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Everyone Matters: Eliminating Dehumanizing Practices in Physical Education

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Everyone Matters: Eliminating Dehumanizing Practices in Physical Education

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Everyone Matters: Eliminating Dehumanizing Practices in Physical Education

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Abstract

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5 Recently, discussions regarding how to create a positive school climate where all can be
6 successful has come to the forefront. Healthy schools support student learning, well-being, time,
7 space to be active, and opportunities for social and emotional growth. However, a host of
8 numerous trends suggest that the school climate is becoming increasingly hostile towards
9 students who are from immigrant, LBGQT and ethnic minority groups. What is often seen as
10 disrespectful behavior towards these students, is in fact actions that can be more accurately
11 defined as dehumanization. This article overviews the practice of dehumanization, the
12 implications for learning and introduces proactive strategies to promote the success of all
13 students.
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28 *Keywords:* school climate, socio-emotional learning, social justice, conflict resolution,
29 dehumanization, restorative practices, communication, diversity and inclusion, racism, sexism,
30 homophobia, democratic classrooms
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6 Kirk (2020) has suggested that we are living in a time of social turbulence, where the
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8 impact of a host of inequities, events and crises have contributed to a society that is perceived to
9
10 be spiraling out of control. This observation corresponds with the call for institutions to
11
12 demonstrate inclusive excellence towards the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in
13
14 communities (Russell, 2019). The field of physical education has long been critiqued for
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16 marginalizing those positioned as “different” (Fitzpatrick & Santamaria, 2014). This includes,
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18 but is not limited to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes related to girls’ ability, perceptions
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20 of Black and Brown youth as having superhuman physical capacities, and the exclusion of trans,
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22 queer or intersex bodies (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, Fuentes-
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24 Miguel, López-Cañada, & Pérez-Samaniego, 2018; Harrison & Clark, 2016; Hodge, 2014;
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26 Landi, 2018; Sykes, 2011). Given the renewed focus on the body over the past few years and the
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28 interactions that occur relative to class, race, sexuality and ability, Liberti (2017) challenges
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30 professionals to remove preconceived notions of human movement that marginalize certain
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32 bodies while normalizing others.
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38 Smith (2011) in studying various periods of history, concluded that individuals under
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40 conflict have a propensity to think in terms of hierarchies. This leads to ways of thought that
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42 empower persons to complete acts that would be unthinkable under normal circumstances. The
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44 demotion of others to a predisposed natural hierarchy is a process of depriving a person or a
45
46 group of positive human qualities known as *dehumanization*. Haslam and Loughnan (2014)
47
48 categorize dehumanization as a violation of our belief in a common humanity that is “blatant,
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50 subtle, influenced by hate, indifference, collectively organized, or intensely personal” (p. 401).
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52 Further, dehumanization promotes the denial of uniquely human attributes to individuals or
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3 groups in a manner that is cruel and often systematic. This article gives an overview of the
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5 practice of dehumanization, the implications for learners in our classes, and provides strategies to
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7 help students succeed.
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10 **Dehumanization in today's climate**

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12 The history of dehumanization is robust and varied. Dehumanization has been witnessed
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14 in the possession of slaves as property, genocide perpetuated against groups, and laws that
15
16 discriminate against marginalized individuals (Haslam, 2006). In everyday life, dehumanization
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18 is more subtle and evident, cutting across domains such as race, religion, nationality, and gender.
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20 Further, dehumanization can be applied to smaller groups of people, such as the mentally ill,
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22 intellectually disabled, physically disabled, lower social classes and those involved in
23
24 professions deemed low status (Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011). Recent
25
26 examples of dehumanization have included political leaders comparing immigrants to infectious
27
28 diseases, Asian athletes during a high-school soccer playoff match being told to “go back to
29
30 where they came from”, anti-LGBTQ participation policies that specifically target transgender
31
32 athletes by barring them from certain bathroom and locker rooms, students being asked to
33
34 recreate the roles of master and slave in a physical education class during Black History month
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36 and anti-Semitic messages being drawn on playgrounds (Culp, 2020).
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42 The late Don Hellison (2011) provided a depiction of how focusing on positive human
43
44 qualities, dignity and basic conventions of respect could be realized in physical education
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46 through the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Model. Level one in the TPSR model
47
48 focuses on Respect. Students should: 1) control their own behavior and show respect for the
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50 feelings and rights of others, 2) understand that all have the right to participate, 3) have the right
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52 to resolve conflicts peacefully, 4) be taught to recognize and respect differences of opinion, 5)
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3 negotiate conflicts, and 6) develop increased awareness of empathy and understanding of the
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5 impact of one's behavior on others. Human connection and the valuing of one another is of
6
7 profound benefit and should be encouraged as part of a quality physical education program
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9 (CDC, 2010). Yet, there is mounting evidence that people have become less trusting in past
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11 decades, less connected to their communities, and more isolated (Pew Research Center, 2019).
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13 Thus, dehumanizing practices can work to undermine the goals we wish to obtain in physical
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15 education.
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19 **How dehumanization effects students**

