the classes are organized in sequences of two lessons, the Clinic and the Game-Day. As described by Alexander and Penny (2005):

‘Clinics’ are teacher-mediated, whereas the Game Days are more like typical Sport Education sessions in which duty teams set up and then officiate the fixture matches. Teacher modelling is a key feature of the Clinic, where teachers assume more direct instructional roles. On Game Day, teachers allow students to administer their own warm-ups, practices and matches but can still choose to intervene at key times (p.292).

One of the key aspects of this model is the learning bridge created between the set of skills developed in the Clinic lesson and its direct application in the Game day lesson. As described by Alexander and Penny (2005), the “Friday” Game day lesson (identification of issues during the game situation) becomes the catalyst for planning “Tuesday” Clinic (set of skills that need to be improved to enhance the quality of the game). The figure below (Figure 1) illustrates how the instructional continuity of the CGD is maintained throughout the term.

Figure 1

*Clinic-Game-Day instructional continuity*



This alternative to the MAP curriculum model can potentially solve the issue of reduced time and opportunity for skill development and the lack of connection between the technique practices and the formal game situation.

To conclude, despite the lack of contemporary relevance and other limitations of the MAP, there are alternatives that could be explored. Each one of these alternative curricula has been designed in an attempt to address some of the limitations of the MAP and to educationally legitimize the presence of PE as a compulsory subject in Secondary schools.

### **Significance of Current Research**

This research is significant because of its focus on teachers and their ability to deal with disengaged students. Prior to this study, no research has been conducted around Physical Education within Western Australia to identify PE teachers' experiences with disengagement at a lesson level. As a result, this research might help to clarify the way PE teachers address

disengagement in their classes and identify other initiatives that may help them enhance engagement in their classes.

This research is also significant because it gives teachers a voice and allows them to share their educational experiences. Even though the literature highlighted several reasons why teachers possibly fail to engage students in their classes, few studies have explored teachers' understanding of this educational issue. These included teachers' ability to identify different forms of disengagement, to acknowledge the influence of risk factors that can influence engagement and to acknowledge their pedagogical stake in dealing with this educational issue. Thus, by giving voice to PE teachers, this research will be able to ascertain their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature and to identify possible areas of improvement.

Another reason that makes this research significant is its focus on the PE curriculum. As argued by Tinning (2012), the purpose of PE in schools will always tend to respond to contemporary contexts and imperatives. According to Kirk (2006), the lack of social relevance of a curriculum can compromise the place of PE in schools. This research is relevant because it explores the PE teachers' understanding of the role of curriculum in influencing students' engagement. Therefore, the results of this study might help to explain why most PE teachers persevere with the MAP when alternative curriculum models are available.

### **Research Questions**

With the aim of acquiring a better understanding of the way PE teachers experience and deal with disengagement at the lesson level, as well as to ascertain their awareness of the educational issues addressed in the literature, the current research was organized under four main questions:

1. How do PE teachers experience and identify students' disengagement?
2. What are the reasons given by PE teachers for students' disengagement?
3. What are the strategies used by PE teachers to deal with disengagement?
4. Are PE teachers aware of the effects of the MAP for students' engagement?

These questions sought to explore teachers' individual experiences with disengagement and to understand what other initiatives could be implemented to help PE teachers increase engagement in their classes.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter II is dedicated to the literature review of this study. This chapter starts by presenting a conceptual analysis of engagement, which will help to frame the research study. Later the chapter explores the presence of students' disengagement in education in general, as well as, in the specific area of Physical Education (PE). In addition, it also describes the reasons for students' disengagement from classes in general and in PE. The research results in the present literature not only indicate that students' disengagement is a recurrent issue in PE, but also that the curriculum model seems to be one of the core reasons why students become disengaged in PE classes. However, few studies seem to explore PE teachers' awareness of such educational issue.

#### Introduction

Students' disengagement from school has been addressed by several researchers as an early indicator of academic failure that can lead to school dropout (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Finn & National Center for Education Statistics, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kappa, 1994; Melissa, 2010). As a result, this topic has attracted growing interest from the educational research community in an attempt to understand the reasons behind such a perennial problem in schools (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to researchers (Alexander et al., 1997; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Newmann, 1992; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Fulton, 2007), the identification of such reasons can greatly contribute to the development of new educational practices that are better capable of engaging students and avoiding dropout.

## **Conceptual Analysis of Engagement**

Students' disengagement has been a central topic of educational research for many years (Fredricks et al., 2004). Consequently, the literature provides a great range of definitions. According to Newmann (1992), students' academic engagement is seen "as the student's psychological investment and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge and skills that academic work is intended to promote"(p. 17). Newmann (1992) stresses the importance of a more cognitive engagement where students invest in mastering new skills rather than merely being compliant with school rules and routines. In contrast, Finn and Voelk (1993) express concern with the behavioral dimension of students' engagement. The authors define students' engagement as their ability to demonstrate good conduct, involvement in academic tasks and participation in the school community. A third component of engagement was addressed by Skinner and Belmont (1993). The authors highlight the importance of students' affective connections with the school by stating that the "opposite of engagement is disaffection" (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572). Even though the authors acknowledge the presence of other types of student engagement, they seem to believe that emotional factors have a core influence on students' motivation to learn.

Despite the various definitions of engagement provided by researchers, empirical findings have suggested that engagement is a multidimensional concept (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007). In other words, students' engagement cannot be seen as single concept, but as a group of different constructs (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to a literature review of the construct, student engagement is regularly defined in three ways: behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively (Fredricks et al., 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Newmann, 1992).

Behavioral engagement is related to students' involvement and participation in both academic and social aspects of schooling, such as extra-curricular activities (Finn & Voelk, 1993). Fredricks et al. (2004) classified a behaviorally engaged student as one who is involved in the learning process, who demonstrates positive conduct and good attendance and who follows the school rules. This type of behavior is seen by the author as "crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out" (p. 60).

Emotional engagement draws on students' positive and negative affective reactions to different school elements, such as classmates, teachers and school staff (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). As stated by Skinner and Belmont (1993), these are all factors that ultimately contribute to students' emotional attachment to an institution and can greatly influence their willingness to study. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), emotionally engaged students are those who are interested in their academic lives and who share a sense of belonging with the school community.

Cognitive engagement is seen as students' readiness and willingness to invest in the learning process (Fredricks et al., 2004). It refers to their effort and dedication to overcoming challenges and to mastering difficult skills (Newmann, 1992). According to Fredricks et al. (2004), cognitively engaged students are those who have the capacity to control their effort on tasks and who are therefore self-regulated. In other words, their academic engagement is seen as "student's psychological investment and effort directed towards learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge and skills that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, 1992, p. 17). As a result, although researchers tend to look at students' engagement as consisting of separate components, in reality behavioral, emotional and cognitive elements are dynamic and interrelated. Therefore, according to Fredricks et al. (2004), students' engagement should not be studied in isolation but, multidimensionally.



In a recent article by Lawson and Lawson (2013), the authors suggest that a more nuanced understanding of engagement is needed. They say this requires a shift in thinking beyond (just) linear-temporal conceptions of engagement (aforementioned: affective/emotional; behavioral; cognitive - ABC) to a more holistic and inclusive approach. The authors argue that even though studies about students' engagement generally consider the three dimensions of engagement (ABC), researchers differ when it comes to the conceptualization and analyses of such variables. As stated by Lawson and Lawson (2013):

*...the majority of qualitative studies on student engagement employ just one dimension of student engagement in their analytic models...studies that incorporate two or more engagement dimensions are unusual. (p.437).*

The authors suggested a socio-ecological approach to understanding engagement be adopted, one which broadens consideration of relevant variables to include those that lie beyond the school gate. Needed is a theorization that examines how families, peers and neighborhoods/communities can influence engagement.

According to Lawson and Lawson (2013), students lives play out in three 'spheres': classroom/academic, school, and youth-community. Classroom/academic engagement refers to students' ability to engage in their academic work. School engagement refers to their engagement in the school community, which includes their peers, teachers and school staff. Lastly, youth-community engagement refers to the way students engage with their community (formally and informally) outside of the school gates. The focus is on out-of-school time (OST), on students' engagement with their families, peer groups and "community settings for youth development." (p.439). According to the authors, the way students engage in any one of these "ecological spheres" can influence/condition their engagement in others. Thus, in order to acquire a better understand of the phenomenon of students' disengagement the authors suggest a more holistic and synergetic approach. This approach should not only

consider engagement inside the school (classroom/ academic,) but also the OST (youth community) and the way these spheres can influence each other.

### **Students' Disengagement and the Risk of Academic Failure**

Studies have consistently confirmed that students' lack of participation is a serious problem in schools as it creates a negative impact on their academic achievement (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). This is to say, students' engagement has a major influence on school outcomes such as academic performance, behavior and dropout (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn & NCEES, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997). According to previous research, across preschool and high school years, students' intrinsic motivation gradually declines and they become disengaged from school (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). This tends to influence their academic achievement which can lead to school dropout (Kappa, 1994). This phenomenon is increasingly viewed as a consequence of a long-term process of disengagement from school that frequently starts in the early grades (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012).

Research also indicates that types of disengagement are linked to academic failure. Although the most obviously disengaged students are the ones who disrupt classes, do not attend to school or fail to complete assignments, they are not the only students at risk of school failure (Finn & PannoZZo, 1995). This was evident in earlier studies by Finn and Cox in 1992. With the purpose of determining the type of students who had higher risk of academic failure, the authors identified "6,000 African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white youngsters attending about 800 public schools" (Finn & Cox, 1992, p. 12). In order to examine their sample of students at risk, the authors divided the students into three groups: "unsuccessful (low academic achievement)", "successful (high academic achievement)" and "marginal (misbehaved students)". After measuring and comparing the

levels of engagement of the three achievement groups, the authors concluded that “unsuccessful” students were far more disengaged from school than the “marginal” and “successful” groups. Therefore, the authors concluded that academic failure is not determined by students’ misbehavior, but by their attention in class (Finn & Cox, 1992). In other words, a student who is not disrupting a class can still be inattentive and fail academically.

The same was later confirmed by Finn and Pannozzo (1995). By asking teachers to rate their students’ behavior in class, the authors were able to organize the students in four different groups: “disruptive”, “inattentive”, “disruptive and inattentive”, and “compliant” (neither disruptive nor inattentive). The authors verified that students who were classified as “inattentive” presented lower achievement levels than the other groups. Furthermore, the students in the “disruptive and inattentive” group presented similar disengagement levels to the ones who were merely “inattentive”. As a result the authors concluded that although most teachers believe that disruptive students are the ones who present higher risk of academic failure, the results revealed that inattentive students are also disengaged from practice, which can equally lead to low academic results. As recommended by Finn and Pannozzo, inattentive behavior should be earlier identified in the classroom in order to avoid its drawbacks on students’ academic achievement.

Similar results were reported in a study undertaken in Western Australia by Angus (2010). In this study the author’s main goal was to determine if students who exhibited unproductive behavior or poor academic results could improve over time. In addition, Angus also tried to determine the types of student behavior that could compromise academic success. By asking teachers to report on students’ behavior and to reflect upon the effects of that behavior on students’ academic performance, the author was able to confirm that students’ passive behavior can be as harmful for academic achievement as disruptive behavior. Unfortunately, although teachers in this study tended to easily identify a

misbehaving student as disengaged from learning, they did not seem to acknowledge the risks of passive behavior.

### *Summary*

Drawing from the aforementioned findings, students' disengagement seems to be a recurrent issue in education that can have a negative impact on academic outcomes (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). In addition, it seems that a significant percentage of disengagement is reported in compliant students who attend classes, complete assignments but do not exhibit good academic achievement (Angus, 2010; Finn & Cox, 1992; Finn & Pannozzo, 1995). Thus, researchers stressed the importance of making teachers aware that inattentiveness/passive behavior is as harmful for students' academic performance as disruptiveness/disruptive behaviour.

## **Students' Disengagement in Physical Education**

As well as being evident in education in general, students' disengagement is a relevant issue in PE (Ennis, 1999). According to the literature, students' engagement in PE has been addressed at two different levels: enrolment rates and classroom.

### *Engagement and the Enrolment Rates*

Research in PE reveals that the number of students enrolled in PE classes is clearly declining (Allison & Adlaf, 2000; Chen, 2001; Faulkner, Goodman, Adlaf & Irving, 2007; Johnston, Delva & O'Malley, 2007; Lowry, Brener, Lee, Epping, Fulton & Eaton, 2005). Furthermore, when carefully analyzed, the data show that this trend is more evident in older students, particularly those in Years 10, 11 and 12 (Allison & Adlaf, 2000; Faulkner et al., 2007; Lowry et al., 2005). To illustrate, in a study by Allison and Adlaf (2000), the researchers investigated the structured opportunities for student physical activity in Ontario (Canada) elementary and secondary schools. The findings indicate that the enrolment rates in

PE secondary schools were significantly lower at successive grade levels: the percentage of secondary students enrolled in PE in grades 9 to 12 dropped from 95%, to only 45% (Allison & Adlaf, 2000).

Similar results were later confirmed by Lowry et al. (2005). After analyzing cross-sectional data representative of both public and private schools from grades 9 to 12, the authors reported that the overall number of students attending PE classes dropped from 42% in 1991 to 25% in 1995. Moreover, the research results indicate that the older the students became, the lower were their enrolment rates in PE classes. To illustrate, in 1997, while there were 69.2% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in PE classes, only 36.1% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students were enrolled in the same year. The same study was later replicated in Canada from 1999 to 2005 where researchers also confirmed a decline in the numbers of students enrolled in PE classes from 70.3% to 60.4%, (Faulkner et al., 2007).

The same results were confirmed by a quantitative study developed in the United States by Johnston et al. (2007). With the purpose of determining the participation rates of secondary school students in PE and sports, the authors developed a longitudinal study (from 2003 to 2005), which consisted of data from more than 500 schools and 54,000 participants. The authors found that the levels of participation in PE considerably declined from 87% in grade eight to only 20% in grade twelve. According to the principals' reports, while 90% of the students in eighth grade were involved in PE, only 34% of twelveth grade students had chosen PE.

### *Engagement at the Class Level*

The identification of different forms of disengagement in PE classes was a topic under investigation by Tousignant and Sidentop (1983) in their paper, A Qualitative Analysis of Task Structures in Required Secondary Physical Education Classes. With the purpose of analyzing the structure of tasks in PE classes and the way students responded to those tasks,

Tousignant and Sidentop (1983) identified four different types of student engagement: “task-as-stated-by-the-teacher, modified-task, deviant off-task behavior and competent bystanders” (p. 49). The first two categories refer to the specificity of students’ responses when they engage in the activity. In other words, the authors classified the engaged students as being involved in doing exactly what the teacher required (task-as-stated-by-the-teacher) or by changing the structure of the tasks (modified-task).

The two other categories developed by Tousignant and Sidentop (1983) refer to the moments when students are off-task. Deviant off-task behavior refers to disruptive behavior such as, “talking during instruction, misusing equipment, fooling around, fighting” (Tousignant & Sidentop, 1983, p. 49). Competent bystanders are students who try to avoid participating without being disruptive to the class. These researchers found competent bystanding to be a much less obvious form of disengagement that seems to be difficult to identify. According to the authors, these are students who know how to use the structure of the class to disguise their low participation. Hence, the competent bystanders identified by Tousignant and Sidentop (1983) aligned well with forms of passive and inattentive behavior presented earlier by Angus (2010) and by Finn and Pannozzo (1995).

Besides the work by Tousignant and Sidentop (1983), very few studies specifically investigate students’ engagement at the class level in PE. Nevertheless, drawing from other research results (Ennis, 2000; McKenzie, 2001; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Garn & Cothran 2006; Faulkner et al., 2007; Cothran, Kulinna & Garrahy, 2009), it can be implied that students’ engagement is also a serious issues in PE classes. An example of that is the study by Rikard, and Banville (2006). With the purpose of examining the students’ attitudes towards PE, the authors found that, even though some students claimed to be involved in sport activities out of the school, they felt bored and alianated in PE classes.

According to the students' reports, they would disengage from the class because they would feel underchallenged by the repetitive nature of the PE curriculum.

The same was confirmed by the study conducted by Cothran et al. (2009). With the purpose of understanding students' attributions for misbehaviour in PE classes, the authors found that in the majority of cases students tend to misbehave because they feel disengaged from the class. According to the students in this study, the PE classes are boring. Cothran et al. (2009) concluded that students opt to disengage from instruction and engage in more meaningful activities which provide them more fun and enjoyment than the PE class itself.

Research results have also revealed gender differences in levels of participation in PE, where female students are more alienated from PE practice than male students (Chen, 2001; Dwyer et al., 2006; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Faulkner et al., 2007; Hassandra, 2003). As stated by Luke and Sinclair (1991), "fewer females are participating in school physical activity programs" (p. 32). This lower level of participation of female students was addressed earlier by Ennis (1999) in the article "Creating a Culturally Relevant Curriculum for Disengaged Girls". According to Ennis (1999), in most high schools girls engaged less in PE classes than boys. The same was confirmed by the study conducted by Faulkner et al, (2007) in Ontario (Canada). According to the authors, "male students were more likely than girls to be engaged in PE" (p. 52).

The issue of gender differences and levels of participation in PE classes was also addressed by McKenzie (2001) in his article, "Promoting Physical Activity in Youth: Focus on Middle School Environments". While discussing some of the reasons why girls tend to be less participative in PE classes, McKenzie (2001) made it clear that female students are more alienated from PE practice. These claims are also supported by Flintoff and Scraton (2001) and Garn and Cothran's (2006) research results. In these studies the authors clearly addressed the concern of low levels of participation in PE classes by female students. Furthermore,

according to Flintoff and Scraton (2001), even though female students enjoyed sport activities and were involved in sports out of the school, they seemed to experience lower levels of enjoyment in PE classes, which made them less participative.

Similar results were reported in the research conducted by Faulkner et al. (2007). Although the study was mainly focused on understanding the factors affecting students' participation in PE, the authors argued that female students were less active and less participative in PE classes than male students. According to Faulkner et al. (2007), these results confirmed the declarations of the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute that reported, although the level of enjoyment in PE classes declines with the age, boys seem to take more pleasure in these classes than girls.

### *Summary*

Overall, as well as being evident in general education, students' disengagement is a relevant issue in the subject of PE. This was evident in both students' enrolment rates and for class participation. According to researchers, the numbers of students enrolled in PE classes is declining (Allison & Adlaf, 2000; Chen, 2001; Faulkner et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 2007; Lowry et al., 2005), and this trend more evident in older students (Allison & Adlaf, 2000; Faulkner et al., 2007; Lowry et al., 2005). With regards to disengagement at the class level, research results indicate that girls tend to be more disengaged than boys (Faulkner et al., 2007; Garn & Cothran, 2006; McKenzie, 2001) and that older students seem to be less interested in PE than younger students (Allison & Adlaf, 2000; Faulkner et al., 2007; Lowry et al., 2005). In addition, it seems that even the students who claim to like sport activities find PE boring and tend to disengage from practice (Cothran et al., 2009; Rikard & Banville, 2006). Thus, it is important to identify the factors that contribute to students' disengagement in PE classes in order to engage students in more meaningful educational practices.



## **Reasons for Students' Disengagement from Schooling**

Considering its multi-dimensional nature (Fredricks et al., 2004), students' disengagement from school can be influenced by numerous factors. According to Fulton (2007) the easiest way to analyze the factors that can potentially influence students' engagement in school is by dividing them in two distinct groups: social risk factors (external risk factors) and school risk factors (internal risk factors). As a result, in order to facilitate the discussion/presentation of the literature findings regarding reasons for students' disengagement from school, this paper will use Fulton's classification.

