Alienation in Physical Education
From the Perspectives of Children

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the phenomenon of alienation in physical education from the perspectives of children. Of particular interest were children’s perspectives about the three constructs of alienation: (a) powerlessness, (b) meaninglessness, and (c) social isolation, as defined by Carlson (1995). A case study methodology was employed with sixth grade children (ages 10 and 11), with a total of 14 children forming the unit of analysis. Observations, field and reflective notes, drawings and semistructured interviews were used to triangulate the data. The data were analyzed by employing a continuum of inductive and deductive analysis, using categorical aggregation and direct interpretation. Three themes were identified as representative of the children’s perspectives: (a) degree of control, (b) meaning, and (c) social factors. The results are discussed in relation to their contribution to the understanding of alienation in children’s physical education and implications for practice.

Keywords: powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, case study

The benefits of physical education (PE) for children are widely recognized. Physical education programs, designed to be developmentally appropriate, address the whole child, physically, cognitively, and affectively, and make a positive impact on a child’s overall quality of life (Gallahue & Cleland Donnelly, 2003). Ideally, this school activity setting provides children and youth of all ages with positive and memorable experiences that can lead to lifelong engagement in activity. Unfortunately, not all children equate PE with positive experiences. Graham (1995) underscores, “that for too many youngsters physical education is a distasteful and discomforting experience” (p. 479). A number of researchers agree that many children do not like PE (Carlson, 1995; Ennis, 2000; Olafson, 2002), particularly when it is perceived as lacking in fun, fairness, and safety (Garn & Cothran, 2006; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Portman, 1995a). An accumulation of these negative feelings may eventually escalate to a phenomenon identified as alienation (Carlson, 1995; Halas, 2002).
Alienation Theory

One of the early sources of the meaning of alienation was established by Seeman (1959), referring to those who have been alienated as “the ‘unattached’, the ‘marginal’, the ‘obsessive’, the ‘normless’, and the ‘isolated’” (p. 783). As it relates to PE, one of the most frequently cited descriptions of alienation was outlined by Carlson (1995), who defined it as “the persistent negative feelings some students associate with actively aversive or insufficiently meaningful situations (which students often label with the all-purpose adjective boring) in the gymnasium setting” (p. 467). Carlson’s definition employs three of Seeman’s original constructs: (a) powerlessness, (b) meaninglessness, and (c) social isolation. First, powerlessness can be described as, “the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks” (Seeman, 1959, p. 784). Similarly, Carlson referred to powerlessness in PE as a “lack of control” (p. 467). Second, Seeman (1959) described meaninglessness in terms of an individual’s understanding of the experiences he or she is immediately involved in and something that occurs “when the individual’s minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met” (p. 786). Somewhat differently, Carlson placed emphasis on the students’ feeling that there is no apparent purpose for PE or that it does not hold any personal value. Finally, isolation describes those who “assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society” (Seeman, 1959, p. 789). To expand on this idea, Dean (1961) added “social” to the construct of isolation, which connected it to a feeling of separateness from a group. Carlson described social isolation as feeling alone and isolated from peers socially or emotionally. For the purpose of the present research study, we have adopted the definition of alienation and of the constructs of powerlessness, meaninglessness and, social isolation put forward by Carlson (1995), which refer primarily to internal feelings, but also recognize the role of external sources of influence. Our goal is to expand the current understanding of alienation in PE by exploring the perspectives of children.

Research on Alienation

The overall study of alienation in the literature has recognized it as a widespread problem in schools, mostly tied to adolescence, and associated with behaviors such as school dropout (Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993), drug abuse and sexual promiscuity (Oerlemans & Jenkins, 1998). The literature on alienation also acknowledges its importance as a topic of study in PE, where it has been referred to as a prevalent crisis and challenge confronting physical educators (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998). However, a limited number of studies have targeted alienation specifically in PE. There are a greater number of studies exploring PE that refer to children’s risk of alienation using similar concepts, such as, withdrawal, disillusionment, dislike, disengagement, and lack of relevance or meaning.

Carlson’s (1995) research discloses the nature of persistent negative behaviors and feelings associated with PE, which are characteristic of adolescents at risk for alienation. Interviews with students identified as alienated revealed a range of behaviors and strategies used to cope with feelings of alienation in PE. For example, trying to blend into the background, pretending to be sick or injured, even missing
school entirely on PE days, and a willingness to accept a failing grade rather than participate. Similarly, Olafson (2002), in a study of adolescent girls’ perceptions of PE, found that students reported feeling embarrassed, self-conscious, and inferior in this setting. These feelings were followed by resistant type behaviors, such as, skipping class, obtaining a note to be excused, noncompliance with changing clothes, and refusal to participate. Comparable themes were reported by Martel, Gagnon, and Tousignant (2002), in a study that examined PE teachers’ and students’ views of injustices in PE. According to the students, injustices in the gymnasium often left them feeling powerless.