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21 Kelman (1973) explained that dehumanization is a violation of two qualities (identity and
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23 community) that we accord to an individual. His concept of community envisioned humanity as
24
25 an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other while recognizing each other's
26
27 individuality and rights (Kelman, 1973). The loss of identity is a significant occurrence for
28
29 victims of dehumanization. Not only is agency (the capacity for a person to act individually and
30
31 freely) lost, but effectively, a dehumanized individual is excluded from community and the
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33 promise of what it has to offer.
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38 Oliver (2011) outlined that the dehumanization of individuals perpetuates what is
39
40 perceived as the in-group vs. the out-group. Dehumanized individuals are not part of the in-
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42 group. Subsequently they are considered "outside the moral kinship or scope of justice, and thus
43
44 become a legitimate target for more active oppressions and exclusions" (p. 87). Kelman (1973)
45
46 mentions that the exclusion of people from our moral community makes it possible to act
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48 inhumanly towards them, allowing for harm to occur to them by others, and contributing to
49
50 moral disengagement and indifference. In addition to the loss of identity and community,
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52 students who are dehumanized in schools are more likely to develop a negative attitude toward
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3 themselves, hide emotions, and over time disassociate with learning. When the actions of
4
5 dehumanized students are misinterpreted by teachers and administrators, students are often
6
7 rendered infantile, labeled as difficult, and criminalized (NSCC, 2007).
8
9

10 Recent studies in physical education from various parts of the world have drawn attention
11
12 to the issue of dehumanizing practices and possible implications for teaching and learning. In
13
14 examining students' interaction in a multiethnic Norwegian PE class, Thorjussen and Sisjord
15
16 (2018) mentioned that attitudes on physical education are closely linked to a focus on western
17
18 world ideals of health, sport, and fitness. These ideals placed an emphasis on white, slim, and fit
19
20 bodies and perpetuated stereotypes and marginalization for some students due to their
21
22 ethnic/cultural background. This was espoused in a narrative by Mahan, a Persian student, whose
23
24 parents are Muslim and immigrants from Iran. Mahan discussed the clear division between what
25
26 he termed as *us* (foreigners) and *them* (real Norwegians), recounting stories of Muslim girls
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28 being bullied for their hijabs and boys with a non-western background waiting to shower for fear
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30 of being ridiculed for their body size.
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35 Landi (2018) in advocating for a Queer Inclusive physical education, commented on the
36
37 prevalence of spaces and behaviors in physical education that exist under the assumption that
38
39 heterosexuality is the norm. This assumption is a long-existing practice that keeps the physical
40
41 education environment from being a place where all can grow, experience pleasure, and be
42
43 successful. In discussing a classroom conversation he had as a first-year physical educator, Landi
44
45 recounted a co-teacher's questioning of a male student's effort during a warm-up exercise in the
46
47 gym. The co-worker expressed the need to "change the student" because of his personal belief
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49 that the student was gay. After listening to other vile remarks from the co-teacher, Landi,
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51 frustrated and angry, walked with the student during the remainder of the exercise. Later, when
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3 Landi asked the student why he hated gym, the student replied, “Because gym sucks.... If I
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5 wanted to be pushed around by muscle-head dumb jocks and be made fun of by old men past
6
7 their prime, I would play football” (p.8).
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10 Pang and Hill (2016) explored young Chinese girls’ aspirations and ideal environments
11
12 for health, physical education and physical activity using a strengths-based approach. They
13
14 highlight discourse in popular media and research that promotes the narrative that Asians are
15
16 passive, high achievers who are uninterested in sport (Malik, 2004). Pang and Hill note that this
17
18 narrative fails to account for cultural expectations and challenges these girls may face that
19
20 include: 1) balancing expectations of white, Eurocentric, Western, cultural norms of participation
21
22 and traditional Chinese ideals that stress femininity and obedience, 2) their families’ opinion of
23
24 sport participation being related to a lower social class and future career advancement, and 3)
25
26 some girls desire to engage more in sport, but lacking the economic resources. Consequently, the
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28 authors promote a holistic perspective of teaching health and physical education that allows for
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30 Chinese girls to make meaning of their experiences while demystifying existing narratives that
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32 marginalize their desires.
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38 **Humanizing strategies in physical education**