### *External Risk Factors*

The majority of research has been focused on identifying and analyzing students' individual characteristics and external factors that can possibly explain their disengagement from school (Fulton, 2007). According to Newmann (1992), a large group of earlier studies has indicated that families and social and cultural backgrounds can have a major influence over students' attitudes towards school and engagement in academic work. An example of that was the study developed by Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992). With the purpose of identifying some of the factors that lead students to disengage and ultimately to drop out from school, Ensminger and Slusarcick followed the developmental path of 1,242 first graduate students, until high school. The authors found that family environment, social status and school expectations were some of the factors which can influence the students' engagement and the likelihood of them finishing high school. For example, if students had mothers with high school qualifications they would be more likely to finish high school themselves.

These results were in agreement with the longitudinal study (1982-1996) conducted by Alexander et al. (1997) in Baltimore (U.S.), which also demonstrated the influence of external factors such as family background for students' engagement. With the intention of identifying the factors that influence students' disengagement from school and dropping out,

the authors analyzed students' individual characteristics, school expectations and family background. Through logistical regression analysis, the authors were able to conclude that students' gender, family environment and socioeconomic status were among the risk factors that influence students' disengagement from school and their consequent dropout.

Other external risk factors were identified in the paper, "Student Disengagement in Relation to Expected and Unexpected Educational Pathways" by Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir (2012). The authors' main goal was to identify the influence of students' academic expectations and educational pathways (students' likelihood of completing secondary school) in relation to their school disengagement during adolescence. In order to predict students' probability of completing secondary school, the researchers measured the students' academic achievement at the end of compulsory schooling. Depending on their grades on the standardized national test they were considered either likely to graduate or to dropout. By following a group of 832 students from ages 14 to 22 the authors found that higher achievers who unexpectedly dropped out demonstrated higher levels of emotional and behavioral disengagement. In contrast, low achievers who unexpectedly graduated demonstrated less emotional and behavioral disengagement than the expected dropouts. The authors concluded that students' emotional and behavioral engagement plays a pivotal role in students' dropout. As well, they claimed that students' academic expectations can greatly determine their likelihood of graduating.

Overall, research findings tends to confirm the influence of external risk factors such as family environment, socioeconomic status, school expectations and cultural background as predictors of students' disengagement from school (Alexander et al., 1997; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Lee & Burkam, 2003). However, Newmann (1992) warns of the danger of giving too much importance to these aspects and overlooking the value of internal risk factors. According to Lee and Burkam (2003),

educational research has given too much importance to external risk factors and neglected internal risk factors which also play a pivotal role in students' engagement. From Fulton's (2007) perspective, it is more relevant to study internal risk factors that can be changed over time than external risk factors that cannot be so easily manipulated.

### *Internal Risk factors*

According to Fulton (2007), several school risk factors have been identified in the literature as being potentially harmful for students' engagement at school. These included school policies, students' connection with the school community and curriculum design.

#### School Policies

The influence of school policies on students' engagement was a topic of discussion in the study conducted by Goldschmidt and Wang in 1999. With the purpose of examining school factors that can lead to students' alienation from school and consequent dropout, the authors examined a longitudinal database from students at middle and high school levels. Even though Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) confirmed that family characteristics influence students' engagement in school, they also verified that certain school policies can greatly discourage students from school engagement. According to the research findings, retaining policies for those students who perform below the school's expectations had a direct effect on students' engagement and likelihood of dropping out. To illustrate, as stated by Goldschmidt and Wang (1999), while the students who were retained once (repeat the year) were 45% more likely to dropout, the students who were retained twice were 90% more likely to be disengaged and to not complete high school.

Similar results were reported in the study conducted by Gallagher (2002) in the U.S. In this study Gallagher (2002) conducted individual interviews with a group of four former students from a high school in Indiana who had recently withdrawn from school. According to Gallagher (2002), the research results clearly identified school policies as one of the

obstacles for students' engagement and academic success. For example, truancy policies that suspended students with low attendance rates aggravated the situation for these students who were already disengaged and falling back academically. In most cases students who were suspended were not able to recover academically, which eventually led to their retention and school withdrawal.

### Students' Connection with the School Community

According to research results, students' engagement can also be determined by their connection with the school community (Lee & Burkam, 2003). As explained by Lee and Burkam (2003), school community refers to the different school "actors" such as teachers, students and other staff members of a school (e.g., gate keeper; librarian). Despite the influence of different school "actors", research seems to place great importance on teachers and their attitudes in the classroom. As concluded by Lee and Burkam (2003), when students feel connected with the school community and, in particular, with the teacher, they are more likely to engage: "teachers' provision of both autonomy support and optimal structure predicted children's motivation across the school year" (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p.568). These claims are in agreement with Kappa's (1994) claims that the amount of attention, affection and dedication expressed by teachers greatly determined the extent to which students felt that their needs were met by the school.

In the article "Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year", Skinner and Belmont (1993) also commented on the influence that students' disengagement can have on teachers. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), teachers tend to lose motivation while working with disengaged students, which compromises their professional practice and consequently leads to more disengagement. Thus, the authors' emphasize the importance of acknowledging this phenomenon and reinforce teacher-student relationships in order to motivate both students and teachers.

Frequently in the literature, the problem of students' connection with school has been related to school size. For instance, in the aforementioned research by Lee and Burkam (2003), the authors reported that students are less likely to become alienated from learning in schools with less than 1,500 students. They argued that school size can possibly influence the way teachers relate to students. In other words, teachers tend to be more likely to establish positive teacher-student relationships in smaller school communities.

### Curriculum Design

Notwithstanding school policies and students' connection with staff members, according to some authors (Ares & Gorrell 2002; Chen, 2001; Fulton, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Marks, 2000; Dunn, Chambers & Rabren, 2004) one of the most significant factors that can influence students' engagement in school is the relevance of the curriculum. Some of the aforementioned studies already showed the relationship between students' academic success and their engagement levels in school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Finn & Cox 1992; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Kappa, 1994; Melissa, 2010). Questions that arise include: what is the role of the school curriculum in engaging students? Are schools engaging students in meaningful practices?

These questions were asked by several researchers who sought to understand the place and responsibilities of the school curriculum in engaging students in meaningful practices (Ares & Gorrell, 2002; Chen, 2001; Dunn et al., 2004; Fulton, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Mark, 2000; Newmann, 1992). According to the international educational brain researcher Sousa (1998) cited by Fulton (2007), students tend to become alienated from classes when they do not find meaning and purpose in the activities. Sousa (1998) reported that educational brain research indicates that students' ability to connect with the subject matters can greatly determine their engagement in learning. If students do not perceive the class content as relevant they will be likely to disengage. Thus, the author concluded that the students'

attitude towards class content can predict their engagement in the class and consequently their academic success.

Newmann (1992) also addressed the importance of the relevance of the school curriculum, arguing that disengaged students frequently claim that the schoolwork is dull and irrelevant to their lives. The authors suggested that in order to engage students it is essential to promote relevant/authentic work. These are:

Tasks that are considered meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of one's effort, in contrast to those considered nonsensical, useless, contrived, trivial, and therefore unworthy of effort. (p. 23)

In the conclusion of his paper, Newmann stressed the importance of creating school curricula that can relate to students' worlds beyond the school gates and of avoiding narrowing the range of options in the school curriculum as this can decrease the probability of corresponding to students' interests.

Mark's (2000) research findings confirm Newmann's earlier claims. With the purpose of evaluating the efficiency of school reforms in dealing with students' disengagement, Mark analyzed different engagement patterns across genders, grade levels and subject matters. The author found that, regardless of gender or grade level "authentic instructional work (which relates to students' individual interests and life beyond the school gates) is a powerful contributor to engagement for elementary, middle and high school students" (p. 169). Moreover, according to Mark's research findings, authentic work attenuates the effect other disengagement factors such as students' personal background, low social economic status and prior academic achievement. Mark concluded by emphasizing the importance of promoting authentic educational work which can be "cognitively challenging and connect students to the world beyond the classroom" (p. 169).

Similar results were supported by a qualitative study by Ares and Gorrell (2002). With the purpose of exploring students' perceptions of classroom environments which foster their engagement, the authors conducted 118 individual interviews as well as focus group interviews. Students gave great importance to the class content and to its relevance to their future lives. The students stressed their desire to be involved in meaningful learning, which referred to the type of "instruction that is relevant to their lives and to their goals for the future" (Ares & Gorrell, 2002, p. 274). As well, students highlighted the importance of a variety of tasks in contrast to class routines which are boring and repetitive. As a result, Ares and Gorrell concluded that the relevance of the subject matter and the range of options in the curriculum can greatly benefit students' engagement in school.

Similar results were reported by Dunn et al. (2004) in their study of students' with learning disabilities. By conducting interviews and collecting demographic information from 456 students, the authors reported that students' perceived value of a subject matter can determine their level of engagement in the class. To illustrate, while 54% of the students who dropped out agreed that school did not prepare them for their future careers, 80% of the students who did not drop out considered that school was beneficial for their future. According to the authors these results confirm that "if students perceive their high school experiences as meaningful to their future goals, it is more likely that they will be motivated to remain in school" (Dunn et al., 2004, p. 320). The authors concluded that it is essential for schools to revise their curricula, in order to guarantee its relevance for students' future lives. This would ultimately raise their engagement in classes and reduce the number of dropouts.

### *Summary*

In summary, research findings indicated that students' engagement can be influenced by both internal and external risk factors (Fulton, 2007). Even though several authors confirmed the influence of external risk factors such as family environment, socioeconomic

status, school expectations and cultural background in predicting students' engagement from school (Alexander et al., 1997; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Newmann, 1992), others highlight the importance of focusing educational interventions on internal risk factors such as school policies, curriculum development and the relationship between students and educational communities. These are internal (to the school) factors that can be more readily manipulated (Fulton, 2007; Lee, & Burkam, 2003; Newmann, 1992). According to researchers (Ares & Gorrell 2002; Chen, 2001; Fulton, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Marks, 2000; Newmann, 1992; Rabren & Chambers et al., 2004), a relevant curriculum is one of the most influential factors for students' engagement in school.

### **Reasons for Students' Disengagement from Physical Education**

As stated by Lodewyk, Gammage and Sullivan (2009), student engagement in PE classes has been central topic of discussion in educational research. The interest in understanding the reasons for students' disengagement in PE was sparked by the concern "that pupils' experiences in PE may not be positive" (Lodewyk et al., 2009, p. 38). The identification of motivational factors for students' participation in PE classes can provide valid information for curriculum review and help teachers to engage students in more meaningful practices (Luke & Sinclair, 1991).

In a recent study by Bevans, Fitzpatrick, Sanchez and Forrest (2010), the authors explored the individual and instructional determinants of student engagement in PE. According to the research results, both students' perceived competence and body image were strong predictors of students' engagement. The less confident students felt regarding their body image and/or perceived competence in PE, the more likely they were to disengage. However, the authors highlighted that "perceived competence was a more powerful predictor



of student engagement in physical education than body image” (Bevans, Fitzpatrick, Sanchez & Forrest, 2010, p58).

Although there are several studies in the literature that identify students’ characteristics (external factors) as predictors of their engagement in PE (Alexander et al., 1997; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992) this literature review will now turn its focus to school factors. Some researchers (Lee and Burkam, 2003; Newmann, 1992; Fulton, 2007) have cautioned that educational research has given too much importance to external risk factors and neglected important internal risk factors which can also play a pivotal role in students’ engagement and can be more easily controlled.

### *The Physical Education Curriculum*

Amongst the school factors that can possibly influence students’ engagement in PE, the curriculum is one of the most influential ones (Rikard & Banville, 2006). The issues of the PE curriculum (typically the multi-activity program - MAP) has been addressed by several researchers (Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 2000; Smith, Green & Thurston, 2009; Kirk, 2002; Rikard & Banville, 2006) who claim that the MAP presents numerous limitations that can possibly explain why students disengage from PE classes.

Some of these curricular limitations were earlier addressed by Ennis (2000), in her article - “Canaries in the Coal Mine”. According to Ennis, most PE teachers insist on blaming students for being lazy and for not wanting to engage in physical activities. Ennis believes teachers are reluctant to recognize the limitations of their own PE curricula. Ennis stated that, just as canaries were used to warn miners of the presence of toxic gases in the mines, PE teachers should look at students’ disengagement as a sign of “ineffective, negative, or harmful pedagogical practices” (p. 120). In other words, Ennis considers that students’ disengagement should be interpreted as a reflection of poor educational practices which, in the majority of cases, should be related to the structure/content of the PE curriculum.

Kirk (2002) also claimed that the MAP (which comprises short units of about 4-6 weeks and usually offers several traditional sports such as, soccer or basketball), has proved to be a complete failure in meeting its main purpose of encouraging students to become physically active throughout their adult lives. According to Kirk, students usually fail to find meaning and purpose in the sport practices delivered in typical (MAP-based) PE, which lead them to disengage from classes.

The meaningfulness of the PE curriculum is also addressed by Alexander (2008), in the paper “Is there a role for tactical and sport education models in school physical education?” From Alexander’s perspective, the meaningless sport practices delivered by the MAP PE curriculum is one of the core reasons why students disengage from classes. In addition, Alexander (2008) outlined the importance of understanding that “decisions about what is ‘meaningful’ are the province of individuals’ own perceptions and interpretations” (p. 13). In other words, the relevance of sport activities depends on students’ individual interests. This is in agreement with earlier findings that boys and girls have different interests and tend to engage in different sport activities (Napper-Owen, Kovar, Ermler & Mehrhof, 1999).

Another important issue regarding PE curriculum addressed by Alexander (2008), is its authenticity. According to Alexander (2008), the inauthentic practices delivered in PE classes are a core reason for students’ disengagement. Inauthentic practices are those that do not correspond to the applied aspects of an activity (i.e., are not game-like in a sporting context). To illustrate, drill practices for skill development can only be authentic if the teacher provides the student with opportunities to apply those skills in genuine form of the game. If, after the development of drills to improve students’ shooting skills in basketball, a teacher does not provide the opportunity to apply those skills in a game situation, the purpose of the activity is lost. In other words, “practice without performance lacks purpose” (Alexander, 2008, p. 14). Thus, the lack of opportunity to apply skills in genuine forms of

activities may explain why students display low levels of participation in PE during skill drills (McKenzie, 2001).

In an earlier publication, Ennis (1999) provided a summary of the main issues of the MAP:

1. Short units of activity with minimal periods of instruction.
2. Weak or non-existent educational sequences across lessons, units and grades that limit learning.
3. Little or no accountability for using skills strategically in game play
4. Little or no instruction or coached supervision of game play
5. Few if any policies to equalize playing opportunities for low-skilled players.
6. Required public display of playing ability.
7. Class control exercised by central authority figure(s), minimizing students' ownership and leadership opportunities in large classes and constraining learning (p. 32).

According to Ennis (1999), the main problem of this curriculum is the assumption that every student already has the necessary skills to play sports, which is reflected in the short units of practice dedicated to each sport. As stated by the author, in most cases students who do not have previous sport experiences do not have the necessary time and opportunity to develop the skills to participate, which lead them to disengage. Furthermore, students who are already capable of participating in formal game situations, become demotivated with the presence of less skilled students who compromise the fluency of the activities. Ennis concluded her paper by stating that the MAP has a discriminatory structure towards less skillful students and consequently struggles to engage students in meaningful practices.

The discriminatory structure of the MAP was also addressed by Amour (1999). According to Armour, although the PE curriculum is meant to be neutral and designed for all students, in reality the majority of programs are relying on students' individual skills such as, speed, agility and strength to participate in sport activities offered by the program. As a result, the author claims that the MAP tends to benefit boys and discourage girls from participating, which can ultimately lead to their dropout.

The same issue was addressed by Napper-Owen, Kovar, Ermler, and Mehrhof, (1999). According to the authors, the MAP emphasizes more male values and preferences than girls. For example, while competition can be a strong motivational factor for boys, girls tend to avoid it. Furthermore, the number of sports available are predominantly male sports (such as, soccer, footy, basketball and cricket). This also discourages girls from participating. With the assumption that boys and girls have different interests, the authors concluded that gender bias is a motivational issue in the MAP for girls. These results were also confirmed by McKenzie (2001) who concluded that the MAP does not offer equal opportunities of physical activity for boys and girls. He recommended that it is important to review the PE curriculum in order to engage students and guarantee equal opportunities for both boys and girls.

### *Students' Perceptions of the Curriculum*

The student perceptions have also been a topic under investigation in educational research (Cothran et al., 2009; Salee, 2000; Smith et al., 2009). The main purpose of these studies was to explore students' understanding of the PE curriculum, in an attempt to identify what more can be done to improvement educational practices in PE and raise engagement levels in class.

One of the studies that explored students' perceptions of the PE curriculum was conducted by Rikard and Banville (2006). With the purpose of examining their attitudes toward PE and their perceptions of the effectiveness of PE lessons in improving their fitness

and skill levels, the authors administered 515 questionnaires to high school students. According to the authors, although students valued fitness and recognized its benefits for health promotion, they claimed to feel bored in PE classes: “students expressed their boredom from being under challenged by sport activities that did not contribute to their fitness or interest levels” (p. 396). This became evident when students demonstrated their aspirations to learn new sports and to move away from the “old-fashioned” repetitive team sports that characterize the MAP. As reported by Rikard and Banville, 82% of the students in this study claimed that the “activities taught in their physical education classes had no transfer to their choice of activities outside of school” (p. 397). In addition, students considered that the differences in their skill levels can greatly affect the fluency of classes and undermine their learning.

The same results were reported by Tinning and Fitzclarence (cited by Alexander, 2008) in earlier research. According to Tinning and Fitzclarence, although most students interviewed in their study claimed to enjoy sports and physical activity in general, they found PE boring and meaningless. From students’ perspectives the sport activities offered by the PE program (the MAP) did not relate to those activities they would be likely to engage in out of the school boundaries. Tinning and Fitzclarence concluded that it seems is essential to offer students the opportunity to experience sport activities that they can relate to and that they would be likely to engage outside the school gates.

The meaningfulness of the curriculum was also examined by Cothran et al., (2009) in their study, “Attributions for and consequences of student misbehavior”. By conducting individual and group interviews with 23 secondary PE teachers and 182 secondary students, the authors concluded that the meaningfulness of curriculum content and the activities developed in PE classes are the core reasons for students’ disengagement. According to the research findings, if students perceive an activity as interesting and stimulating they are more

likely to engage in the class. In contrast, when students do not find a purpose for the activity they tend to disengage. “When the activity is boring we’d rather have fun, like more fun than learning something that we really don’t care about” (Cothran et al., 2009 p. 161). These results confirmed Salee’s (2000) research findings, that students’ perceptions of the relevance of an activity can greatly determine their level of engagement in class activities. “When students perceived the activities were not enjoyable, they were more likely to act out”(p. 128).

The importance of curriculum relevance was also confirmed by the research conducted by Smith et al., (2009) in England and Wales. Drawing on findings from 24 focus groups of 153 participants from a wider study, the researchers verified that 15-16 year old students gave great importance to activity choices and their relevance. However, the authors reported that restricted choices “were felt more keenly by girls than boys” (Smith & Green et al., 2009, p. 212). According to Smith and his collaborators, girls saw activity choices as a positive feature in PE curriculum, mainly because they were able to choose the activities they felt more competent and confident to participate in such as, gymnastics, dance or aerobics. As well, girls stated that the traditional team sports offered by the MAP benefit male dominance and discriminate against those who are not as skilful. The authors concluded that it is important to broaden the range of sport activities in the PE curriculum in order to increase the likelihood the curriculum corresponds to girls’ individual interests.