Students who are less skilled than their peers appear to be at significant risk of becoming alienated in PE. In a study that explored the experiences of sixth graders, student responses to failure situations in PE included “avoiding learning tasks, announcing failure in advance, acting out frustration in the form of anger and aggression, and accepting failure” (Portman, 1995b, p. 34). In another study by Portman (1995a), students identified as at risk for alienation from PE because of low skill shared experiences of performance repercussions (e.g., being yelled at), possibly leading to a desire to withdraw. According to several researchers, if a competitive class environment forms the basis for the delivery of the PE program, where skill comparison and winning are emphasized, a demoralizing atmosphere may ensue and contribute to alienation (Halas, 2002), particularly for children of low skill (Portman, 1995a). Furthermore, competitive sport-based activities in PE have been found to be especially marginalizing for boys who have less coordination and are weaker and slower (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

The descriptive effects of alienation have been conceptualized in the PE literature as follows. Alienation is associated with boredom (Carlson, 1995; Couturier, Chepko, & Coughlin, 2005; Ennis et al., 1997; Gibbons, 2008; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008); lack of meaning or lack of relevance (Carlson, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Ennis, 1999; Ennis et al., 1997; Halas, 2002); teacher behaviors (Carlson, 1995; Martel et al., 2002; Portman, 1995a); low skill or perceived ability (Carlson, 1995; Olafson, 2002; Portman, 1995a; 1995b); embarrassment (Couturier et al., 2005; Ennis et al., 1997; Olafson, 2002); and competitive class environment (Ennis, 1999; Garn & Cothran, 2006; Halas, 2002). Although the majority of these researchers focused on adolescents, a few also studied preadolescents, including children as young as 10 years old.

While the phenomenon of alienation may not be fully realized until late adolescence, it may be a result of “experiences in the early elementary and middle schools years” (Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993, p. 239). Children as young as fifth grade have expressed dissatisfaction with PE and the opinions they form at this early age may influence future decisions about PE participation (Gibbons, 2008). Pangrazi and Gibbons (2009) concur that, “lifetime involvement in physical activity often depends on early positive participation” (p. 19).

Therefore, given: (a) the potential for PE to contribute to lifetime physical activity engagement, (b) that many children and adolescents do not have positive experiences in PE, and (c) that these negative experiences may ultimately lead to alienation from PE, the purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of alienation from the perspectives of children in sixth grade. The aim of the study was to gain insight into the factors that are likely to lead to the experience of alienation in PE. In keeping with this objective, the children in this study were asked to reflect
on their own experiences as well as the experiences of peers and to theorize about alienation in PE. The purpose was not to evaluate the current pedagogical structure of their own PE class but rather to provide a broader understanding of how children interpret alienation and its associated constructs within the PE setting.

**Method**

**Design**

An in-depth instrumental qualitative case study was used to explore alienation from the perspectives of sixth grade children (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005). The study concentrated on revealing what children thought and felt about the constructs of alienation, regardless of whether they identified experiencing them personally. This is consistent with instrumental case study in that it provides insight into an issue or concern by focusing on a single case (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; 2005). The instrumental case study demands that the research be attuned to two main requirements: boundedness and patterning (Stake, 2005). The present case was bounded by the group of students and the teacher for a single classroom. Patterning was illustrated by the activities of the classroom, which were intentionally structured routines, repeated in a predictable way on a daily basis, including PE.

**Participants and Context**

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 14 children (nine girls, five boys, $M_{age} = 10$ years, 9 months, age range: 10–11 years) who were part of a sixth grade class at Brookside School. Although the entire classroom, which consisted of 23 students, one teacher, Ms. Winston, and a part-time aide was considered as the case, bounded by space and time, the unit of analysis (Patton, 2002) was represented by the 14 children who provided consent to participate in the study. Two of these children experienced varying degrees of cognitive impairment. This was only a study issue with regard to one child and, in her case, interview questions were simplified and rephrased. Although no formal skill assessment was performed on the children, the field researcher, through observation, identified two of the children as being highly skilled in PE, two of the children as low skilled, and the remainder of the group as having medium skill levels. The field researcher also observed that one of the low skilled children was also overweight. The sixth grade class was one of three at Brookside school. Ms. Winston, who was the classroom teacher, also taught PE to the class. There was a PE specialist for the school, whose role appeared to be that of observation. The classroom aide performed specific tasks with two of the children in the class, but for the most part appeared to have little impact on the class routines and structure. Brookside School is located outside a large Western Canadian City, in a town of relatively high average income. It offers classes to 490 students from grades four to eight. It is a well kept school established in the 1970s, is surrounded by large playing fields, and an updated playground.