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40 Despite a host of current economic and social crises dominating the headlines, Shih
41
42 (2018), espoused that there is a need to humanize individuals amid a society characterized by
43
44 emptiness, meaningless and hopelessness. While not a new concept, humanizing education
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46 establishes teaching as a dynamic process and a vision for life in schools and beyond that is
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48 unifying for the teacher and student (Price, 2014). Well-designed physical education programs
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50 are inclusive, active, enjoyable, dynamic, and supportive (SHAPE America-Society of Health
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52 and Physical Educators, 2015). Furthermore, they add to the promotion of a positive school
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3 climate by supporting student learning, well-being, time, space to be active, and opportunities for
4 social and emotional growth (Beale, 2015; Osher & Berg, 2018). Here, it is suggested that
5
6 physical educators take a proactive approach to work against dehumanizing classes by
7
8 recognizing language, introducing a pedagogy of somebodiness, democratizing the classroom,
9
10 using restorative practices, and positioning learning as “light”. Each of these suggestions will be
11
12 briefly described next, with examples of how each of these ideas can be utilized provided in
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17 Table 1.

18 19 *Recognizing Language*

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21 Brown (2017) mentioned that dehumanizing always starts with language, often followed
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23 by images that creates a false narrative. She also feels that once people are seen on the other side
24
25 of a conflict as morally inferior and dangerous, the conflict is framed as good versus evil
26
27 (Brown, 2017). This othering over time eventually promotes the idea that there is a winner and
28
29 loser. In considering the use of language, Brown suggested that we periodically ask ourselves are
30
31 we using value neutral terminology (impartiality and without bias and judgement), person-first
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33 language (i.e. “a person with diabetes”) and refraining from using metaphors (i.e. “that boy is an
34
35 animal on defense”) to describe the characteristics of individuals and groups.
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39 40 *A pedagogy of somebodiness*

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42 Somebodiness is a community recognized idea rooted in African American history and
43
44 expanded upon by theologians such as Howard Thurman and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
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46 (Johnson, 2016). In short, it asserts that dignity is inherent to human beings and a value to be
47
48 fought for. King believed that without a deep sense of somebodiness, an individual would be
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50 incapable of being fully mature and would struggle to maximize their potential. Physical
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52 educator teachers can inspire a pedagogy of somebodiness in students by instilling the belief in
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3 students that they all have a purpose. This can occur using verbal, written and visible
4 affirmations, emphasizing the positive, and acknowledging the diverse cultural lives of students.
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7 *Giving students voice*

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10 Butler (2016) mentioned that to embrace human rights and create spaces that are fair and
11 equal, students must be prepared in a democratic environment. Students who put democracy in
12 action, along with discussing situational ethics and inventing games in Butler's view are
13 prepared to work with a diverse range of people when they leave our classes. Butler notes two
14 main challenges for teachers seeking to foster more democracy in the classroom. The first
15 challenge for teachers is to minimize ways to limit their privilege and biases while assisting them
16 in finding positive ways to participate in the construction of the physical education experience.
17 Another challenge for teachers involves deciding how much autonomy students will have in
18 making group decisions and the creation of rules. If teachers do not facilitate well, students could
19 marginalize their peers and perpetuate the behaviors that we wish to eliminate (Morrison, 2008).
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32 *Restorative circles*

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35 Restorative practices help students build social and emotional skills by focusing on
36 relational practices, empowerment, and conflict resolution. Hemphill, Janke, Gordon & Farrar
37 (2018) along with Lynch and Walton-Fisette, (2019) have advocated for the use of restorative
38 practices in sport and physical education, with specific attention to the utilization of restorative
39 circles as a means of building community and encouraging student voice. When facilitated
40 correctly, the circle considers everyone on equal ground. Each person in the circle shares
41 responsibility for its functioning. Answers to questions are typically phrased as "yes-and" than
42 "either-or." In the restorative circle, each person takes a turn to lead and communicate with
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3 guidelines created by the group. Decisions are made by consensus of the whole group and can be
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5 unexpected and navigated over the course of time (Clifford, 2015).
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7 *Learning about others*