The importance of the curriculum choices for girls was also highlighted by the study conducted by Flintoff and Scraton (2001). With the purpose of understanding young women’s views and attitudes towards PE, Flintoff and Scraton interviewed 21, 15 year old female students. The results of their study showed that although most of the girls were involved in sport activities out of the school, “few of them, were involved in the more traditional sport forms such as netball or hockey” (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001, p. 17). The girls

in this study not only gave great importance to the presence of choices in the PE program but also recognized that the sport activities offered in their classes were more related to boys' interests.

The importance of curriculum choices was also confirmed by Gibbons and Humbert's (2008) research findings. After conducting individual interviews and focus groups with 90 girls, Gibbons and Humbert verified that the variety of choices in the PE program was the most predominant concept in students' responses. As reported by the authors, the participants in this study "wanted a wider variety of physical activity offerings in their PE programs including lifetime activities such as walking, dance, or swimming" (Gibbons & Humbert, 2008, p. 180). The girls involved in the study claimed that a variety of choices would allow them to experience sport activities that were more relevant for them and avoid the predominant team sports which tended to benefit the dominance of boys.

### *Summary*

Overall, research indicates that the curriculum is a core reason why most students disengage from PE classes. According to researchers (Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 2000; Kirk, 2002; Rikard & Banville, 2006), the MAP is an out-dated curriculum design that presents several limitations that can undermine students' engagement in PE. These include: students' perceptions of meaningless activities, the lack of opportunity for skill development, the promotion of inauthentic practices and the presence of gender bias. As well, research results show that students were aware of many curricular limitations and their influence over their participation in classes. These included the meaningless of activities (Cothran et al., 2009; Salee, 2000; Smith et al., 2009) and the influence of their different skill levels over the fluency of activities (Ennis, 2000; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Rikard & Banville, 2006), and the presence of curriculum bias (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). As recommended by Ennis (1999; 2000) it is imperative to review the PE

curriculum and understand the main changes which need to be made in order to engage students in meaningful practices.

### **General Summary**

According to the literature students' disengagement tends to be a recurrent educational issue that affects students' academic performance and that can ultimately lead to drop-out (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). As well as being evident in general education, this is also a relevant issue in the subject of PE where the numbers of students enrolled declines with age (Allison & Adlaf, 2000; Chen, 2001; Faulkner & Goodman et al., 2007; Johnston & Delva et al., 2007; Lowry et al., 2005) as students' tend to lose interest in the class activities (Cothran et al., 2009; Rikard & Banville, 2006). As well, researchers (Angus, 2010; Finn & Cox, 1992; Finn & Pannozzo, 1995) state the importance of acknowledging the risks of passive forms of disengagement (competent bystanders), for students' academic achievements.

The possible reasons why students become disengaged from classes is also well documented in the literature. Research suggests that both internal and external risk factors can influence students' engagement in school (Alexander et al., 1997; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Newmann, 1992). However, researchers highlight the importance of focusing educational interventions on internal risk factors that can be more easily manipulated (Fulton, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Newmann, 1992). These include school policies, teacher-student relationships and curriculum development. Amongst the internal risk factors, curriculum design was one of the most influential factors for students' disengagement in PE (Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 2000; Green & Parr, 2007; Kirk, 2002; Rikard & Banville, 2006).



Although the limitations of the MAP (the most commonly used curriculum model in Australian schools) are well documented in the literature, and students tend to be aware of most of these limitations (Cothran et al., 2009; Salee, 2000; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Green et al., 2009), few studies have explored PE teachers' awareness of this educational issue as it relates to engagement. Moreover, even though the aforementioned research studies clearly identified the importance of external and internal factors influencing engagement, none considered using a "social-ecologic approach" (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). In other words, research has tended to focus on internal and external factors. For instance, although researchers suggested that the curriculum's relevance to students (internal) is one of the most significant factors influencing engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Finn & Cox 1992; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Kappa, 1994; Melissa, 2010), they did not mention the importance of assessing the types of activities students engage with in their youth communities (external) and that can also enhance the relevance of curriculum offerings. As recommended by Lawson and Lawson (2013), educational research should move beyond a consideration of affective, behavioural and cognitive (ABC) approaches to engagement to adopt a more holistic approach. Their socio-ecological perspective can consider the "synergetic" influence of both internal (classroom/ academic; school) and external factors (youth community). For the purposes of this study, it would be advantageous to explore the way PE teachers experience students' disengagement, from both a traditional (ABC variables) and from a "social-ecological" point of view.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

Chapter III is dedicated to the discussion of the method used for this study. This research used a qualitative approach with an interpretivist theoretical framework. The main purpose was to understand the meaning given by PE teachers to the phenomenon of students' disengagement, as well as to explore their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature review. This research included a total of four public schools and fourteen PE teachers. The data collection was conducted through individual semi-structured interviews which were guided by a theme list and recorded in a digital format. The data analysis consisted of the coding of the transcripts into different categories and in the identification of meaningful patterns.

As stated by Ronald, Jackson, Darlene, Drummond and Sakile (2007), the definition of the research method is a crucial step in any research project. The method should help the researcher to determine:

...what problems are worth investigating, how to frame a problem so it can be explored, how to develop appropriate data generation, and how to make the logical link between the problem, data generated, analysis, and conclusions/inferences drawn.

(p. 23)

As recommended by Ronald et. al, (2007), there are several aspects to take into consideration while discussing the best method for this research. This includes the research design (theoretical framework) and its methodology, which includes the determination of the

population target (participants), the recruitment process, the data collection process and the data analysis.

Overall, the literature highlighted several limitations and possible reasons why PE teachers fail to engage students in PE lessons. Nevertheless, very few studies explored PE teachers' awareness of such educational issues. Thus, drawing from the results addressed in literature review, this research was organized in four main topic questions:

1. How do PE teachers experience and identify students' disengagement?
2. What are the reasons given by PE teachers for students' disengagement?
3. What are the strategies used by PE teachers to deal with disengagement?
4. Are PE teachers aware of the effects of the MAP for students' engagement?

Each one of these questions aimed to explore the participants' individual experiences with disengagement at a class level and to understand the meaning given by these PE teachers to this phenomenon (students' disengagement). In addition, the research sought to ascertain their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature. This research also endeavors to understand what other initiatives may be necessary to help PE teachers enhance engagement in PE classes.

### *Research Design*

With the purpose of understanding the way PE teachers experience and give meaning to the phenomenon of students' disengagement, this research used a qualitative approach. As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), "the aim and function of a qualitative inquiry is to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience" (p. 23). Liamputtong (2009) believes that qualitative research aims "to elicit the contextualized nature of experience/action and attempts to generate analyses that are detailed, 'thick', and integrative" (p. 2). According to Liamputtong, one of the main assumptions of qualitative research is that in order to

understand people's actions, first it is essential to understand the meaning and purpose people give to those actions. This is what makes a qualitative researcher turn the research focus towards "understanding human beings' richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences" (Ronald et al., 2007, p. 22).

The main purpose of this research was to uncover conscious and unconscious reasons people react to a phenomenon through dialogue (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). This approach allowed the researcher to access detailed information about a certain phenomenon (students' disengagement) from the view point of the person (PE teacher) who was experiencing it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As well, by giving a voice to the participants, the researcher was able to ascertain their awareness of some the curriculum limitations addressed in the literature. From this perspective, a qualitative approach was a suitable methodology, as it would not be possible to acquire a deeper understanding of the meaning and purpose PE teachers give to the phenomenon of students' disengagement by using a quantitative approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

### Theoretical Framework

As stated by Liamputtong (2009), a theoretical framework establishes the point of view from which the researcher is going to approach the phenomenon to be studied. Thus, taking into consideration the purpose of this research, the theoretical framework used to conduct this study was interpretivist. According to McGregor and Murnane (2010), the interpretivist paradigm emerged in the mid 1960s in opposition to the scientific research method of positivism. As stated by McGregor and Murnane, instead of testing hypotheses and explaining how people operate, interpretivists generate their hypotheses "through inductive reasoning" (p. 422) and focus their research on trying to understand the reasons why people act in a certain manner. This is because, according to the interpretivist paradigm, in order to understand the way people act, first it is important to acknowledge the meaning

people give to their experiences (Cibangu, 2010). Instead of trying to generalize findings, interpretivists are more interested in understanding “lived experiences from the point of view of those living them day-to-day” (McGregor & Murnane, 2010, p. 426). Thus, by interviewing PE teachers, this research aimed to acquire a better understanding of the way participants experience students’ disengagement in their daily classes.

According to Weber (2004), the interpretivist paradigm is based in two main beliefs about the nature of reality and knowledge. From an interpretivist perspective “reality is socially constructed via the lived experiences of people” (McGregor & Murnane, 2010, p. 426). In other words, reality is generated by individuals in interaction with other people in a specific context (Lin, 1998). Thus, according to interpretivists, truth is something created by individuals and therefore there is more than one truth. In McGregor and Murnane’s words, “truth relies on humans’ interpretations of their world” (p. 425). Considering that each PE teacher (participant) interacts with different students in different contexts (classrooms/schools), the truth/reality of students’ disengagement will be created by the participants’ individual interactions and interpretations of their lessons.

With regards to the nature of knowing, assuming that people create their realities through their lived experiences, the knowledge of reality cannot be separated from people’s own experiences (Weber, 2004). Therefore, interpretivists consider that the researcher’s lived experiences are essential to the interpretation of other peoples’ realities (McGregor & Murnane, 2010). In other words, the researcher and the research topic cannot be separated. For this reason, interpretivists consider that both participants and researchers play a pivotal role in the research process (Weber, 2004). As a result, the researcher will use his own lived experiences (about disengagement) to conduct the interviews and in an effort to help participants to explore their own realities of disengagement in their PE classes.

## Researcher's lived experiences

Taking into consideration the theoretical framework used to conduct this study, the researcher will now provide a brief reflexive account of his lived experiences with students' disengagement. In order to facilitate the description of the researcher's position regarding the topic under investigation, the following section will be developed in the first person:

I am a Health and Physical Education teacher and I was born in a small country in Europe called Portugal. My father was a very health conscious man and his lifestyle has definitely had an impact on me. I have been involved in sporting activities since I can remember. For me, sporting activities were and are one of my favourite recreations. My involvement in PE and other sports such as Karate (individual sports), Kitesurfing (outdoor) and Basketball (team sports) have all taught me how to be resilient and self-confident, and how to interact with others. It was in year 10 after my PE class with Mrs. Agrelos that I decided that I wanted to become a PE teacher and to help others enjoy the benefits of physical activity.

After concluding my undergraduate studies in sport sciences and my Masters degree in Secondary School Education, I began my professional journey as a PE teacher. In order to become a registered teacher in Portugal, every new graduate needs to complete a year of professional practice in a Secondary School. It was during this year that I was first confronted with the issue of students' disengagement. As I was so passionate about health and physical education (HPE), it was difficult for me to understand why students would dislike HPE. From all the challenges that I faced during my first year of professional practice, students' disengagement was by far my biggest hurdle. After concluding my professional practice I felt that there was a gap in my knowledge. Despite my efforts, I was still not consistently able to engage students in my classes. As a result I decided to do a second Masters in Behaviour Management and, in particular, to develop a literature review about students' disengagement.

The completion of this literature review gave me new insights into my own professional practices and the reasons why my students were possibly disengaged in my classes. However, the conclusion of this Masters also brought more questions: How are PE teachers dealing with this educational issue? Can they successfully engage students in their classes? Were they aware of the influence of internal factors such as the curriculum? Were they aware of the presence of competent bystanders (students who are, at best, peripherally engaged)? In general, are PE teachers aware of the educational issues addressed in the engagement literature, or are they also experiencing the same problems that I faced on my first year of professional practice? These were the questions that sparked my interest in conducting this research, as well as a desire to help other PE teachers deal with the challenges of engagement.

### *Methodology*

#### Participants

This research included a total of four public schools and fourteen PE teachers. See Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants' Schools

School	Public / Private	ICSE A	N. of Students	N. of PE Teachers	N. of participants per school	Curriculum Model	Alternative Curricular options	Specialized Programs
A	Public	903	365	4	4	MAP	Out. Ed.; Rec.	Basketball; Dance
B	Public	920	553	5	4	MAP	Out. Ed.; Rec.	Soccer; Dance
C	Public	1034	1204	10	4	MAP	Out. Ed.; Rec.; Out. Rec. & Surf	Soccer; Dance
D	Public	1145	1300	9	2	MAP	Out. Ed.; Rec.	None

As illustrated in Table 1, this study only included public schools. They all used the multi-activity program (MAP) as their curriculum model. The fact that all four schools used the MAP as their chosen curriculum model may affect the participants' ability to engage students in class. As argued by Ennis (2000), the MAP presents several limitations that can compromise students' engagement in PE classes. Therefore, the discussion of the curriculum and its influence over students' engagement will take into consideration that the participants in this study were using the MAP.

Another important characteristic to be highlighted is the number of students in each school. As indicated by Table 1, schools A and B were considerably smaller than schools C and D. According to Lee and Burkam's (2003) research findings, school size can possibly influence the way teachers relate to students. As argued by the authors, students are less likely to become alienated from learning in schools with fewer than 1,500 students. In other words, teachers tend to be more likely to effectively connect with students in smaller school communities. Thus, it will be important to address these differences in school sizes while discussing teacher-student relationships.

There were nine male and five female PE teachers as participants in this study (see Appendix G). With the exception of Lachlan (pseudonym), all participants graduated from Western Australia Universities. Of the fourteen participants, ten came from teacher education programs in which they were instructed in alternative curriculum models to the MAP. The average age was 41 years and the average years of full-time working experience was 15.2 years.

This research used a volunteer sampling technique for the selection of participants (Liamputtong, 2009). This means that the PE teachers were invited to participate in the study by letter and, depending on their consent, the researcher selected them for the study. This was considered the most suitable sample technique due to the type of research topic and sample



required. Considering that the main goal was to explore PE teachers' experiences with disengagement at the class level, there were no restrictions in terms of age, gender and years of professional experience. The only criterion that needed to be met by the participants was being a PE teacher who was currently teaching and who "voluntarily" agreed to participate in the study.

This research included a minimum of 12 participants in the sample with new participants being added until reaching a saturation of information. According to Liamputtong (2009), the selection of a sample size in qualitative research is greatly dependent on the type of research question and on the amount of information being collected. In other words, the sample size is appropriate "when the researcher is satisfied that the data are rich enough and cover enough of the dimensions they are interested in" (Liamputtong, 2009, p. 49). Therefore, taking into consideration the nature/number of research questions and the information required to answer these questions, this study included a total of 14 participants.

### Materials

In order to gather participants for this study, two letters of invitation were sent to the school principals and to the PE teachers (see Appendix A and Appendix B). These letters provided all the necessary information about the study and its main goals. A consent form was also needed to obtain the principals' consent to initiate the study (see Appendix C and Appendix D). To collect the demographic information from the participants it was also necessary to create a demographic sheet (see Appendix E). This information provided a better understanding of the participants' background and allowed the researcher to ascertain if the sample had unique qualities (which was not verified, as described above). In addition, because this research used a semi-structured in-depth interview, a theme list was necessary to help guide the interviews (see Appendix F). A digital recorder was also necessary to record

the interviews and the data analysis was supported by the software Nvivo (Version 10) which facilitated the organization and analysis of the transcripts.

### Recruitment Procedure

The first step in the recruitment process was to establish contact with the schools through an invitation letter to inform the principals about the research purpose. Attached to this information letter was a consent form that needed to be returned should the principal agree to participate in the study. After receiving formal consent the researcher met with the school principals to outline the procedures and implications of the study, as well as to clarify possible concerns. The second step was to then repeat the process with the PE teachers by sending them invitation letters and getting their formal consent to participate in the study.

### *Data Collection*

This research adopted an in-depth semi-structured interview format to conduct fourteen individual interviews. A semi-structured interview is positioned somewhere between an open-ended unstructured interview and a survey with closed questions (Liamputtong, 2009). In contrast to fixed questions and forced answer surveys, in-depth interviews aim to explore the interviewees' ideas about a phenomenon (students' disengagement) through a dialogue (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Instead of forcing certain responses the researcher uses a theme list to guide the interviews (McCracken, 1988).

The main purpose of this research was to explore PE teachers' experiences with disengagement at the class level and to answer four main research questions through a semi-structured interview format. This interview format not only helped the researcher to cover the four main topics of discussion (with the help of a theme list), but also allowed him to be more focused in the interaction process of the interviews (McCracken, 1988). This theme list also included other sub-questions to help the researcher further explore each topic of discussion (see Appendix F). Although the interviews were guided by the theme list, the researcher was

not limited to the four main topic questions. As stated by Liamputtong (2009), a semi-structured interview should be open to explore new lines of inquiry that might emerge during the conversation.

Before the beginning of each interview the participants were reminded that all information shared was confidential and that they were allowed to talk for as long as they wanted about the topic. Every question aimed to explore their personal teaching experiences, so there were no right or wrong answers. The intention of this statement was to help participants feel more confident with their responses in order to avoid any “defensive strategies” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). It was also important to state that participants were allowed to refuse to answer a certain question or to even withdraw from the interview at any stage without a penalty. As part of the data collection process, in the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked to complete a demographic sheet with some essential demographic information.

In general, each interview took approximately 20 to 40 minutes and the information was recorded in a digital format. According to Liamputtong’s (2009) recommendations, the interviews were conducted in a neutral setting to avoid any discomfort for the interviewer or interviewees. While establishing a setting for the interview the participants were asked to find a quiet place, as the interviews were being recorded in a digital format. As a result, most interviews were conducted in a meeting room or in an empty classroom.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data collected was processed in two distinct stages. Firstly, after being recorded in a digital format, the researcher transcribed all the interviews into a written document. The transcripts not only included the participants’ answers to questions, but also their self-corrections, hesitations, emphases and emotions (such as reluctance). After the

completion of each interview the researcher replayed the recordings and compared them to the transcript to ensure that the interviews were correctly transcribed.

Secondly, the information on the transcripts was analyzed using an interpretivistic approach. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), such an approach aims to understand the meaning and actions given by participants to a certain phenomenon (students' disengagement). In the first stage the interviews were coded in a line by line process. The main purpose of this open coding was to organize the transcripts into different categories and to identify meaningful patterns (Berg, 2004).

In the second stage this coding process was guided by the four main research questions and involved the interpretation of the participants' responses when they answered the questions. This second stage involved a more analytical interpretation of the data collected, resulting in the reduction of the number of codes and the organization of the codes under each research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To illustrate, the categories of "Access to School Facilities" and "Access to School equipment" were combined into a single category "Work Place Limitations", which was coded under the research question: "What are the reasons given by PE teachers for students' disengagement?". In order to facilitate the analysis of the data collected, the researcher used qualitative analysis software Nvivo 10. This software not only allowed the researcher to create different codes and memos, but also to access a summary of the information coded under each category.

### *Rigour*

Even though the term "rigour" is more often discussed in quantitative research by addressing its validity and reliability (Robson, 2002), the rigour of a study is just as important for qualitative research (Grayson, Kent & Rust, 2001). However, unlike the methods used to assess the quality/rigour of quantitative studies, "there is controversy over the evaluation of qualitative studies" (Oliver, 2011, p. 2). As stated by Oliver, the main issue with qualitative

research is the ability to reproduce such studies and obtain similar results. This can become an issue with studies employing an interpretivist approach, where each participant constructs their own reality in interaction with other people in a specific environment (McGregor and Murnane, 2010), making the reproduction of similar results very difficult. Nevertheless, according to Greenwood, Mackenzie, Cloud, and Wilson (2009), there are several steps that can be taken to ensure the rigour of a qualitative study.