Sixth grade was identified as an appropriate age group with which to investigate alienation given that it is an especially critical time period for increases in feelings of alienation from school (Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993). It is also recognized that children of this age (10–11 years old) are cognitively able to understand questions
and express their thoughts and opinions (Scott, 2000). This study was approved by a University research ethics board and the school board for Brookside school. Only children for whom consent was provided and assented took part. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the school and children’s identities.

**Data Collection**

Field work occurred over a period of nine weeks, at the school. While the principal, school staff and Ms. Winston, were supportive, the field researcher was diligent in establishing relationships with these gatekeepers to gain trust and acceptance. Particular attention was paid to respecting the classroom routines, not interfering with academic learning times, and spending time discussing the project with Ms. Winston to ensure her comfort with the study. Formal and informal opportunities for study discussions were encouraged by the field researcher, who also volunteer taught several PE classes at the end of the study as a thank you to staff and students. To build a comprehensive picture of the case, several strategies were used, including rapport building, observations, field notes, drawings, interviews, and reflective notes.

*Rapport Building, Observations, and Field Notes.* In the first two to three weeks at the school, the field researcher focused on building rapport and gaining entry into the world of the children (Punch, 2002). Although the exploration focused on the gymnasium setting, activities in PE and the classroom were observed to increase opportunities for the children to become comfortable with, and get to know the field researcher, and for her to learn more about the children. Observations began in a “nonparticipant observer role”, switching to a “changing observational role”, to include a “participant-observer role”, which allowed for subjective and objective involvement on the part of the field researcher (Creswell, 2005). At times, the field researcher observed from a position on the sidelines, other times she participated in an assistant role by handing out booklets in the classroom and helping with equipment distribution in PE. By the fourth week, the field researcher had become a participant observer, taking part in a few of the PE and classroom activities. This gradual entry into the children’s class over an extended period of time, and using a range of observational roles, contributed to a more natural rapport building process that facilitated researcher-child interactions. These interactions were often initiated by the children, who by the third week of fieldwork, readily engaged the field researcher in informal conversation. This acceptance was experienced by the field researcher who wrote in her reflective notes that week, “I think the kids no longer look at me as a stranger in their room (which is great!)”. Observations were recorded as field notes, which included descriptions of the setting, dates, events, people, direct quotations, interactions, and comments (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). At the end of each observation day, the field notes were reviewed and additional reflections were recorded.

*Drawings.* In the fifth week of data collection, the children were invited to take a more active role in the research process through two drawing activity sessions (Punch, 2002). The purpose of the drawing sessions was twofold. First, they provided the children an opportunity to express their experiences through drawing. According to Punch (2002), drawings can be particularly useful in that they “are rich illustrations, which directly show how children see their world” (p.331). Second, the drawings served as a springboard for conversation in the
interviews that followed. While drawing can be used as a communication tool, it may be “even more beneficial to the researcher when used to assist children in their verbal communication” (Mowling, Brock, & Hastie, 2006, p.12). In a review of the strengths and weaknesses of using drawings with children, MacPhail and Kinchin (2004), indicated that skill limitations of the artist can be an issue. The field researcher addressed this issue and other potential participation discomforts by reminding the children of their right to withdraw from the study at anytime or to not answer questions or take part in activities they were uncomfortable with. In the first drawing session, the children were asked to draw a picture of a general memory of gym. The following day, the children were asked to draw one picture that represented a good day in gym and one that depicted a bad day in gym. The framework for this second session modeled the thematic summary in a study by Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) about children with disabilities in PE.

**Interviews.** A semistructured interview guide was developed to explore the children’s drawings, past and present PE experiences, perspectives, and alienation. Importantly, children were not only asked about their own experiences. They were also asked to share their thoughts on the experiences of their peers and to theorize about the constructs of alienation. In this way, the field researcher was able to gain a broader understanding of the children’s perspectives, which would not require the personal experience of alienation to communicate their insights about the phenomenon. All 14 children who had agreed to be part of the study were interviewed. A pilot study with a child the same age as the children in the study was conducted to test question comprehension, to identify child friendly terms for the constructs of alienation, and to allow the field researcher to practice her interview skills. The constructs of alienation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation were explored in developmentally appropriate ways, using the terms choices, usefulness, and being left out, respectively. Examples of these questions are included below:

1. Powerlessness: Do kids get to make choices in gym? In what way? Do kids like to decide? What would happen if kids never got to decide about anything that happens in gym?

2. Meaninglessness: Do you think that kids would say gym is useful for later in life? How would it be useful? How would it be useless?

3. Social isolation: Do you think kids sometimes feel left out in gym? Can you think of a time when you or your friends were left out in gym? Can you describe that time for me?