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10 Teachers who are prepared to respond to the educational needs of students from diverse
11
12 backgrounds in a pluralistic society are an integral part of providing resistance to the scourge of
13
14 dehumanization (Smith, 2011). These teachers should demonstrate cultural humility, defined as
15
16 a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique where the individual learns about another's
17
18 culture and examines her/his own beliefs and cultural identities (Cervantes & Clark, 2019; Culp,
19
20 2013; Yeager and Bauer -Wu, 2013; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). This critical
21
22 consciousness requires self-awareness and intentional work to uncover one's own assumptions,
23
24 biases and values (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). Another critical step in this process involves
25
26 teachers learning about the cultures of their students and their challenges, fears, and aspirations.
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30 **Recommendations**

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33 Suyatno and Wantini (2018) in their work found that dehumanization can be combatted
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35 by the creation of classroom environments that consider human needs while reinforcing
36
37 universally accepted values such as honor, respect, love, dignity, and friendship. Each of the
38
39 strategies listed in this article can be enhanced using several educational design approaches
40
41 centered on the value of humanity as the basis for student growth (Nwafor, 2014). First, teachers
42
43 should structure curriculum and educational objectives in accordance with the needs and interests
44
45 of youth. Second, teachers must view students as active beings with talents and interests, not as
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47 passive entities that require coercion to force behavior change.
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51 Third, teachers are advised to move away from roles where they are seen primarily as a
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53 class ruler, moving toward archetypes that allow them to be seen as serve as facilitators, guides,
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3 study partners and “heroes” in the journey of teaching and learning (Mayes, 2020). Fourth,
4 teachers who humanize classes have adopted the premise that school is a “miniature society”,
5 and make learning activities beneficial for both the classroom and community through problem
6 based learning (i.e. teaching students about advocacy so they can help garner support for a new
7 bike path in a local park). Finally, humanizing classes employ democratic practices that
8 incorporate student voice, while involving positive role models who understand the distinctions,
9 singularities, and different patterns of behaviors in student populations (Suyatno & Wantini,
10 2018).

21 **Conclusion**

22
23 Humanizing pedagogical practices centers students as valuable and active members of the
24 learning process (Nwafor, 2014). Strong (2019) in commenting on equity, diversity, and
25 inclusion challenges physical education professionals to *think* in a humanizing way so that they
26 can *respond to* students’ behavior in a humanizing way while helping them reach their potential.
27 As Noddings (2005) urges, each of us can provide a pedagogy of care that reminds students daily
28 that they and the individuals around them have value. Rising to the challenge helps contribute to
29 the promotion of quality physical education for students in our classes.
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Table 1

Examples of humanizing the physical education classroom

1. Fostering appropriate language

While language is a facet of human culture that always evolves, demeaning others through language is one of many practices that is unnecessary for the promotion of quality physical education. The effectiveness of lessons and classroom culture is heavily influenced by language. Words convey assumptions and expectations about people and when negatively used can fracture the learning environment. To promote a positive community in the physical education classroom, (Borba, 2001; Nucaro, 2017) suggest:

- That teachers model inclusive language (i.e. using preferred pronouns are, explaining American idioms for the benefit of non-native English speakers, avoiding gendered language).
- Students should be given opportunities to demonstrate respect towards each other using language (i.e. daily compliments, defining respect in different activities, writing down affective words for weekly use).
- Demeaning language should be interrogated, explained to the offender why it is demeaning and corrected immediately. For instance, the casual use of the phrase *“that’s so gay”* is pejorative and a slur that could indirectly lead to more harassment of a student or group in the gym.
- Positive language used by youth should be reinforced during class via comments or non-verbal expressions of approval. *“I’m hearing lots of friendly conversations and seeing people helping each other.”*
- A tone that conveys a teacher’s belief in youth is encouraged. One might state *“You can look at our board to remind yourselves when you walk into to the gym what the rules are”*.
- Direct language that notes positive behaviors that is clear, free of innuendo or sarcasm helps to avoid shaming or judging youth, while reducing the likelihood of power struggles.

2. Creating a culture of Somebodiness

In developing the concept of somebodiness, Dr. King advocated for concepts of respect, equality, and empathy. He believed that everyone--no matter what race, position in society, or income deserves respect. Somebodiness is a multidimensional and culturally relevant concept that celebrates human worth and dignity and is also concerned with self-determination, self-definition, self-acceptance, and self-love. The latter ideals are inherent qualities that can be nurtured and are influential for the 1) psychological functioning of the individual and 2) the perception of this individual in their belief that they are in control of their situation (Abdul-Kabir, Herrero-Taylor, Stevenson, & Zamel, 2003; Baker-Fletcher, 1993). Teachers should:

- Model resilience and the behaviors that they want to see in students (Beale, 2013).
- Provide high expectations with students, with an emphasis on “best effort” with activities that are not focused with comparing one student to another.
- Reinforce resilient behavior and introduce resilience-based strategies for students early in the school year (Tudor, Sarkar, & Spray, 2020).
- Design physical education experiences that focus on building confidence irrespective of the activity level of the student, or their motor skill (Goodwin, 1999).
- Consider a reflexive teaching style that includes documenting performance, asking questions that encourage self-reflections and providing opportunities for self-observation (Rubeli, et al., 2020).