As recommended by Greenwood et al. (2009), qualitative studies should use transparency through detailed description of the study. This should include the protocols/tools used, the recruitment of participants, data collection and the data analysis process. In the current research, transparency was evident as the procedures were described in detail and linked/justified to/by its theoretical framework. As well, the researcher included the names of the participants (pseudonyms) under each quote to allow the reader to assess how often each participant was quoted, to address the different topics of discussion (see Appendix G) and to link to the research time-line (see Appendix H).

Descriptive validity was also used to ensure the rigour of this study. According to Maxwell (1992), descriptive validity refers to the accuracy of the data collection process. As stated by the author, an accurate transcript should include whole words, pauses and the accentuations of the participants. In this study whole interviews were transcribed by the researcher and later contrasted with the recordings to verify their accuracy. Overall, each interview was replayed twice to ensure that the transcripts matched the participants' words.

The last method used to ensure the rigour of this study was peer debriefs. Peer debriefing is used to assert the credibility of the data collected in qualitative research (Finlay, 2006). These peer debriefs consisted of extensive discussions between the researcher and other peer(s) about the research findings and the progress of an investigation (Spall, 1998). During these discussions the other peer(s) ask questions of the researcher to help him to

understand how his personal views and values can affect the research findings. As stated by Spall (1998), peer debriefs “provide a means toward the establishment of the overall trustworthiness of the findings” (p. 280).

In summary, in order to ensure the credibility and validity of this study, the researcher used three different forms of rigour. These included transparency, descriptive validity and peer debriefs. These three forms of rigour were essential tools to in ensuring that the data collected were authentic representations of the participants’ perceptions of disengagement in PE classes.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

Chapter IV is dedicated to the description of the results of this study. The purpose is to summarize the main research findings and to answer its research questions. The data are organized in four main sections, which correspond to the four main research questions.

#### **Introduction**

As highlighted by other researchers in the literature review section of this study, there are several factors and pedagogical issues that could possibly explain why students disengage from PE classes. Some of the most relevant literature findings refer to the drawbacks of passive forms of disengagement (teachers' perceptions of disengagement), the importance of acknowledging the influence of internal risk factors (the reasons for students' disengagement) and the influence that the curriculum model can have over students' engagement (engagement and the PE curriculum). However, few studies have explored PE teachers' awareness of such factors, which raises some questions regarding their ability to engage students in classes (strategies used to deal with disengagement). This chapter presents data relevant to each of the four research questions. Each one of these categories/codes will be now individually presented and considered further in the discussion chapter of this study.

#### **Teachers' Perceptions of Disengagement in Physical Education**

One of the main areas of investigation in this research is the way PE teachers experience students' disengagement at the class level. This research aimed to achieve a better understanding of the way participants identified and classified students' behavior as disengagement. In order to understand the way people act, first it is important to acknowledge

the meaning people give to their experiences (Cibangu, 2010). Therefore, the identification of the way PE teachers' perceived disengagement was expected to provide a better understanding of the way they reacted to these educational challenges. The data show that participants in this study considered that disengaged students were those who were not involved in lesson activities. According to the participants, this lack of involvement/participation can be manifested in three different forms: refusal to participate, quiet disengagement (participating but not engaged) and disruptiveness.

### *Refusal to Participate*

According to the participants in this study, one of the most common forms of disengagement was the simple refusal to participate. As stated by Jacob, *“Obviously in PE they are disengaged if they are not participating usually, or refusing to participate”*. According to the participants, students who did not want to be involved in lessons used different strategies to achieve their aim of withdrawal. As observed by Simon, *“the withdrawer ones...just don't worry [about] participating and they will give any excuse”*. Similarly Jacob argued that *“there are a lot of techniques that the kids have”*. One of the most common excuses cited by participants was the lack of sporting attire. As stated by Lachlan, *“A student that is disengaged hum...doesn't bring their change of clothes and they don't want to do it, that is pretty obvious”*. As well Anthony claimed that:

*If you are talking about PE you will have students who possibly, deliberately do not bring the right change. Yeah coming in without...even if they have got their sports gear in their bags they are going to say 'I don't have my gear for sport'.*

Due to this perennial issue, participants confessed that occasionally they even allowed students to participate without their uniforms in an attempt to get them involved in class. According to Catherine:



*...even if they do that and they don't have the uniform I get them to participate, because for me that is another form of avoidance and disengagement in the classroom. 'I'm not bringing my uniform so I don't have to play'. 'Hey, you still need to play now but, there will be repercussions and consequences for doing that'*

Another common excuse was to fake injuries or illness. Mathew stated that students “would have a sort of an injury that is not validated. So they tell us but there is no note from home and you would suspect that maybe it is not genuine”. Anthony acknowledged the same problem by stating that some students, “maybe bring in a fake note or just saying that they are sick”.

In addition to these strategies to avoid being involved in the class activities, the participants also claimed that, in the most extreme cases, students simply refused to participate and withdrew from classes. These students usually just sat on the side of the class and refused to be involved at any level. As stated by Mary, some students “*just don't want to participate and just sit apart from the class*”. Cameron added that these students tend to display the same behavior repetitively: “*They refuse to participate, they are apathetic and most of the time they tend to be the same kids*”. As well, Jonathon argued that teachers have “*an idea about who are the kids that are going to avoid joining in. 'I don't want to join in', 'I don't want to mess my hair up', those kind of things*”.

Hence, the participants in this study identified refusal to participate as a recurrent form of disengagement in their classes. This refusal was manifested in excuses, lack of sporting attire, faked injuries/sickness and simple refusals to be involved.

### *Quiet Disengagement*

Another form of disengagement identified by participants in this study was the group of students who were participating but not engaged. This form of disengagement referred to students who changed and went through the motions of the exercises, but who were still

disengaged from the class. Participants referred to this group of students in different ways. For instance, Kevin called these students the “*quietly disengaged*”, whereas Max called them “*static participants*”. As stated by Cameron, “*they will participate but stand there and not do anything*”. Laura also argued that these types of students “*do the bare minimum, like participation but no effort*”. Often the participants referred to these students as being cooperative but not intrinsically motivated to learn. According to the participants, these types of students did not want to be seen as disruptive or non-cooperative, so they would get changed and participate. However, their level of effort was very low and they took every chance to avoid getting involved. As declared by Jonathon, “*A lot of those kids might be good kids! They will get changed and they will go through the motions but, that doesn’t mean they are engaged*”. Another good example of that was provided by Lachlan:

*...a student who brings their change of clothes but, when there is an activity happening they will just not get involved...They will not move to receive a pass for example....They bring a change of clothes because they don’t want to get in trouble but, they just sort of hang around the fringe not getting involved hum...They don’t want to be seen as not being helpful*

Jacob also claimed that students “get changed, join the line and work their way up the line but as soon as they get to the front they try to sneak to the back again, and they haven’t done anything.”

According to the participants in this study, this type of disengaged student did not represent a major behavioral issue. As cited by Max, “*They have got everything. They are there and they don’t represent a behavior problem, but they don’t get involved*”. As argued by Kevin “*I guess if someone is standing in the corner they will not be disrupting what I am trying to say or anything like that*”. As a result, participants considered that following-up (e.g., with parent contact) was unnecessary, as this type of behavior did not disrupt other students’ learning and students could still pass the subject. As stated by Anthony, “*when I*

*talked about those kids that aren't trying their best but they are still around...I wouldn't be contacting their parents."* According to Jonathon *"it is still hard to fail someone who is getting changed and kind of having a go. But, they are not going to get higher than a C"*.

Thus, even though the participants acknowledged the presence of quietly disengaged students who come to classes, changed, but do not display any desire to learn, they did not consider these students to be a major problem. This is because, according to the participants, quietly disengaged students did not disrupt other students' learning and could still pass the subject.

### *Disruption*

Another form of disengagement identified by the participants was the disruptive student. According to the participants, disruptive behavior occurred when students did not follow teachers' instructions and were frequently off task. As stated by Catherine, *"If they are misbehaving, that is disengagement"*. As well, according to Mathew, these were students who *"are not following instructions...are mucking around with other students"*. Another example was provided by Max stating that *"They are just disruptive...They do everything besides what the teacher says. So you might tell them to have a relay with their partner and they do everything else but doing their relay with their partner"*.

According to the participants this inappropriate behavior can be displayed in different ways, such as constant chatting. An example of that was provided by Mary stating, *"When I am just trying to start the lesson and I am marking the roll and the kids talk... I always have kids who are talking...so yeah, that is very difficult"*. As stated by Kevin, *"They can be loud, chatting to other students and be disruptive that way."* Another good example was provided by Max arguing that *"they obviously don't do their work, spend time talking with other students and distracting other students"*.

In addition to the chatting problem, the participants also referred to students who are attention seeking and constantly disrupting the class. As stated by Max:

*Another type of student is the person who may be good at sport but who wants to be the centre of the attention, so they want the teacher to tell them off and those sorts of things. They want the attention to be on them all the time...*

Jonathon also stated, “You got those with an attitude. They might be quite skilled but they have that attitude that they don’t want to be told what to do”. According to Sarah, this attitude can be very disruptive to classes because “even if they go through the motions, they can still be very disruptive...they can still be very uncooperative while going through the motions”.

Despite acknowledging other forms of disengagement, the participants considered disruptive behavior to be the most problematic forms of disengagement. As stated by Sarah, “*Disruption is a huge, huge problem.*” Kevin also declared that “*generally the loudly disengaged students would be more of an issue.*” According to the participants, disruptive students were more problematic, not only because they affect their own learning, but also the learning of others. As declared by Jonathon, “*They take up your time with behavior management and they take your time to teach the engaged students*”. In Lachlan’s opinion, disruptive students “*stop themselves but they can stop others as well*”.

### *Summary*

The participants in this study gave great importance to disruptive forms of disengagement such as constant chatting and refusals to follow instructions. Even though the participants identified other types of disengagement (such as the refusal to participate and quiet disengagement), they agreed that disruptive behavior was the most problematic form of disengagement. The participants believed that this was because disruptive students not only affected their own learning, but also the learning of others. Thus as stated by the participants,

as long as students participate in class and do not disrupt other students' learning, they can still pass the subject.

### **Reasons for Students' Disengagement from Physical Education**

The reasons given by the participants for students' disengagement from PE classes were also addressed in this research. The main purpose was not only to identify some of the reasons given by the participants for students' disengagement, but also to ascertain their level of awareness of internal risk factors (school factors). According to Fulton's (2007) review, it is more relevant to focus educational intervention on internal factors (school factors such as school policies, curriculum development and students' relationships with teachers). These factors can be changed over time more readily than external factors (e.g., parents' influence, cultural background and social status). These data on reasons for students' disengagement may help answer questions about teachers' beliefs concerning internal versus external risk factors for disengagement.

The participants in this study pointed out several reasons why students could possibly disengage from PE classes. These included their attitudes, peer pressure, equipment and facilities, external factors and lesson delivery. The following reasons/categories will be individually addressed in this chapter and then considered in the Discussion chapter of this study.

#### *Students' Attitudes*

The most commonly cited reason given by the participants for students' disengagement from PE was their attitudes. According to the participants, students were mainly responsible for their own disengagement due to their lack of a work ethic and willingness to learn. Simon pointed out "*that their self-management skills are quite poor*". Sarah held a similar view considering that students were mostly "*apathetic*,

*lazy...unenthusiastic. They don't persevere very well*". As stated by Cameron, *"If you have kids that are lazy it really impacts the quality of the game and the opportunity for everyone else to improve"*. Max went even further:

*That is one of the big ones, or they have got poor working ethics in general...it doesn't matter what the content is, they are just not interested in working, they don't bring materials to class. A lot has to do with their work ethics, they are not interested. That makes it is very hard to get them engaged.*

Besides these references to students' attitudes, participants also pointed out other individual student characteristics that influenced their engagement in class. Amongst those characteristics were the students' interests in particular sports or their dislike for sporting-activities in general.

#### Disinterest in Particular Sports

According to the participants in this study, student disinterest in particular sports can also influence their engagement in PE classes. When students did not like or perceived a sporting-activity as irrelevant to their lives, they were more likely to disengage from class. According to Catherine, some students *"are not interested in that sport or activity"*. Mary considered that *"a lot of kids need to do sports that they don't like to do and just then...depending on the type of activity I will have always one or two that won't do anything"*. Jacob also argued that *"it comes down to sport...If it is something that you don't enjoy doing, you kind of switch off"*. Another good illustration of this was provided by Kelvin declaring that:

*...it can also be a sport by sport thing. A student may have only a particular interest in one or two sports. They can be great at those sports but, as soon as you do something they don't like, they don't give the same effort....*

Hence, depending on the students' perception of the relevance (appeal) of a sport-activity, they would engage or disengage from the PE class.

#### Dislike for Sport in General

Another reason addressed by the participants for students' disengagement, was their general dislike for sport-activities. Just as some students did not like certain sports, other students simply disliked any form of sporting activity. This led them to disengage from lessons. As stated by Kevin, *"I think some people are just disengaged in sports in general and therefore that will be an issue throughout the year"*. Mathew also claimed that *"the kids not particularly liking that subject...a smaller percentage don't, and those kids will usually absent themselves or do some form of disengagement somehow."* According to Jacob, *"you will always have kids that are disengaged in Phys. Ed., just like you have kids that are disengaged in other subjects"*. Anthony considered that some students *"don't see the relevance of Phys. Ed. and I think they have got other interests and priorities"*. Similarly, Simon declared that some students *"see PE or fitness or sport as something that they don't enjoy, that they wouldn't have any interest in"*.

Another aspect pointed out by the participants was that the overall dislike for PE and physical activity was more evident in female students. As stated by Jacob, *"I had taught some female classes and it's hard. They are teenage girls and that is such a battle straight away"*. Jonathon considered that *"you got others who just dislike sport. They might be quite good at it but, they dislike doing anything physical. A lot of female students are like that"*. According to Mary, *"In Phys. Ed. it is usually girls who don't want to participate because they are not into sports so they just mess around."* Even though the majority of participants held similar views, Laura considered that girls' engagement levels in PE were possibly lower than boys because of *"the kind of curriculum that it's not suitable to all girls."* Laura was the only

participant who raised the possibility of gender bias in the curriculum. That it could possibly explain girls' low engagement levels and general dislike for PE.

### *Peer Pressure*

According to the participants in this study, peer pressure can also have a major influence over students' engagement levels. This was what Anthony referred to as students' "*social reasons*" for becoming disengaged. The participants claimed that peers can greatly influence engagement in class by encouraging or suppressing participation. As stated by Sarah, "*They can become disengaged quickly and influence each other to become disengaged or even engaged like, 'hey do you want to join in?'*". In Cameron's opinion, "*Different kids, depending on who is around and who else is there on that day, [that will] influence how well they do...I think that is the biggest one, it is peers*". In other words, according to participants in this study, students' engagement can be socially moderated by their inter-personal relationships in class. However this peer influence can be a double-edged sword; it can either encourage engagement or it can suppress it.

### Positive Peer Pressure

The participants in this study considered that peer pressure can positively promote class engagement when students have friends who encourage their participation. According to Catherine, the "*class tends to...work in their favour if they have a group of friends that tend to work well*". Anthony also pointed out that "*sometimes it can be purely social; social groups. You can imagine if there were, you know, a couple of their mates in the class that are sporty and like to participate, they would participate*". Simon shared a similar opinion considering that it is very difficult to get students to participate "*when they don't have a teacher or any peers that want to play sport or get into sport*". Max added that friendships and peer influence can play a pivotal role in determining the ability of a student to engage in sport-activities out of the school: "*I have seen cases of kids who have been interested in playing*



*going off with the friend and trying AFL at club level but, the important thing is that social aspect*". Thus, peer pressure can positively influence engagement, when students develop positive affiliations with other students in class.

### Negative Peer Pressure

According to the participants in this study peer pressure can also suppress engagement when students avoid participating for fear of becoming the target of peer appraisal. In other words, social judgment could be a major reason why students do not wish to risk failure in PE classes. As stated by Catherine, students' *"choice of not participating for fear of failure in anything...they don't like failure"*. In Sarah's experience, *"they don't have the confidence to risk failure in front of their peers"*. Simon went even further and claimed *"there's some bullying boys in there and if you fail or make a mistake, you might be ostracized or teased, you know, I think that the kids worry about that"*. As well, the participants in this study considered that students' aversion to risking failure can be compromised by their individual skill levels and their self-perception of body-image.

The participants in this study argued that fear of failure and negative social appraisal can also be closely related to students' individual skill levels. The less skilful students were in a specific sporting activity, the less likely they were to risk failure in front of the class. As stated by Jonathon, *"There are the ones, who are very poorly skilled and therefore it's very difficult to get them engaged because of their fear of making mistakes"*. Lachlan also argued that *"sometimes it might be their skill level...they haven't got the confidence so, they don't want to engage because of that."* Jacob considered that *"if they don't have the ability they don't want to participate...Definitely, definitely. If they are low [skilled], they are less likely to participate."* Another example was provided by Anthony while referring to the differences between sport activities:

*...I was mentioning before the student that might notice that he is below the rest of the group, might force him [self] to withdraw and disengage....then you might notice that you change sports and then they are just joining in because they might be good at this sport.*

Therefore when students perceived that they were less skilful in a certain sporting activity, they were more likely to disengage themselves from practice to avoid being the target of social judgment.

Another factor participants said could affect engagement was students' self-perception of body-image. According to the participants, when students were not comfortable with their body-image, they were also more likely to disengage from class for fear of being criticized by other students. According to Jacob, *"sometimes it comes down to body image and self-esteem...they definitely affect their engagement in the class. They don't want to be thought as fat so, they don't go and get changed for Phys. Ed."* Anthony also considered that *"It could be body image...They might not feel comfortable in their sports clothes and doing some movement stuff like that"*. Another illustration of this was provided by Jonathon when referring to swimming classes:

*...swimming you got body issues. Some of the larger boys have problems in getting changed in the changing room...they all go hide in the toilets. Or they are so worried in getting changed that they don't even change because people can see them in the pool.*

Thus, the participants also considered that body-image can influence students' engagement. They believed that when students were not confident with their body-image they were also more likely to disengage from the lesson for fear of social appraisal.

The participants in this study acknowledged the importance that peer pressure can have over students' engagement in PE classes. Peer pressure can either encourage or discourage engagement, depending on the nature of students' affiliations in class. The results

of this study point to the level of social exposure embedded in PE classes, where students need to perform in front of other students. According to the participants, students' disengagement could be affected by their skill level and self-perception of body image. Students who had lower skill levels or had negative self-perceptions of their bodies were more likely to disengage from class to avoid being the target of social judgment.

### *Structural Limitation*

Another group of factors addressed by the participants that could influence students' engagement was the equipment and facilities at their disposal. Sarah considered that *"the equipment and facilities might not be motivating [for students]"*. Lachlan also claimed that students' engagement can vary with the class venue, which can become an issue when PE teachers do not have access to the most suitable venue for the class/sport activity:

*...could be the venue...kids might be more engaged in the gym than on the oval...we played a game of soccer on the oval compared to playing a game of soccer in the gym, the kids engage at different levels so,...that could be an issue as well.*

Another example of how school facilities can constrain educational practices was provided by Catherine who stated, *"You cannot engage students in basketball tournaments, because you don't have as many courts"*. Similarly, Max stated *"we don't do any swimming for instance...we don't have any access to facilities to do that...you just got to go with the facilities"*.

The problem of access to school facilities could also be affected by the weather conditions. As stated by Simon, *"it can come down to simple things like, the weather"*. According to Kevin, the selection of activities for PE can be greatly determined by weather conditions and the access to facilities: *"like in a hot day not being able to be in the gym, or even sometimes when you are in the gym is damn hot because there is no air conditioning"*.

In other words, the participants argued that the weather can also influence their educational practices and consequently influence engagement.

Thus, the participants in this study considered that the access to school equipment and facilities also played a pivotal role in determining their educational practices. If participants did not have the access to appropriate facilities to teach a lesson, students' engagement could be affected.

### *Outside Influences*

According to the participants, students' engagement could also be influenced by outside factors. This was what Catherine referred to as "outside issues". As argued by Lachlan, "*sometimes you get kids that something else has happened to them outside of the school and they...are concentrating too much on that...that is stressing them. Sometimes they don't engage because of that*". One factor mentioned was conflict at home: "*it could be home life*" (Fiona). Max also considered that if "*something major has happened at home, they can become quite disengaged*". Another example was provided by Mathew who stated that "*you get other kids...that might have issues at home and whatever. It is just...you are not going to get anything out of them for the day*".

Another external factor addressed by participants was parental influence. According to the participants, parents can also influence students' ability/likelihood to engage in PE. For instance, according to Anthony, if the parents were inactive and overweight, their kids were also likely to have a sedentary life-style, a factor which can compromise engagement in PE:

*...their attitude is coming from their parents. That is still hard to change, I mean, there is no nice way to speak to a kid about how possibly their parents had led them down the wrong path, I mean...when you see some of the kids that are really fat you look at their parents and they are pretty much the same...*

Jonathon agreed, stating that “it all depends on what parents know and think about it, and a lot of them don’t see it as very important. ‘Why do they need Phys. Ed. for?’ That kind of thing.” Another example was provided by Sarah stating that “parents’ attitudes can subconsciously wash off onto the kids and kids can be a bit careless about physical activity, or joining in, or giving and making their best”. In Sarah’s opinion:

*...parents have that attitude that, ‘it is only Phys. Ed. so it doesn’t matter’. Parents don’t see Phys. Ed. as an important classroom subjects so, if their kids are lazy, or disengaged, or won’t make an effort, they make up some excuses and treat it as not being so important....that can be a reason why.*

In other words, the participants considered that parents’ lifestyle and perceived relevance of PE/physical activity to their children could possibly influence the way students’ perceived the subject.

The participants in this study also considered that external factors such as home issues and parental guidance were beyond their control. According to Simon, “*there are a lot of outside factors that we can’t control*”. Anthony also considered that teachers do not have control over such factors: “*obviously anything that is going on at home, you can’t really control that, can you? Whether it is issues at home and that makes the kid turn up and not be interested*”. Laura shared a similar opinion by stating that: “*if it’s something that has happened at home to the kid that is causing him to be disengaged, then that is very difficult. So, in that sort of situation I would say that you can’t control that*”.

Hence, according to the participants, external factors can also play a pivotal role in students’ engagement in PE. These external factors referred to possible home conflicts, parental guidance and life-style. As stated by the participants in this study, parents’ attitudes can wash off onto their children and influence the way they see physical activity. In other words, students’ interests and personal preferences (e.g., only liking certain sports; disliking

physical activity in general) can be greatly affected by the adoption of their parents' values. In addition to the aforementioned external factors, the participants also considered that the prioritization of PE in students' lives can be influenced by difficulties students may have been experiencing in their lives. The participants believed they had little control over such factors.

### *Lesson Delivery*

The participants in this study also recognized that engagement can be determined by the teacher. As stated by Lachlan, *"it could be the teacher"*. This was what Kevin classified as the *"teacher factor"*, which referred to lesson planning and delivery. For instance, Anthony considered that *"possibly in your PE class, your planning...you always want to make it exciting from the start"*. According to Kevin, *"disengagement can be a result of...teachers not running an enjoyable class"*. Another good example of this was provided by Max, who claimed:

*Another engagement factor can be the way I teach. It can be boring for them. That can be another reason why they disengage, because of how I am teaching and the way I am teaching...*

Catherine also stated that *"the delivery of the content definitely has an influence on the students"*.

Thus, according to participants engagement can also be determined by teachers' pedagogical approach. This included the planning, selection and delivery of the class content. Even though the participants placed great emphasis on students, external factors and equipment and facilities they also acknowledged their own capacity to influence engagement through the nature of their lesson delivery.

### *Summary*

The participants in this study considered that the main reason for students' disengagement were the students and their attitude in class. As well, they pointed out the influence that peer pressure can have over students' engagement levels. Depending on the nature of inter-personal relationships, peer pressure could enhance or reduce engagement. Another aspect highlighted in this study was the number of factors that could influence engagement that were beyond the participants' control. These included structural limitations (access to equipment and facilities), as well as, outside influences (possible home conflicts, parental guidance and life-style). As stated by the participants these were all factors that could affect students' engagement and compromise their ability to effectively engage students in PE. The participants in this study also acknowledged their responsibility for dealing with disengagement (lesson delivery). Nevertheless, they did not make reference to the relevance of curriculum.

### **Strategies Used to Deal with Disengagement in Physical Education**

In investigating the participants' experiences with disengagement, this research also aimed to explore the strategies used by PE teachers to deal with disengagement. The main goal was to acquire a better understanding of the way the participants dealt with disengagement at the class level, and also to identify effective strategies used to enhance engagement. The identification of such strategies also provided a good opportunity to ask the participants about the effects of particular curriculum models on engagement. According to researchers (Ares & Gorrell 2002; Chen, 2001; Dunn et al., 2004; Fredericks et al., 2004; Fulton 2007; Gallagher 2002; Marks 2000;), the commonly used multi-activity program model (MAP) has presented several limitations that can possibly affect engagement in PE classes. Results showed that participants used a wide variety of strategies to deal with

disengagement at the class level. Amongst those strategies were the promotion of a positive teacher-student relationship, pedagogical adjustments and parental contact as a source of support. Each one of these strategies will be now be described individually.

### *Teacher-Student Relationship*

The data indicated that the participants in this study believed that one of the key ways to effectively deal with disengaged students was to create a positive teacher-student relationship. According to the participants, it was these positive relationships that allowed them to know their students at the personal level and to better understand the reasons for their disengagement in class. This is because, students were all different and they all had different needs. As stated by Jacob, “*every student is different so you need to have a different approach to every single student*”. Catherine also stated that “*you just adjust your approach depending on the issues that they are dealing with, and what the issues are*”. Sarah shared a similar opinion arguing:

*I think that all of those strategies you have to be ready to use them depending on the cause of the problem...it varies. Not all of them are disengaged all the time, and not all of them react the same way all the time.*

As stated by the participants in this study, there were several strategies that they used to connect with students. For instance, the participants considered it important to demonstrate a real interest in students’ personal lives. As stated by Kevin, “*I think probably trying to develop a personal relationship with them. Say Hi!, have a good weekend...ask them what they did on the weekend that sort of thing*”. Fiona shared a similar opinion arguing:

*I would try to be reasonably personal...I use their name, I would show an interest in them, ask them about what its wrong, ask them how their weekend was or just ask them how their life is going and just show an interest in them. So that’s the way I would try reach out to them I guess.*



Besides showing a genuine interest in students, the participants also claimed it was important to have an open conversation about engagement. As stated by Laura, *“I guess that for the ones who are feeling really disengaged you can always have a chat with them”*. The participants’ main goal was to reason with their students by discussing the consequences of their behavior (disengagement). According to Catherine it was important *“to have an open chat about what their behavior is doing and if it’s affecting others and how it’s affecting me and possibly suggest some ways in which they can possibly improve”*. Mathew also claimed that *“often it would be by talking to them privately and discussing things...Just by reasoning you generally get kids [to] come on board and then you give them some feedback”*. An important aspect highlighted by the participants, was to have these conversations in private. According to Anthony’s experience, it was essential to avoid verbal confrontations with disengaged students in front of the class:

*I make an effort not to speak to him in front of the group...and also I don’t think it shows them much respect. I think that obviously if they are having some issues you need to give them the privacy of going next to them, to sit next to them, and probably discuss what is going on. That is my first go straight away.*

This approach was also regarded as “one-on-ones” (Max). As stated by Catherine, “I try to have one-on-ones with those students who I feel are disengaged or choosing not to participate, and I try to talk at their level”. Thus, as well as showing a genuine interest in students’ lives, the participants agreed that having one on one conversations with those students about their behaviour can help to reinforce teacher-student relationships and enhance engagement in class.

Another approach used to create a positive teacher-student relationship was encouragement and praise. The participants in this study considered it important to encourage students in order to acknowledge their effort and reinforce positive behaviour in the class. As stated by Fiona, *“I always use encouragement and praise”*. Laura also considered it important

to “really encourage and emphasize the positives that they are doing in your class, not what they are not doing”. In Max’s opinion, PE teachers should always “try to be positive and encourage them to have a go”. Simon shared a similar opinion by stating, “I give a lot feedback, encouragement and praise when a student does the right thing. I try to make a conscious effort. When they do something good I acknowledge that”. Jonathon considered that encouragement and praise was particularly important for those students who seemed to be reluctant to participate:

*For the kids who...I am trying to get them to have a go, it's a lot of encouragement based...give them that praise and encouragement. 'Hey, that was really good, great, great job'...that is one of the strategies that I definitely use with those type of kids.*

Thus, the participants in this study claimed that in order to enhance engagement in PE classes, first it was important to establish positive teacher-student relationships. By reinforcing teacher-student relationships in class the participants were able to acquire a better understanding of their students and their individual needs. As a result the participants claimed to be better able to connect with the students and effectively engage them in PE classes.

### *Pedagogical Adjustments*

Another strategy to deal with disengagement was pedagogical adjustments at the class level. Amongst those strategies were adjustments to class activities, to working groups and to students’ roles during the activities. According to the participants these three levels of intervention can help enhance engagement levels in PE classes.

#### Adjustments to Class Activities

The participants believed that one of the most effective ways to increase engagement in PE was to adapt the class activities to suit students’ individual skill levels - to help them to experience success. As stated by the participants, the experience of success can motivate students to participate and encourage their engagement. According to Fiona, it is essential to

give students *“a little bit more success. It makes them feel they are capable of doing something and...I think that if they are not successful it makes them want to withdraw”*. To achieve this, it was thought to be essential to *“modify [the activities] to suit the ability groups that you have got, and that makes them be successful and enjoy it”* (Fiona). Another example of this was offered by Max:

*...yesterday for football I said, ‘If you just put your hands up and touch the ball, I will give you a mark for that, while the other students they actually had to catch it you know?...Yeah so just modify the rules for that student or students...to try to get them engaged somehow...at least make an effort.*

Anthony also agreed that the class activities should be modified to suit students’ skill levels - to allow them to succeed: *“you are sort of scaffolding it, so you are giving them the chance to succeed”*. Jonathon shared a similar opinion, claiming that *“you just need to show them a bit of success, or give them a better success and then it can turn [their attitude] like that and go: “hold on a second, I might be OK at this”*. As well, the participants acknowledged that it was essential to set the right challenge. As stated by Kevin, *“If a student finds an activity too difficult or the class too easy I think that could or that does lead to disengagement as well”*. Therefore, the participants in this study considered that the selection of the class activities needs to be suitable for the students’ individual skill levels, if they are to experience success and be motivated to participate.

Another aspect that the participants considered important to enhance students’ engagement in class, was the element of fun. Participants believed that when students perceived an activity as being fun they were more likely to engage. According to Mary’s experience, *“I think fun is the number one, I think it needs to be fun”*. Anthony also considered that making *“the beginning of the lesson as exciting and as...easy”* can also help to effectively engage students in PE. Kevin stated that *“students will become more engaged in a sport even, if they don’t like it, if you make it fun and interesting”*. By referring to another

teacher in his department, Max provided an example of how PE teachers can engage students in activities that were not particularly exciting for them:

*...she introduced music in PE to try to engage. Having music at the start when they did their warm-ups and she made them run for “X” number of minutes at the start of the class and gradually over the term increased the time so, the girls just ran to music playing in the background and they did in pairs, [alternating] so they don’t have to run all the time.*

Therefore, some participants also believed that it was important to make classes fun and enjoyable for students. According to their experience, students tend to be more engaged when they perceive an activity as being fun.

Another strategy used by the participants to enhance engagement was changing the game rules to “require” students’ involvement in class. According to the participants, by changing the game rules PE teachers can encourage students to be involved, particularly those students who lack the confidence to participate. As stated by Max, PE teachers can “force them to be involved by modifying the rules”. Lachlan stated that “you can say, ‘OK, everybody in the team needs to touch the ball before you are allowed to shoot’ so, you can do little adjustments”. Mathew also claimed to change the rules of the games to guarantee that every student was involved in the activity:

*Some of the reluctant boys or girls that usually sit down on the field and watch things happen suddenly realized that...we all need to touch this ball before we get a goal, so I need to get involved otherwise I will let down my team mates.*

Simon reported using similar strategies and introduced special rules in the games to encourage/require students to be involved:

*let’s say I’m doing an activity and a student is just standing there doing nothing...then I might put a condition in the game or the activity and say...if I have boys and girls in the class I might say, “right, hum...boys can only take the ball from boys or tackle*

*boy, and girls can only take the ball from girls and tackle girls". Or, even before scoring you need to pass to a girl to score, so you put different conditions on*

Hence according to the participants, game rules can be manipulated to require students' involvement in the class. The participants claimed that this strategy was particularly effective with those students who were more reluctant participants.

The PE teachers in this study considered it important to adjust their class activities to suit students' individual skill levels and to help them experience success. According to the participants, when students succeeded in class they felt more motivated to participate. As well, the participants considered it important to make the activities fun and enjoyable. In some cases the participants also believed that adjustments to game rules would also enhance participation.

#### Adjusting Working Groups

According to the PE teachers in this study, adjusting students' working groups can also play a pivotal role in fostering engagement. As stated by the participants, there are several factors that need to be considered while organizing working groups. These included, students' individual skill levels, peer pressure and gender differences.

The participants in this study considered that students' individual skill levels were one of the main aspects to take into consideration when organizing working groups in class. Participants grouped students in distinct ways. While some participants agreed that the best way to organize students was by separating them into different skill groups, others considered that was more beneficial to mix students with different skill levels. For instance, in Anthony's opinion, *"If you can put them into ability groups...absolutely more engaged"*. To illustrate, Anthony provided an example: *"we have two classes with footy so we are combining and splitting the higher ability students in one group and the lower ability students in another group"*. Kevin also believed that *"if you have students who have lower ability, I think if you*

*can group them with other students of like skills. I think they will be a lot more engaged.”*

Similarly, Max explained:

*Rather than having them mixed together, we split the class in two games one with the stronger students and the other with the weaker students...if they are with the weaker students they will be more likely to be involved because they are not going to be smashed every time they go for the ball [in] the advanced group. We can challenge the kids with more difficult strategies, while the other kids go with more basic strategies.*

In contrast, other participants considered that the organization of working groups with mixed ability levels could greatly promote engagement. As argued by Mathew, *“generally we modify the participation by mixing the teams up with good players and not so good players and girls with boys”*. Laura also mixed ability groups so that *“a student that is more able to help the students that are less able...it depends on your students”*. Hence, even though participants used different strategies to group students (mixed ability and ability groups) they all agreed it was important to consider their skill levels when organizing working groups.

Another factor that was taken into consideration by the participants when organizing students in different working groups was the influence of peer pressure in class. As it has already been mentioned, peer pressure can encourage or discourage engagement, depending on the type of interpersonal relationships students have with one another. The participants in this study considered that this was a factor PE teachers should be able to control. Max considered that, *“if it is their peer group that gets them to misbehave, you then move them and isolate them so they can get more done”*. As stated by Lachlan, *“if it’s peer pressure you should be able to work it around to your advantage...have a positive influence rather than a negative influence”*. Thus the participants seemed to believe that they could manipulate peer pressure to their advantage to promote engagement in class.

Although the participants in this study agreed that students' interpersonal relationships (peer pressure) can influence engagement, they grouped students differently depending on the situation. For instance, in Catherine's opinion it was important to "*make sure that those groups of friends were not always together... Sometimes I isolate the four best friends so they need to interact and learn with other students in the class*". In contrast, Sarah claimed that some students tend to be more engaged when playing against their mates, so a good strategy would be trying "*to get them to team against each other*". Lachlan shared the same opinion claiming that: "*if you got teams and you got equal teams it is easier so, if they have a friend in the other team and you put them against each other, they might become engaged because it's against the friend*". Thus, although participants group students differently (separated friends or paired-up friends), they agreed it was important to assess the influence of interpersonal relationships in class in order to take advantage of peer pressure and to enhance engagement.

When discussing adjustment to working groups the participants also highlighted the importance of considering gender differences. Although participants agreed students' engagement can be influenced by co-educational classes, the participants reported grouping students differently. To illustrate, Catherine was very confident in affirming that "*girls feel comfortable playing with girls. With the boys they sometimes fade out a little bit and avoid participating in the class*". Laura shared a similar opinion, arguing, "*I had a group, a mixed group last year and me and the other teacher split up the group in to boys and girls...the girls seemed to be a lot more motivated.*" In contrast, Mathew believed co-educational classes can be a great motivational factor, especially for boys: "*being involved with the girls can be a motivating thing because the boys you know...like to show their skills and get involved with girls as well.*" Similarly Cameron considered that in some sports boys tend to be motivated by the presence of girls in class, which can help to improve engagement levels:

*I think you can get a lot of guys trying to show off, which actually improves some of the boys who are a bit lazy. They need to step up when there are girls to impress. And I don't think that the girls are intimidated by the boys. I taught in another school where they had every class as mixed gender and I think they were probably better.*

Hence, while some participants argued that girls tend to feel uncomfortable about participating next to boys, others believed that students can be motivated by the presence of the opposite gender in class.

Thus, according to the participants in this study the organization of working groups in class can have a major influence over engagement. The factors participants took into consideration were students' individual skill levels, their relationships with peers and gender. As stated by the participants, these variables should be controlled by PE teachers and used to promote engagement. As well, although the participants grouped students differently, they seemed to agree that the way students were grouped was greatly dependent on their individual characteristics (skill level, interpersonal relationships and gender).

#### Alternative Roles in Class

The participants in this study considered that the assignment of alternative roles in class also an effective strategy for dealing with disengagement in PE classes. The purpose of these alternative roles was to give the disengaged students an opportunity to be involved in the class. As stated by Laura, for those students who do not want to participate, *"I get them to help in some way so they can feel part of the class or have some purpose for them in the class that might not be directly skill or sport related, but makes them feel a part of it"*. Lachlan also stated *"I try to get them involved in some way. I might give them a special role...make them feel important"*. According to Jonathon these types of strategies were particularly effective with students who were severely disengaged and refused to participate:



*...OK they are not changed, they are not participating as a sports person. What can they do to get them more involved in the lesson...for some of them you can be a scorer and you can maybe umpire. Try to find something that engages them in a way trying to work around.*

Jacob used a similar strategy, claiming that students “can still learn the rules of a game, how the game is structured, how to umpire it. They can do other things, how to score. There are a lot of other things that they can get out of the session”. Mary also provided a similar example while referring to a particular student in her class: “I got a student, she didn’t want to do it, so I got her to do the scores and see who was going to win and help out...yeah so give them a job so they can help like that”. In Max’s opinion, these students can be a great help for PE teachers. “A lot of teachers use those students to their advantage and they become assistant teachers or coaches...if the student can’t do the skills he can go and help the class.” Hence, in order to maximize participation in class the PE teachers in this study assigned alternative roles to those students who would otherwise be disengaged.