3. Giving students voice

Teachers are encouraged to establish ground rules for appropriate behavior early in the school year to help promote student-buy in and rapport. However, how does a physical classroom go from rules established at the outset of the school year, to an on-going product of interaction that is ethical, culturally relevant, and real for those in the class? (Da Matta, Richards & Hemphill, 2015; Enright, Ní Chróinín, & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Fiset, 2011; Lorente-Catalán, E. & Kirk, D.) Some strategies include:

- Providing students with opportunities to co-construct curriculum (i.e. cooperative activities or creative-game activities).
- Having students design and teach lessons. Task force teams of inquiry can be created, with students in each group being required to explore, research and present on a topic related to the lesson.
- Leading students in periodic reflection activities and self-assessment using a task card with questions.
- Creating a group that shares roles where criteria is transparent (i.e. sport education).
- Reducing power dynamics by the teacher redirecting from an instructor to a facilitator of content using critical thinking questions and changing group roles at the end of an activity.

4. Restorative Circles

Restorative circles are touted as a means by which to promote and strengthen positive school culture while enhancing pro-social relationships within the school community. In respect to dehumanization, there is ample evidence in social-psychological research that suggests that the perception of the other impacts how “we” relate to “them”, which can lead to negative relationships. Leidner, Castano and Ginges, (2003) note that in the present context, we should cultivate *sentience* or the capacity to feel and experience emotions. This capacity is central to our understanding of human nature and is a building block of empathy key for negotiating issues of intergroup justice, peace and conflict resolution. Restorative circles can be arranged in multiple ways. Clifford (2015) and Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel (2010) explicitly discuss the following four configurations:

- *Basic Circle (Sequential Circle)*: Everyone sits facing center. Students are reminded of the norms and use a talking piece that is passed around the circle from one participant to the next in a sequence. Participants can use the “right to pass” or “right to come back to me”.
- *Popcorn Circle (Non-Sequential Circle)*: Everyone sits facing the center. Students are reminded of the norms and use a talking piece that moves around the circle in “popcorn” style. Students signal for the piece when they are ready to contribute.
- *Fishbowl Circle*: 4-6 volunteers or selected students form a small circle in the center of the larger group circle. An empty chair is placed in the inner circle so that others can join in the discussion. Dialogue is focused within the small circle (with an optional talking piece). The participants in the outer circle remain quiet. They can only contribute to the inner circle’s discussion when a person leaves an empty chair in the inner circle for them to sit in. When their contribution is done, they return to the outer circle.
- *Wheelhouse Circle*: Known also as an “inside/outside circle”. Two groups of participants are split in half, with one group on the outside and one group on the inside. The inner group faces the outer group

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to discuss a topic. When prompted by the facilitator, students in the outer or inner circle move “x” number of spaces to the right or left so that they can discuss another topic with a new partner.

For Peer Review Only

5. Learning about others

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1970), Freire describes the construct of dehumanization as a constant struggle for those facing oppression, having to fight for their given right to be treated as an equal (fully human), while the ones inflicting the oppression create a feeling of inferiority around them (p. 56). When students are humanized, they navigate from a state of oppression to emancipation. Thus, it is important to understand that the role of the teacher in stopping oppression is integral. The teacher is the archetype and guide for students in the journey of learning about themselves and how they treat others. Some questions to reflect upon in the pursuit of eliminating dehumanizing practices in physical education include:

- Is the application of a social justice framework evident in the curriculum and routines of the physical education program to help foster actions that promote equity, diversity and inclusion?
- Is there understanding of the impact of trauma on student learning and are aware of how to use models (i.e. TPSR) to help spur interest in the backgrounds of students and information that could be beneficial for them? (Ellison, Walton-Fisette & Eckert, 2019).
- Is there a concerted effort to participate in *border crossing*? Border crossing is an ongoing examination of the boundaries that exist between students' lifeworlds and school culture and the subsequent valuing of students experiences relative to race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, and geography (Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1991).
- Has there been efforts to reach out to others (i.e. networks, communities of practice) in order to develop community ties and support for transformative educational practices that can nurture every aspect of a student's being? (Blackshear, 2020).