In summary the participants considered that by adjusting their pedagogical approach they were able to improve engagement levels in PE classes. This included adjustments to the class activities, to working groups and to students’ roles.

### *Parental Contact*

Another well cited strategy to deal with disengagement was parental contact. In most cases the participants relied on parents to help them deal with disengaged students. What the PE teachers in this study expected from parents was some support at home. For instance, as stated by Simon, “ask them to provide some support at home and encourage [their child] to do Phys. Ed. or to have their gear or to be prepared to play. However the participants admitted that parents were not always supportive. As argued by Catherine, “I’m massive on parent contact. Whether that gets them engaged or not...but I can get them on task”. Jacob

believed that “*you can tell straight away [if] they are on your side and they give you assistance to get their kid changed. Some are just...you are not going to get anything from them*”. Another example was provided by Jonathon:

*...It depends on the parents. Some are a lot better. I have just talked with a parent this morning and he was very disappointed. He wanted his son to be doing a lot better in the subject...so it all depends on what parents know and think about it, and yeah, a lot of them don't see it as very important. “Why do they need Phys. Ed. for” kind of thing.*

Mathew also claimed to experience a similar problem while dealing with parents: “*Some are just resigned to the fact that she hates sport or he hates sport...good luck to get them to do something*”. So, although the participants in this study sought the help of parents to deal with students' disengagement, they also reported that when parents fail to see the purpose of PE, their attitude affected their children's likelihood of engaging in PE.

During the discussion of this topic the participants were also asked under what circumstances they would contact parents. The answer to this question showed that parent contact was regulated by school policy. However there was no school policy that specifically addressed the problem of students' disengagement. As stated by Mary, “[a policy] *only for disengagement, no!*”. Anthony also confessed, “*Look...there is not a policy specifically on engagement*”. Similarly Sarah recognized, “*Well! Not directly for disengagement, no!*” Although the schools did not have a policy that specifically referred to students' engagement in classes, participants tied other behavioral issues addressed by the school policies to engagement. This included disruptive behavior, refusal to participate and lack of uniform (which were all addressed by the school policies).

An example of disruptive behavior prompting parent contact was provided by Mary, “the contact home has more to do with behavior...If someone is not behaving and doing the

right thing, yeah then...we phone a parent". Cameron also stated, "we are encouraged to contact parents...if it becomes a behavior issue we are supposed to".

Another issue addressed by the school policies that could be linked to disengagement was the lack of participation. According to Jonathon, "*We make a note of how many times they have participated...When it hits a certain number...we give a lunch time detention...[and] a letter home*". Another example was provided by Simon arguing that "*If students are failing to participate...we just contact parents and say: 'little John is refusing to play or is refusing to participate*". Mary also stated that "*if they are lazy and just not doing their work I am going to phone a parent*". As well as disruptive and uncooperative behavior, the participants also contacted parents when students did not bring their uniform. As argued by Lachlan, "*the policy of getting changed in their uniform...the students must have a uniform, must have a sports uniform to change into*". This was also referred to by Catherine, "*when we talk about disengagement without the uniform we have a policy*".

Thus, according to the participants, parental contact can also be used as a strategy to deal with disengagement. However, the participants reported that when parents failed to see the importance of PE, the contact home was ineffective. As well, even though the schools did not appear to have policies that specifically addressed engagement, the participants considered this educational issue was embedded in other school policies. This included school policies that addressed students' misbehavior, refusal to participate and lack of uniform.

### *Summary*

The discussion of the strategies used to deal with students' disengagement showed that the participants in this study placed great importance on their relationships with their students. They claimed that a positive teacher-student relationship was what allowed them to better understand their students and to adjust their educational practices to students'

individual needs. Their pedagogical adjustments included adjustments to class activities, to working groups and to students' roles. As well, the participants reported using parental contact to gain support for dealing with disengagement.

### **Engagement and the Physical Education Curriculum**

One of the main topics under investigation in this study is the relationship between the PE curriculum and students' engagement. As stated by researchers (Ares & Gorrell, 2002; Chen, 2001; Dunn et al., 2004; Fulton, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Marks, 2000) one of the most relevant factors that can determine students' willingness to engage in school is the curriculum design and its relevance to students. As well, several authors (Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 2000; Kirk, 2002; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Smith et al., 2009) have argued that the multi-activity program (MAP) is an outdated curriculum model, one which has several limitations that can undermine engagement in PE classes. Amongst those limitations are the lack of time devoted to instruction (Ennis, 2000; Rikard & Banville, 2006) and the appeal of the activities offered in the curriculum (Alexander, 2008; Cothran et al., 2009; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). As well, researchers highlighted the inauthentic nature of the many activities offered in the MAP curriculum (Alexander, 2008; McKenzie, 2001) and the presence of gender bias, which tends to discourage girls' participation (Armour, 1999; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Napper-Owen et al., 1999). As a result, this study sought to explore teachers' awareness of the relationship between PE curriculum and students' engagement.

With the purpose of exploring the teachers' understanding of the influence that the PE curriculum can have over students' engagement levels, the participants in this study were encouraged to engage in a discussion about their curricula. There were three main topics that emerged from this discussion. These included their curriculum goals, the effectiveness of the curriculum in accomplishing these goals and the alternative curriculum models available for

PE. The four schools involved in this study used the MAP as their curriculum model for PE. Teachers' responses to this topic related primarily to the MAP and to its influence over students' engagement levels.

### *Goals Embedded in the PE Curriculum*

In order to explore the participants' understanding of the influence that the MAP can have over their students' engagement, they were asked: "*What do you believe are the main goals of this PE curriculum design?*" Participants referred to two distinct goals: the overarching goals of the curriculum (or long-term goals) and the goals of their daily lessons.

#### Overarching Goals

The PE teachers in this study shared similar views, believing the main goal of PE was to develop lifelong physically active students. There was a sense of agreement amongst participants that the main goal of PE in schools is "*to give students the ability to understand exercise and understand participation in sports*" (Anthony) so they can be "*involved in sport activities and have [a] healthy life style.*" (Mary). As stated by Kevin, "*my main thing is the students to have an enjoyment of exercise and hopefully they become lifetime sport participants*". Lachlan who claimed that his main goal for students was for them to "*want to do physical activity once they leave school because they know it makes them feel good*".

The participants in this study referred to this overarching goal to justify the type of curriculum model used in their schools. According to participants, in order to promote lifetime physically active students it is essential to expose them to a great variety of sports so they can select at least one in which to remain active for the rest of their lives. As stated by Mary, "*if you try everything and have a go at everything...they might choose something they would enjoy*". Jonathon also argued that "*one of my goals, it is to promote several sport activities so they can choose one and be physically active for the rest of their lives*". Another example was provided by Fiona who argued, "*I just want them to find something that they*

*want to do...I think it's good what we do...they might find something they want to do and be active, later on after school".* Thus, participants used the overarching goal of PE (lifelong participation) to justify the use of the MAP, which generally exposes students to eight different sport-activities per year (two-per-term).

In summary, what participants highlighted was not the main goal of the MAP (as asked), but the educational goal of PE in schools. According to participants, it was through these short experiences with different sports that students would be able to choose what they would like to pursue in their adult lives.

#### Lesson Goals

Participants referred to two distinct lesson goals: participation/physical exertion and skill development. According to the participants one of the main goals of the lesson was to get students to participate and to become physically active during classes. As stated by Lachlan, *"My main goal for the students is to be physically active in class so at the end of the class they get a red face and they are puffing"*. Another example was provided Simon, *"my main goal is always to get maximum participation...I want them to be huffing and puffing at a certain point in the activity"*. Participants linked this goal with the health benefits of physical activity. As stated by Mary, *"I think the health, just to get them moving and exercising, that is the key...just get them moving is everything"*. Thus, participants in this study agreed that one of the main goals of PE lessons was to raise students' physical activity levels through participation in class, linking this goal to students' health.

Skill development was also pointed out by participants as an important goal of a PE lesson. According to the participants this skill development included a set of basic tactical and technical skills required to participate in sport-activities. As stated by Max these skills included *"team strategies...rules and some tactics that might be employed"*. As well, participants declared that the main purpose of promoting skill development was to allow

students to acquire the necessary skill to be involved in a sporting activity out of the school. As stated by Mathew, his main goal in class was to help students develop their “*skill levels so they can probably take that away and transfer it into whatever sport they choose to play and,...a general understanding of team work and fitness requirement to play social sports*”. Thus, what participants aimed to achieve in their lessons was a level of skill development that would allow students to acquire enough skill to participate in a sport activity.

A small group of participants referred also to another form of skill development - to students’ interpersonal skills. According to these participants, students should be able to develop their interpersonal skills in PE classes and to learn how to cooperate with each other. As stated by Max “*one of the main goals are [is]...interpersonal skills...To be able to get on with everyone, to cooperate, work in a team environment, accept decision[s] and be self-managed*”. These participants considered that interpersonal skills were not only essential to a successful involvement in sport-activities, but were also transferable to a future work environment, where students would need to be “*capable [of knowing] how to communicate; how to collaborate*” (Anthony).

Overall, the participants in this study considered that the main goals of their lessons were participation/physical exertion and the promotion of technical and tactical skill development. These results showed that participants gave great emphasis to class participation and believed that their approach could help students raise their physical activity levels. In addition, participants considered that, through the acquisition of technical and tactical skills, students would learn how to participate in and enjoy physical activities. As a result, they would be more likely to pursue sport activities out of the school. The majority of participants discussed physical (motor) skill development. Only a small group of participants referred to interpersonal skills and self-management skills.

## *Curriculum Effectiveness*

The discussion of curricular effectiveness took into consideration the goals stipulated by participants earlier in the interviews. During this discussion participants were encouraged to assess the effectiveness with which the curriculum helped teachers to accomplish their lesson goals (participation/ physical exertion and the promotion meaningful skill development), and their overarching goal (promotion of lifetime physically active students). In this case the curriculum model under discussion was always the multi-activity model (the MAP).

### Ability to Accomplish the Lesson goal of Participation

One of the main goals for participants was to raise students' activity levels. In order to accomplish this, PE teachers needed to be able to engage students in class. With this in mind, the participants were asked to make an estimate of the proportion of students they were able to engage. The answers to this question varied, ranging from as high as 98%, to as low as 30%. For instance, even though Simon estimated, "*I would probably say 90%*", Fiona stated, "*students are engaged and accomplishing...50%? I don't know*". Against these estimates, the participants were encouraged to discuss situations in which it might be difficult to engage students. Participants reported that, it was extremely difficult to engage students when they were not interested in the activities

### Ability to Promote Skill Development in Class

Another question concerned the participants' ability to promote skill development (technical and tactical skills for participating) during their PE lessons. In order to assess their capacity to accomplish these goals, participants were asked if the curriculum model used in their school gave students the necessary time and opportunity to develop their individual skills in class.



Overall, participants considered that in most cases students were unable to move beyond basic skill levels. As stated by Mary, “It would be nice to think that yeah, I can get my class to reach higher levels [the levels established in their year book that corresponded to an A grade] but, unfortunately it doesn’t happen”. The same became evident in Anthony’s interview: “Can you effectively teach those students AFL and get them effectively engaged in AFL? I would say probably not”. According to Jacob, “There is no chance that in six weeks I was going to get them from not being able to play, not knowing how to play or any rules, to be able to play...which is all that you got with this kids”. When asked why students were only acquiring basic skills, participants provided differing explanations.

Participants claimed that students can only acquire basic skills due to the time allocated for each sport activity. As stated by Max, “*You get the basics...you are only giving them an exposure to the sport...because we don’t have enough time*”. Simon was more specific and declared, “*I would say no....7 weeks...I don’t think it’s enough time for them to truly get into the sport I think. Maybe 10 or 12 weeks and then you can really get their skill level quite high and...the quality of the game play high as well*”. Hence, participants reported that students can only acquire basic skills, because the curriculum “*doesn’t allow us to necessarily focus on them for a large amount of time*” (Jonathon).

The participants in this study also highlighted the influence that certain sports can have over students’ opportunities to improve their skills. As stated by Sara, “*Can they develop their skills in six to seven weeks? It depends on the sport*”. Fiona made a distinction between sport activities:

*Yes I do for basketball and netball. I think tennis again is a very hard sport. I think it is very hard to develop skills from zero and they may not be any better after 6 weeks. But I think basketball, netball, definitely volleyball...I think they can improve and enjoy playing games.*

According to the participants, depending on the sport, six to seven weeks can still be enough time to promote some skill development.

Thus, although the participants considered that skill development was one of the main goals of their lessons, they recognized that students could generally only acquire basic skill levels. As stated by the participants, students were unable to achieve higher skill levels, due to the time allocated to teach each sport with the MAP and also due to the differences in difficulty between sports. In other words, despite recognizing that students' individual skill levels can compromise engagement in class, the participants were still using a curriculum model that does not allow students to acquire more than a basic set of skills.

#### Ability to Promote Lifetime Physically Active Students

Another topic under discussion was the ability of the MAP to accomplish its goal of promoting lifetime physically active students. As stated by participants in this study, the overarching goal of PE is to provide students with the necessary skills and experiences to remain physically active for the rest of their lives. The participants were asked if the activities offered by the MAP related to the activities students will be likely to pursue in their adult lives. Cameron stated: *"I think it is really good that they have the chance to play some sports that they haven't played...whether those are the sports that they want to play, I'm not certain"*. As stated by Anthony, *"I don't have the data to back my answer"*.

Participants also considered that some sporting activities in the MAP were irrelevant to students. As stated by Jacob:

*I think that the ones that we do more repetitively, which are athletics and swimming, are the ones that are most despised and disliked...I don't necessarily agree with the fact that we have athletics in years 8, 9 and 10 for 6 weeks. They are doing the same lessons for three years in a row, but they just get one lesson to throw the discus...what is the point in that?*

Another example was provided by Anthony, “If I was to teach a class of hockey and talk about engagement, we would see a serious drop off. OK, the kids are going to still pick up a stick and run around but, we wouldn’t see them really motivated [and] having a go”.

Participants suggested that most students seemed to be interested in alternative sports - ones not customarily offered under their MAPs. According to Max, “*a lot of students are interested in doing weights, gym work, doing the Pilates and aerobics...Dance with girls, especially in year 10*”. As argued by Laura, “*I guess that within the Phys. Ed. classes...we don’t have alternative sports...such as yoga, judo, martial arts*”. Kevin suggested that “*we could just bring in those sorts of classes like a...water aerobics, aerobics and those sorts of activities that they offer in recreation centres*”. Although participants recognized that the MAP offered a great variety of sports, they considered that some of those activities did not relate to students’ individual interests and there were some others that were not offered at all.

Another topic addressed during the discussion of the relevance of the sports activities offered by the MAP was elective subjects. Participants reported that students tended to be more engaged in elective subjects than in general PE classes. As stated by Simon, “*kids that choose outdoor ed., or the soccer program they don’t have any problems. It is great. But, if you have got a general Phys. Ed. class...they don’t want to do it*”. Similarly Fiona claimed, “*usually the ones in dance want to do dance, which doesn’t happen in general Phys. Ed.*”. The same was argued by Jonathon, stating that in specialized classes “*most of the time I get 99% changed and engaged...where in general Phys. Ed. I get 5 or 6 unchanged.*”

According to participants the reason why students were more engaged in elective subjects was not only that they liked the sport activity, but also because they had the chance to choose what they would like to do. As stated by Catherine, “*when you have a group that choose that subject, they are interested so...there is less disengagement in those classes*”. According to Sarah’s experience, “*The specialized class we have here in the school is a*

*dream class because they are so motivated to play the sport of their choice*". Lachlan shared a similar opinion stating that the students were *"more engaged because they want to do your subject, because they choose to do it"*. These claims by participants not only showed that elective subjects were more relevant to students, but also highlighted the importance of choice.

According to the participants in this study, students seemed to show more interest in alternative sports such as, Pilates, weight lifting and martial arts, which were not offered by the MAP. As well, they argued that students were more engaged and motivated in elective subjects, where they could choose a sport activity that related to their individual interests. Participants could not provide any evidence related to students' perceptions of the relevance of various sports to their future lives.

#### *Alternative Curriculum Models*

The discussion of alternative curricula for PE showed that the majority of the participants in this study were not aware of any curriculum alternatives to the MAP. Only a small group of teachers acknowledged the existence of alternative models. In general, participants reported not being aware of other curriculum models. As stated by Cameron, *"Not really in WA schools and WA high schools in general"*. Similarly Jonathon claimed, *"No, nothing radically different. I would say that we have worked with different subjects... such as, archery. We also did European handball...to expand their range of sport experiences"*.

The discussion of this topic also demonstrated the participants' lack of understanding of what a curriculum model represented. This became clear when participants referred to co-educational and single sex classes as different curriculum models. As stated by Mathew, *"We have mixed classes. There have been single sex classes that we have had in the past"*. Another example was provided by Lachlan, *"I worked with programs that we have done*

*single sex classes and we have done the same thing with co-ed classes*". The same was evident when participants related alternative curriculum models to specialized programs. For instance, as stated by Sarah, *"I think this is a very standard one in Australian schools, but you can get schools, schools can offer more (pause)...specialized programs for specific sports"*. Max also argued that *"some school are specialised so they might do a sport for a term or for a semester and they just hammer it"*. Thus, even though students were organized in different gender groups or had the opportunity to participate in specialized programs (elective subjects), the curriculum model remained the same. In other words, participants were still working with the MAP.

In contrast, there was a small group of participants that acknowledged the existence of alternative curriculum models such as sport education (SEPEP) and its variant the Clinic-Game Day model (Alexander and Penney, 2005) and CGD. However, when asked if they were currently using any of the alternative curriculum models, they reported that they only incorporated some of the SEPEP and CGD activities in the MAP. As stated by Catherine: *"I didn't use the full SEPEP but only more the game activities...we had referees when they were self-officiated, but we didn't have the whole skills organized like in the full SEPEP"*. Similarly, Anthony claimed, *"I'm always drawing on my SEPEP knowledge and the Clinic-Game-Day knowledge....so [I] try to be aware that are still other things out there that you can use to motivate the students"*. In other words, they were still using the MAP and occasionally adapting elements of alternative models to suit their classes.

When asked why they were still using the MAP in preference to alternative models, participants argued that, for example, SEPEP was very time consuming due to the amount of class preparation that is required. As stated by Jacob, *"it was not manageable... just the amount of things that you need to have kids to be organized for doing...each kid was in charge of five different things and it was just overwhelming"*. Simon also argued, *"It is more*

*time consuming and preparation. If you are doing a lesson plan or getting the top effort certificate there, does take a little bit more time*". Anthony justified the use of the MAP with the time-constraints imposed by time-tabling, *"I use the multi-activity model, purely because that is the easiest way to teach as we said...because of timetabling"*. Hence, even though this small group of participants were aware of alternative curriculum models, they believed it to be difficult to employ them due to the amount of time required for class preparation.

Overall, besides showing that the majority of the participants were not aware of alternative curriculum models for PE, the small group of teachers who demonstrated some awareness of them were still using the MAP. According to this small group of participants the alternative curriculum models (such as SEPEP) were very demanding in terms of class preparation.

### *Summary*

In responding to questions about the merits of the curriculum models employed to reach their goals, participants referred to two distinct goals for PE, the overarching goals of the curriculum (which referred to the promotion of lifetime physically active students) and the lesson goals (which referred to participation/ physical exertion and the promotion of technical and tactical skill development). The discussion of the overarching goals showed that participants felt the need to offer a wide variety of activities to promote lifetime physically activity. Participants argued that the MAP allows students to experience different sports which help them to decide what they would like to pursue in their adult lives. During the discussion of curriculum effectiveness, the participants reported that students were usually more interested in alternative sports than the ones they typically offered and that they were more engaged when offered elective activities related to students' individual interests.

The discussion of the lesson goals demonstrated that the participants placed great importance on class participation and skill development. However, only a small number of

participants referred to interpersonal and self-management skills. As well, the participants believed they were unable to engage students who had lost interest in lesson activities and that students who did engage still only reached a basic skill level.

The discussion of alternative curriculum models showed that the majority of the participants in this study were not aware of alternative curriculum models for PE and that the few participants who were aware of them were still using the MAP. Despite acknowledging some of the limitations of the MAP in engaging students and accomplishing their educational goals, the participants were still using the MAP as their preferred curriculum model for PE.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion of teachers' perceptions of disengagement showed that they recognized the presence of different forms of disengagement such as a refusal to participate, quiet disengagement (passive behaviour) and disruptive behaviour. As well, the participants considered that disruptive students constituted the most problematic form of disengagement, disrupting not only their own learning but also the learning of others.

The discussion of the reasons for students' disengagement demonstrated that the PE teachers in this study acknowledged their responsibility for dealing with disengagement and that students were mainly responsible for their lack of engagement in lessons due to personal preferences and the influence they had over one another's engagement (peer pressure). Moreover, the participants reported that structural limitations and outside influences could also affect students' engagement; both factors that were beyond their control.

Strategies used to deal with students' disengagement were also considered in this study. According to the participants, positive teacher-student relationships allowed them to know their students and to adapt their pedagogical approaches to students' individual needs. These pedagogical adjustments included adjusting class activities, working groups and

students' roles. When the participants were unable to engage students, they contacted parents to seek some support from home.

The last topic under discussion was engagement and the PE curriculum. The results showed that the PE teachers in this study divided the curriculum goals into overarching goals (lifelong physically active students) and lesson goals (participation and skill development). The results also indicated that, in most cases, participants were unable to accomplish their lesson goals. Moreover, there was a lack of data to indicate whether participants were successful in promoting lifelong physically active students. The discussion of this topic also showed that most participants were not aware of alternative curriculum models and they were still using MAP.

The results of this research confirmed some of the findings mentioned in the literature review. These results raised some concerns regarding the participants' ability to effectively deal with disengagement in PE classes. The analysis of these results will be now developed in the Discussion chapter.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

The Chapter V is dedicated to the discussion of the results of this study. The main purpose was to interpret the data collected, to acquire a better understanding of the way participants perceived students' disengagement in their classes and to ascertain their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature. This chapter includes the discussion of the four main topics under investigation and appropriate links to the literature.

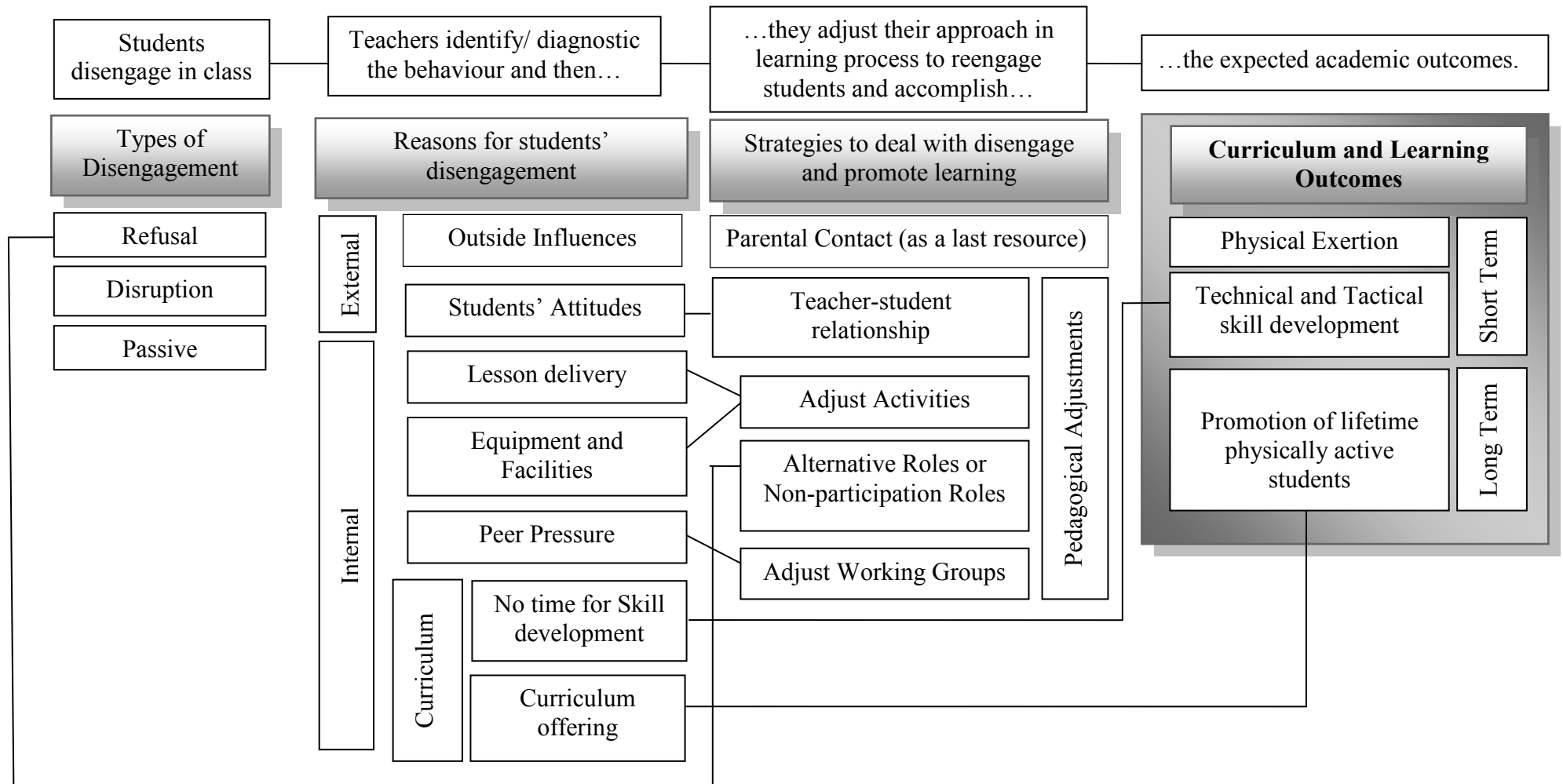
#### **Introduction**

The review of the literature indicated several reasons why PE teachers might fail to engage students in their classes. These included challenges in identifying and addressing passively disengaged students, the importance of acknowledging the influence of internal/school factors and curriculum limitations (e.g. the multi-activity program model MAP). Even though this information is well documented in the present literature, very few studies investigated the teachers' awareness of such educational matters. Considering that students' engagement is what is assumed to be a necessary condition for learning to occur (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn & NCES, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997), the main purpose of this study was to explore PE teachers' perceptions of disengagement at the class level and to ascertain their awareness of the educational issues addressed in the literature. Did participants treat engagement as an end in itself or as a means to an end?

The diagram below (Figure 1) provides an overview of the main research results and illustrates the way participants addressed students' disengagement:

Figure 2

Overview of Main Research Findings



Initially (see Figure 1) PE teachers identified student behaviour and classified it as one of the three types of disengagement (refusal; disruption; passive). They then try to understand the reason(s) for the student's disengagement (internal or external). Depending on the reason behind such behaviour, teachers apply different strategies to re-engage the student (internal pedagogical adjustments; parental contact) and accomplish the desirable short-term and long-term learning outcomes (skill development and lifetime physically active students). There were three main findings that emerged from this research:

1. Teachers failed to recognize some of the factors influencing engagement presented in the literature. This compromised their interventions and therefore their ability to re-engage students in PE.
2. Teachers focused their pedagogical adjustments at the lesson level and not at the curriculum level (peripheral adjustments).
3. Teachers focus on the process of learning and not on the learning outcomes. They were aware of their short- and long-term goals but acknowledged that they could not achieve either of them due to a range of factors, including curriculum limitations.

The next section of this paper will discuss each one of these findings referring to Figure 1 periodically.

### **Importance of Teacher Awareness of the Engagement Issue**

This research confirmed the participants' lack of awareness of some of the educational issues addressed by researchers regarding engagement, which can compromise their ability to engage students and accomplish desirable learning outcomes. Overall, teachers recognized that engagement can be influenced by both

internal and external factors and they acknowledged the presence of passive behavior (as shown in Figure 1). Nevertheless, they gave more importance to external factors, particularly to the nature of their students and their interests. There was a sense of defeatism apparent where teachers believed that, even when all internal factors are addressed, students can still be disengaged due to their attitudes and/or outside problems. These results corroborate Fulton's (2007) claims that teachers usually overemphasize the importance of external factors, which can possibly lead them to overlook other internal changes that could be addressed in enhancing engagement. For instance, initially teachers did not recognize the curriculum as a potential internal factor that could influence engagement.

More than pointing out the participants' lack of awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature, these results suggest that teachers are only able address disengagement in their classes when more fully aware of their options. For instance, the fact that participants overemphasize external factors can possibly demonstrate how they were not aware of other internal factors that could be addressed to enhance students' engagement (e.g. alternative curriculum options; addressing passive behaviour; changing school policies; promoting students' affiliations in classes).

### **Level of Pedagogical Intervention to Address Engagement**

Results showed that although the participants acknowledged the impact of some internal factors (such as peer pressure and lesson delivery - see Figure 1), the data revealed that their curricular and pedagogical adjustments were still peripheral to the fundamental and structural limitations of the curriculum (MAP - Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 2000; Kirk, 2002; Rikard & Banville, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). In other words, they addressed disengagement by adjusting the way their curriculum was delivered in class

(pedagogical adjustments at the lesson level) and not by changing the way the curriculum was organized (the structure of the MAP model). An example of that was the way teachers organized their working groups (as shown in Figure 1). Although the participants recognized the influence that peer pressure can have over students' emotional engagement, they were still forming working groups incidentally rather than systematically. Rather than forming groups that could promote new affiliations, teachers accepted the constraints imposed by a curriculum model (MAP) that tends not to establish ongoing team/group affiliations (e.g. SEPEP by Alexander & Penny, 2005). As a result, students would enter the class with few expectations as to the affiliations the teacher might create for the day because groups would form (or be formed) without affiliation in mind. This provided students with limited opportunities to create new affiliations in class or to build a sense of community, which can compromise engagement. Considering that the MAP (which was the curriculum model used in the four schools) is one of the core reasons for students' disengagement from PE (Alexander, 2008; Amour, 1999; Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 2000; McKenzie, 2001; Napper-Owen et al., 1999; Kirk, 2002), the pedagogical intervention need also to lie at the structural level of the curriculum if teachers are to effectively engage students and accomplish learning outcomes. The organisation of groups is just one example of why teachers may have reported the inability to engage their class and achieve their learning outcomes.

Overall, once a number of lesson level curricular pedagogical adjustments were exhausted, participants turned to parental contact as a source of support. These results suggested that, ultimately, the participants are relying on external factors, such as parental influence (which they cannot control) to address students' engagement, when other internal factors have not been fully explored - such as the use of an alternative

curriculum models. This confirms the aforementioned point about teachers' overemphasis on external factors and their lack of awareness of other internal changes that can be addressed to enhance engagement.

### **Engagement as an End in Itself or as a Means to an End?**

Although the participants in this study agreed that engagement was essential for learning to occur, and that if students were not engaged they could not learn, the results of this study showed that teachers were more focused on the process of learning (engaging students) than on the learning outcomes (the result of that engagement). In other words, teachers prioritized class participation over learning outcomes. A good illustration of that is the fact that the teachers assigned non-participation roles (alternative roles) to students who refused to participate. Considering that, according to participants, a student who is engaged needs to participate, it seems contradictory that teachers use non-participation roles as a strategy to engage students. Even though participants considered this a good strategy to achieve engagement, they said little about the learning such roles might achieve.

Another example emerged from the discussion of the curriculum's effectiveness in accomplishing its learning outcomes. Although teachers used a range of adjustments to identify and address disengagement (see Figure 1), they admitted to not being able to accomplish their learning outcomes of technical/tactical skill development (lesson goal – short-term) or lifetime physically active students (overarching goal – long-term) due to curriculum limitations. Even though they considered that engagement is what leads to learning, they were engaging students in the lesson (process) without achieving their desired academic outcomes. In other words, they saw engagement as an end in itself and not as a means to achieve learning.

If the participants acknowledged the limitations of the MAP in accomplishing their academic outcomes, why were they still using this curriculum model? There are four possible answers to this question that emerged from the discussion of alternative curriculum models. Firstly it could be the case that teachers were not aware of other alternative curriculum models, which relates to the first finding of this research (the participants' lack of awareness of some of the educational issues addressed by researchers regarding engagement). Secondly it could be a case of low self-efficacy, where teachers are aware of alternative curriculum models but do not feel confident to utilise them. Thirdly, teachers could be using the Nuremberg defence, where they felt that they must 'follow orders'. In the absence of any culture that might support seeking alternatives, teachers were expected to follow a MAP to be in alignment with their colleagues in the PE Department. The fourth and last reason could be a case of cost-benefit analysis, where teachers concluded that there is too much time and effort required to move to different curricular arrangements. All four of these possibilities were present, to varying degrees, in the responses of the participants in this study.

### **Other Relevant Findings**

The results of this study highlighted some other relevant findings that are worthwhile mentioning. For instance, another finding to be addressed is the silences around the goals of the official Western Australia HPE Curriculum Framework. Although participants referred to the promotion of lifetime physically active students as an overarching goal of HPE in schools (which is in agreement with ACARA and SCASA), in the short-term they were mainly concerned with technical/tactical skill development and participation. Only a small group of participants referred to interpersonal skills and self-management skills. In other words, the majority of

participants considered that their class outcomes were predominantly “Skills for Physical Activity” (SCASA, 1998). These emphases around technical/tactical skill development/ participation and the silences around other learning outcomes in the WA curriculum framework (such as students’ knowledge and understanding, attitudes and values, self-management skills and interpersonal skills) indicated that participants perceived PE as “sport-technique” (Kirk, 2006; Tinning, 2012). In addition, these results can possibly explain why participants privileged ends over means. The fact that participants were mainly focused on participation/skill development and were not aware of other learning outcomes, can possibly explain why they perceived “*engagement*” as participation and not as a means to achieving the learning outcomes described in the Curriculum Framework.

Another relevant finding was the importance of revising the school curriculum to assess the relevance of curriculum offering. According to Fulton (2007), students tend to become alienated from classes when they fail to find meaning and purpose in the activities. As recommended by Dunn et al. (2004), it is essential for schools to review their curricula in order to assess its relevance for students’ future lives and to promote their engagement. Even though participants acknowledged that, in general, students were not interested in the more traditional sports taught under the MAP, they blamed students for having different interests and for not recognizing the relevance of the curriculum activities that were offered. Often the participants referred to differences between genders, age groups and cultural backgrounds (e.g. girls like netball and Asian students like ping-pong). Nevertheless, as argued by Alexander (2008), “decisions about what is ‘meaningful’ are the province of individuals’ own perceptions and interpretations” (p. 13). In other words, instead of focusing on genders or age groups,



the selection and inclusion of activities needs to be considered from students' individual points of view.

Participants also acknowledged they had little idea whether students were pursuing PE activities outside school, while at school or after their schooling had concluded. Thus they had no evidence of their performance in relation to their professed overarching goal – the promotion of lifetime, physically active students (see Figure 2). When reviewing a curriculum it would be important to establish whether selected PE activities might be likely to help each student engage in those activities in their neighborhoods/communities. By understanding the type of activities students engage in their communities, teachers may be better placed to select socio-ecologically meaningful content that could relate to students' individual interests and also increase their engagement in class (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

The last topic to be addressed is the peer pressure/appraisal confirms that PE is a subject with a great level of publicness. To illustrate, in a Maths class students can complete their tasks at their desks without exposing their academic performance to others. Usually the Maths teacher is the only one who accesses a students' work. In contrast, in PE classes students are constantly exposed to peer appraisal, as they need to perform the tasks in front of their class mates. This suggests that teachers need to be more intervenient in providing a supportive classroom environment, as this seems to be a determining factor for students' emotional engagement in PE due to the level of social exposure embedded in the subject.

### **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study was to explore PE teachers' experiences with disengagement at the class level. This research aimed to ascertain their awareness of the

educational issues influencing engagement addressed in the literature and to verify if teachers were able to engage students and achieve their educational goals. There were three main findings that emerged from this study. Firstly, awareness plays a pivotal role in dealing with disengagement. If teachers are not fully aware of their options in dealing with disengagement they will be restricted in their ability to engage students and achieve learning outcomes. Secondly, teachers' pedagogical adjustments were peripheral to the curriculum. Considering that the curriculum is one of the main reason students disengage from PE, the level of teachers' pedagogical intervention needs to occur both at the lesson and at the curriculum level. Thirdly, despite recognizing the importance of engagement for learning to occur, the participants in this study saw engagement as an end in itself rather than as a means to achieve the desired learning outcomes (short- and long-term). Engagement should not be assessed by the number of students on task but, by the learning outcomes that such engagement might achieve. Overall, what these results suggest is that, in order to effectively engage students in PE classes:

1. PE teachers need to be engaged in ongoing professional development if they are to become fully aware of their options in dealing with disengagement.
2. PE Teachers need to be looking at pedagogical adjustments beyond the lesson-level, reviewing curricula (activities and models) to make adjustments at the curriculum level.
3. PE Teachers should be looking at engagement as a means to achieve desirable educational outcomes and not as an end in itself.

In addition the aforementioned findings, this research also identified other pedagogical issues including the silences around curriculum outcomes, the importance of reviewing

the curricula and assessing its relevance from a social-ecological point of view, and the level of social exposure embedded in PE classes (students always need to perform in front of other students),.

These results raise some questions regarding teachers' ongoing professional development (PD). If educational research has already suggested why PE teachers might fail to engage students in their classes, teachers should be aware of these findings if they are to improve their professional practice. It appears that the thrust of PD concerning engagement should be focusing on raising PE teachers' awareness about forms of engagement that lead to academic outcomes. In other words, the first step to enhance engagement levels in PE would be to change teachers' knowledge and perceptions of engagement. This would have implications for both pre-service teachers and currently employed teachers.

The final chapter of this study (summary and conclusions) will provide an overall summary of the research findings/discussion and address the limitations of this research. It will also present suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Chapter VI is dedicated to summarizing the research findings and main topics of discussion. As well, this chapter addresses some of the limitations of this research, along with suggestions for future research in this area.

#### **Summary and Conclusions**

Prior literature has highlighted several limitations and possible reasons why PE teachers fail to engage students in PE classes. However, few studies have assessed PE teachers' awareness of such educational issues. The main purpose of this study was to explore PE teachers' experiences with disengagement at a class level and to ascertain their awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature. As well, this research endeavored to understand what other initiatives may help PE teachers enhance engagement and achieve desirable learning outcomes. With this in mind, this research was organized under four main topic questions:

1. How do PE teachers experience and identify students' disengagement?
2. What are the reasons given by PE teachers for students' disengagement?
3. What are the strategies used by PE teachers to deal with disengagement?
4. Are PE teachers aware of the effects of the multi-activity program model for students' engagement?

The analyses of the answers to these questions resulted in three main findings:

1. Teachers failed to recognize some of the factors influencing engagement documented in the literature. This compromised their interventions and therefore their ability to re-engage students in PE. These results suggested that PE

teachers should be engaged in ongoing professional development if they are to become fully aware of their options in dealing with disengagement.

2. Teachers focused their pedagogical adjustments at the lesson level and not at the curriculum level (peripheral vs. structural adjustments) which, according to researchers, is one of the main reason students disengage from PE. These results suggested that in order to successfully engage students in PE, teachers need to be looking at pedagogical adjustments beyond the lesson level, reviewing curriculum structures (activities and models) and making adjustments at the curriculum level.
3. Teachers were aware of their short- and long-term goals but acknowledged that they could not achieve either of them due to a range of factors, including curriculum limitations. These results show that they were more focused on the process of learning than on learning outcomes. As a result, if PE teachers are to achieve desirable learning outcomes, they should be looking at engagement as a means to achieve this end and not as an end in itself.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A possible limitation of this study was the use of variable terminology to address the same topic of discussion (curriculum). Initially, when the participants were asked if they were aware of any alternative curriculum models for PE, the researcher used the words “alternative curriculum design”. This use of different terminology may have created some confusion regarding the question that was being asked. The researcher prompted the participants with an example of an alternative curriculum model (e.g. SEPEP) to clarify the question. It would have been more helpful to use a consistent terminology to avoid any initial confusion.

A second limitation of this study was the time constraints on the conduct of the interviews. Considering that the time and place of the interviews were negotiated according to the participants' availability, the majority of the interviews were conducted during the participants' free periods (between classes). In some cases the bell rang and the researcher was forced to conclude the interview. It would have been beneficial if the interviews were conducted after school hours or during teachers' days off. Nevertheless, valid data were collected within the given time and the researcher appreciated the time invested by the schools in this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this study highlight some educational issues that would be worthwhile investigating further. Considering researchers' claims that students tend to disengage from classes when they fail to recognize the relevance of activities offered by the curriculum for their future lives (Ares & Gorrell, 2000; Chen, 2001; Dunn et al., 2004; Fulton, 2007; Gallagher, 2002; Marks, 2000), it seems important to investigate how PE teachers assess the relevance of their curriculum and how often they do it – especially as they consider the promotion of lifetime healthy activity as an overarching goal for their profession. As recommended by Dunn et al. (2004), schools should frequently review their curricula in order to enhance its relevance to students' future lives and to promote students' engagement in class. Considering that the PE teachers in this study did not evaluate whether their curriculum offerings actually led to student engagement in activities outside school, it would be sensible to study the degree to which such options were promoted to students and adopted by them. As recommended by Lawson and Lawson (2013), the type of activities students engage in their

communities (out-side of the school) should be the catalysts for internal adjustments (e.g. to curricula).

Considering that the participants in this study were unaware of many of the educational issues related to engagement addressed in the literature, it would be worthwhile to investigate the extent to which research is informing practice. In other words, to what extent are PE teachers being informed/updated about research findings on engagement? For instance, the fact that most participants were unaware of the impact that the curriculum can have for students' disengagement in PE can possibly explain why their response to disengagement occurred at the pedagogical level rather than at the curriculum level. It would be advantageous to identify the channels of communication used by researchers and educational institutions to inform PE teachers of engagement options.

### **Final Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study was to explore PE teachers' experiences with disengagement at the class level in an attempt to understand the meaning given by these teachers to this phenomenon. By doing so, this research assessed the participants' awareness of some of the educational issues addressed in the literature regarding students' engagement and asked whether they felt able to accomplish their educational goals. This research also aimed to understand what other initiatives may be necessary to assist PE teachers to engage students and to achieve desirable learning outcomes.

The results of this study suggested that if PE teachers are to succeed in engaging students to accomplish learning outcomes there is a need for a shift in pedagogical thinking and intervention. PE teachers will need to recognize that significant engagement opportunities when adjustments to pedagogy encompass curriculum re-

structuring. As well, if PE teachers are experiencing difficulties in dealing with disengagement, they should be looking for further professional development, instead of seeking external help (e.g., parental support). Likewise, they should be more focused on accomplishing learning outcomes rather than simply working with the processes of day-to-day teaching. Engagement should be the driving force for learning to occur, not an end in itself. To conclude, if PE teachers are to improve engagement and successfully accomplish academic outcomes, there are two main changes that need to occur:

1. PE teachers will need to start looking at engagement as a means to achieve academic outcomes and not as an end in itself. As a result, they will need to assess their ability to engage students based on the academic outcomes they achieve, not simply on the number of students who are on task.
2. PE teachers will need to broaden the focus of their pedagogical interventions. They need to lift their sights above just lesson-level adjustments to also consider structural changes at the curriculum level. This would allow teachers to overcome the structural limitations of the MAP and to open up new possibilities for student engagement.



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## Appendix A

### Invitation letter to school principal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Nuno Oliveira and I am currently developing a research project as part of my Master in Education at Edith Cowan University. I am writing you this letter to ask your permission to conduct my research with physical education teachers from your school. My research has already been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research title is: Teachers' Experiences with Disengagement in Physical Education classes at Secondary School Level in the Perth Metropolitan Area. The main aim of this project is to understand the way physical education teachers experience and handle disengaged students in their classes. Considering that students' engagement in school is one of the main determinants of academic success, this research aims to explore some of the strategies used by physical education teachers in dealing with this educational issue. As a result, by giving voice to the real experts in the field (the participant) we expect to bring some new insight to this area and understand what more can be done to enhance students' engagement in physical education classes. The discussion of such a topic may provide participants the opportunity to reflect upon their educational practices, reinforce effective strategies in dealing with disengagement and raise their awareness of this educational issue.

This research will involve individual interviews with participants. They would take from 30 to 45 minutes each. During this time participants will be asked to provide their ideas on disengagement and the way they deal with this educational issue in their classes. As well, participants will be asked to provide some demographic information. If participants feel uncomfortable discussing any topic they can refuse to answer the questions or even decline from the interview at any moment without a penalty. The interviews will need to be recorded in a digital format so the information can later be transcribed and analyzed. After being transcribed, the recording will be deleted and only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the transcripts. Although the results of this research may be used in future publications the name of the school and participants will remain anonymous. A feedback report with the results of the study will be provided to participants if requested.

It will be a pleasure to work with some of your staff members. I am sure they will be able to provide some insightful information about the topic. If you would like your physical education teacher(s) to participate in this study please return the consent form attached to this letter in the reply paid envelope. As soon as I receive your consent form I will contact you to clarify any possible concerns and distribute the invitation letters to the teachers. As the participation of physical education teachers is voluntary, I will only interview teachers who send me their consent forms.

If you require any further information about the research process and implications please feel free to contact me phone: 0434392420; mail: [p.nunorato@gmail.com](mailto:p.nunorato@gmail.com), or any of my supervisors, Dr Ken Alexander - phone: 0402701591; mail: [k.alexander@ecu.edu.au](mailto:k.alexander@ecu.edu.au), Dr Mandie Shean - phone: 042512158; email: [m.shean@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.shean@ecu.edu.au). If you would like to speak to an independent person regarding the project, please contact the Research Ethics Officer, Kim Gifkins, phone: 6304 2170; email: [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au)

Signature:

Date:            /            /

## Appendix B

### Invitation letter to participants

Dear Physical Education teacher

My name is Nuno Oliveira and I am currently developing a research project as part of my Master in Education at Edith Cowan University. I am writing to you to ask that you participate in this study. My research has already been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research title is: Teachers' Experiences with Disengagement in Physical Education classes at Secondary School Level in the Perth Metropolitan Area. The main aim of this project is to understand the way physical education teachers experience and handle disengaged students in their classes. Considering that students' engagement in school is one of the main determinants of academic success, this research aims to explore some of the strategies used by physical education teachers in dealing with this educational issue. As a result, by giving voice to the real experts in the field (teachers like you and me) we expect to bring some new insight to this area and understand what more can be done to enhance students' engagement in physical education classes. The discussion of such a topic may provide you with the opportunity to reflect upon your educational practices, reinforce effective strategies in dealing with disengagement and make a valuable contribution to the physical education community.

This research will involve individual interviews with participants. They would take from 30 to 45 minutes each. During this time participants will be asked to provide their ideas on disengagement and the way they deal with this educational issue in their classes. As well, participants will be asked to provide some demographic information. If participants feel uncomfortable discussing any topic they can refuse to answer the questions or even decline from the interview at any moment without a penalty. The interviews will need to be recorded in a digital format so the information can later be transcribed and analyzed. After being transcribed, the recording will be deleted and only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the transcripts. Although the results of this research may be used in future publications, the name of the school and participants will remain anonymous. A feedback report with the results of the study will be provided to participants if requested.

It will be a pleasure to learn from a fellow physical education teacher. I am sure your educational experience will make a great contribution to this research and to the improvement of professional practices in our area. If you would like to participate in this study please return the consent form attached to this letter in the reply paid envelope. As soon as I receive your consent form I will contact you to set up an interview. On the interview day I will be available to clarify any possible doubts that you might have regarding the research.

If you require any further information about the research process and implications please feel free to contact me phone: 0434392420; mail: [p.nunorato@gmail.com](mailto:p.nunorato@gmail.com), or any of my supervisors, Dr Ken Alexander - phone: 0402701591; mail: [k.alexander@ecu.edu.au](mailto:k.alexander@ecu.edu.au), Dr Mandie Shean - phone: 042512158; email: [m.shean@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.shean@ecu.edu.au). If you would like to speak to an independent person regarding the project, please contact the Research Ethics Officer, Kim Gifkins, phone: 6304 2170; email: [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au)

Signature:

Date:        /        /

## Appendix C

### Consent form to school principal

I \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), principal of \_\_\_\_\_ Senior High School have read all the information provided on the invitation letter regarding this research, and I am satisfied with all the answers that were given to my questions.

I am also aware that if I have any further questions I can contact the research team:  
Chief investigator Nuno Oliveira - phone: 0434392420; mail: [p.nunorato@gmail.com](mailto:p.nunorato@gmail.com),  
Supervisor Dr Ken Alexander - phone: 0402701591; mail: [k.alexander@ecu.edu.au](mailto:k.alexander@ecu.edu.au),  
Associate Supervisor Dr Mandie Shean - phone: 042512158; email: [m.shean@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.shean@ecu.edu.au), Research Ethics Officer, Kim Gifkins, phone: 6304 2170; email: [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au).

I understand that this research will involve one on one interviews with physical education teachers from the school and that these interviews will be recorded in a digital format.

I comprehend that the information will be transcribed and the audio files will be deleted.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw from the study at any stage without a penalty.

I also acknowledge that the information gather from this research might be used in a future publication and I agree with it, as long as the name of the teachers and the school remains anonymous.

Therefore, I would like to give my permission for the physical education teachers of this school to participate in the study.

Principal's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:     /     /

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Consent form to participants

I \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), physical education teacher from \_\_\_\_\_ Senior High School have read all the information on the invitation letter regarding this research and I am satisfied with all the answers that were given to my questions.

I am also aware that if I have any further questions I can contact the research team: Chief investigator Nuno Oliveira - phone: 0434392420; mail: [p.nunorato@gmail.com](mailto:p.nunorato@gmail.com), Supervisor Dr Ken Alexander - phone: 0402701591; mail: [k.alexander@ecu.edu.au](mailto:k.alexander@ecu.edu.au), Associate Supervisor Dr Mandie Shean - phone: 042512158; email: [m.shan@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.shan@ecu.edu.au), Research Ethics Officer, Kim Gifkins, phone: 6304 2170; email: [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au).

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any stage without a penalty.

I also understand that my participation will involve an interview which will take from 35 to 50 minutes.

I allow that the interview to be recorded in a digital format, as long as the recording is later erased after being transcribed.

I also acknowledge that the information gathered from this research might be used in a future publication and I agree with it as long as my name and the school remain anonymous.

Therefore, I \_\_\_\_\_ (print name), would like to volunteer to participate in this research project.

Teacher's signature:

Date: / /

Phone Number:

## Appendix E

### Demographic information from participants

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:       Male       Female

Qualifications/ years:

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University attended:

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---

Qualifications/ years:

---

University attended:

---

Number of years of full-time teaching experience: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years in the School: \_\_\_\_\_

Subjects you have taught in the past:

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Subjects you are currently teaching:

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## Appendix F

### Interview theme list

#### 1. Stage – How do physical education teachers experience Students’ Disengagement?

- 1.1 Have you ever had students being disengagement in your classes?
- 1.2 Can you describe me the attitude of a disengaged student in your class?
- 1.3 Do you think that disengagement is an overall attitude towards the subject of Physical Education or does engagement change according to different situations in the class?
- 1.4 Are there any types of disengagement that you find it hard to shift?
- 1.5 Do you see disengagement as an educational issue? Why?

#### 2. Stage – Which are the reasons given by teachers for students’ disengagement?

- 2.1 Why do you think student become disengaged from PE?
- 2.2 Are there any factors that influence disengagement that might be beyond your control as a teacher?

EXPLANATION: In order to facilitate the analysis of factors that influence engagement...

- 2.3 What internal factors do you believe can influence students’ ability to engage in PE?

#### 3. Stage – Which are the strategies used by physical education teachers to enhance students’ engagement?

- 3.1 What do you usually do when you see a student disengaged in your class?
- 3.2 Are there any other strategies you use or are contemplating using to enhance students’ engagement?
- 3.3 How do you monitor their levels of engagement in the class?
- 3.4 Do you have any school policy to monitor engagement levels? Do you have any school policy that informs parents about students’ engagement levels?

#### **4. Stage – The physical education curriculum**

- 4.1 Can you briefly describe me the way your PE curriculum is organized and delivered to the students? (n of sports per term...)
- 4.2 What do you believe are the main goals of this PE curriculum? (class level VS long-term)
- 4.3 How confident are you that these goals are accomplished?
- 4.4 Do you believe the physical education curriculum relates to the activities students will be likely to be involved out of the school and in their future lives?
- 4.5 In which ways do you believe students' individual technical and tactical skill levels influence their enjoyment and ability to engage in sport activities?
- 4.6 If a student have never played a certain sport, do you believe the student have the necessary time and opportunity to develop the skills to play that sport in PE classes? (Volleyball VS Tennis)
- 4.7 Do you think providing students with curriculum choices would influence their engagement? (Giving the opportunity for students to choose the sport activities they would like to learn)
- 4.8 Do you have felt any need to make small or larger changes to your current program?
- 4.9 Are you aware of the alternative curriculum option in PE? (Game day Clinic or Sports Module)

#### **5. Is there anything else you would like add to our discussion?**

## Appendix G

### Participants' Demographics

Participants	School	Gender	Age	Years as a Full-timer	Years in School	Subject Taught	Subject Currently Teaching	Qualifications	University Attended
Kevin	A	Male	35	13	13	Heath; PE; Outdoor Ed.; Maths	Heath; PE; Maths	Bachelor of Sport Science; Grad Diploma Education	Edith Cowan University
Laura	A	Female	41	14	7	PE; Health; Dance; Gymnastics; Outdoor Ed.	PE; Health; Dance;	Bachelor of PE; Grad Diploma in Science (outdoor)	Edith Cowan University
Mathew	A	Male	55	34	8	PE; Health; PE studies; Outdoor Ed.	PE; Health; Sport and Rec.	Bachelor Education; Diploma Education	Edith Cowan University
Sarah	A	Female	53	32	31	PE; Health; Physical Rec.	PE; Health	Bachelor of PE; Grad Diploma Education	Edith Cowan University
Fiona	B	Female	58	28	18	PE; Health; Dance	PE; Health; Dance	Bachelor of PE; Grad Diploma Education	University of Western Australia



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Mary	B	Female	43	0.5	0.5	PE; Health;	PE; Health;	Bachelor of Sport Science; Grad Diploma Education	Edith Cowan University
Jacob	B	Male	30	1	5	PE	PE; Maths; Science; Outdoor Ed.	Bachelor of Education PE	Edith Cowan University
Jonathon	B	Male	35	8	6	PE; Health; Outdoor Ed.	PE; Soccer; Outdoor Ed.	Bachelor of Sport Science; Grad Diploma Education	Nottingham Trent (UK); Edith Cowan University
Cameron	C	Male	31	10	5	PE; Maths; Health; Outdoor Ed.	PE; Health	Bachelor of Education PE	University of Western Australia
Simon	C	Male	29	6	6	PE; Health; Sport and Rec; Outdoor Ed.	PE; Health; Sport and Rec; Outdoor Ed.	Bachelor of Education & Social sciences; Masters of Education	Edith Cowan University
Lachlan	C	Male	48	23	6	Heath; PE; Outdoor Ed.; Maths	Heath; PE; Outdoor Ed.	Bachelor of Education PE; Certificate IV	Canberra University

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Catherin	C	Female	29	6	3	Health; Sport and Rec.; PE	Health; Sport and Rec; PE	Sports development certificate IV; Sport Science Diploma	Edith Cowan University
Max	D	Male	57	36	24	PE; Health; Outdoor Ed.PE studies	PE; Health; PE studies	Bachelor of Education PE	University of Western Australia
Anthony	D	Male	24	1.5	24	PE; Health; Science; Maths; Outdoor Ed.	Heath; PE; Outdoor Ed.	Bachelor of Education & Health Sciences	Edith Cowan University
			41	15.214286	11.178571				

## Appendix H

### Research time-line

<b>1 Semester</b>	Months	<b>August</b>				<b>September</b>				<b>October</b>				<b>November</b>				<b>December</b>							
	Weeks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Masters by research proposal</li> <li>-Visa application</li> <li>-1 Meeting (check list)</li> <li>-GRIP</li> <li>- Developing research questions and selecting suitable methodology for the study.</li> <li>-Prepare for colloquium</li> <li>-Literature review</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 Meeting</li> <li>-Developing research methodology (create an interview theme list)</li> <li>- Colloquium</li> <li>- Selecting theoretical framework and conceptual framework</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- First draft of research proposal</li> <li>- 3 Meeting (submit proposal for internal review)</li> <li>- Rewrite research proposal</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4 Meeting (submit proposal for second internal review)</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formal proposal presentation</li> </ul>							
<b>2 Semester</b>	Months	<b>January</b>				<b>February</b>				<b>March</b>				<b>April</b>				<b>May</b>		<b>June</b>					
	Weeks	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Write Method Chapter</li> <li>- Submit proposal to Human Research Ethics Committee</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-5 Meeting</li> <li>- Send the invitation letters with consent forms to school principals</li> <li>- Identify schools who are willing to participate</li> <li>- Send the invitation letters with consent forms to PE teachers</li> <li>- Arrange interviews</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 6 Meeting</li> <li>- Start interviewing</li> <li>- Start transcribing the interviews</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 7 Meeting</li> <li>- Finish the interviewing</li> <li>- Continue Transcribing the interviews</li> <li>- Analyse transcripts</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 8 Meeting</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interview another 2 participants</li> <li>- Finish analysing transcripts</li> </ul>					
<b>3 Semester</b>	Months	<b>July</b>				<b>August</b>				<b>September</b>				<b>October</b>				<b>November</b>				<b>December</b>			
	Weeks	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Data Analysis on going..</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-9 Meeting</li> <li>-Start writing research results</li> <li>-Data Analysis on going...</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continue writing research results</li> <li>- Colloquium</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 10 Meeting</li> <li>-Finish writing research results</li> <li>- Rewrite Methodology</li> <li>- Start writing discussion chapter</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 11 Meeting</li> <li>- Finish writing discussion chapter</li> <li>- Write conclusion</li> <li>- Rewrite literature review.</li> <li>- 12 Meeting</li> <li>- Write introduction</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 13 Meeting</li> <li>- Submit theses for internal review</li> <li>- Final Paper ready for submission</li> </ul>			

## **Appendix I**

Thesis in Digital Format