The interviews took place in the school in one of three private locations which included a conference room, the PE office, which did not have a view to the gymnasium, and a small meeting room. Interviews took place at a time convenient for the classroom schedule and did not occur during PE class time. They were digitally recorded, lasted an average of 20 min, and were transcribed verbatim.

**Reflective Notes.** Reflective notes were taken by the field researcher over the course of the study development, at the end of the day in reviewing observation field notes, and following the interviews. These notes served as feedback for the field researcher in assessing her interviewing and observation skills. They also afforded the opportunity for initial interpretation of the data and were a source of verification for the data analysis (Patton, 2002).
Data Analysis

A preliminary exploratory analysis (Creswell, 2005) was performed to get a general sense of the data by listening to the audio recordings of the interviews, reading the transcripts, and reviewing the drawings, field and reflective notes in their entirety. The primary source of data analysis was the textual interviews. The other triangulating data were used to support and/or challenge the interpretations of the interviews. The drawings themselves were not analyzed as separate units, but the narrative from them formed part of the textual analysis, which was performed on the interview data (MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004). Following this initial exploration, data were then organized and coded to build descriptions and themes (Creswell, 2005). This was done by highlighting transcript sections of interest and remaining open to ideas, in an inductive discovery oriented approach (Patton, 2002). Following this inductive strategy, analysis and interpretation continued in a deductively oriented approach, intentionally using the constructs of alienation and focusing on patterns in the data in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. The analytic strategies of categorical aggregation and direct interpretations were used within the inductive and deductive approaches. Categorical aggregation denotes the collection of relevant information from the coded data and direct interpretation refers to drawing key meanings from this information (Stake, 1995).

Trustworthiness

A range of techniques consistent with the purpose and design of the study were used to establish trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). The triangulation of multiple data sources was used to gather information accurately and in various ways, allowing for multiple perspectives to be represented and interpretations to be evaluated (Stake, 1995). The reflective notes provided an audit trail of decisions made throughout the research process and, for the field researcher, a source of reflexive practice in acknowledging her own assumptions and biases (Patton, 2002). The process of engaging in reflective note taking also assisted the field researcher in monitoring researcher bias. Along with writing and reviewing these reflections, ongoing peer debriefing with another researcher, over the course of the study, helped to recognize the field researcher’s subjectivity. Member checking occurred continuously on an informal basis during the interviews, by asking the children to repeat what they said or to confirm the interviewer’s paraphrasing of responses, and formally, using a modified member checking approach by way of a second interview with three of the children (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). These three children were selected because of their high levels of engagement in the first interview, their ongoing interest in the study (e.g., these students regularly asked questions of the researcher), and because they were rich sources of information. The purpose of these interviews was to gather more information and to provide the children an opportunity to elaborate, not to confirm overall study interpretations. Discussions between the field researcher and a second coder, another researcher in the field of inquiry, occurred on several occasions, resulting in mutually agreed upon themes and their interpretations. Where rare interpretive differences emerged, the researchers revisited the textual data repeatedly and used the other triangulating data sources to reach consensus. Finally, the qualifications of the field researcher were also an important contributor to the quality of this study (Patton, 2002). Along
with interviewer training and expertise in the theoretical concepts of this study, the field researcher had taught PE in schools to elementary children for several years. She was therefore familiar with the nature of the PE setting and the children who took part in the study, which contributed to her ability to develop rapport, to collect relevant information, and to perform a thorough analysis and synthesis of the data.

**Results**

Case study researchers “seek to portray the case comprehensively, using ample but non-technical description and narrative” (Stake, 1995, p. 134). We begin and end the results with descriptive vignettes to provide greater insight into the case. Within this section, the findings are presented using description and narrative in the form of three central themes, using quotes from the children. The main themes: (a) degree of control, (b) meaning, and (c) social factors, were based on the alienation constructs of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation, respectively. Following analysis of the data, the researcher elected to identify these main themes in more neutral terms given the variety of responses from the children. The themes are not mutually exclusive as there is overlap in that ideas presented in one theme may reemerge in another.

**Entry Vignette**

The doors to the gym flew open and the sound of children talking and laughing filled the air. The brightly lit gymnasium was soon occupied by 23 children, most of them clustered in small groups, chatting among each other and some enjoying the sound of their own loud voices in the vast open space. Many felt the physical freedom of the large space, running in spurts, jumping randomly, and spinning in circles. The whistle blew; some appeared eager to play while others seemed content to keep socializing and missed the instructions altogether. Floor hockey was the game of the day, celebrated by some, but lamented by others. The noise level grew louder as sticks clacked together, banged or scraped on the floor. Players called each others’ names continuously, before almost every pass of the puck. Mary plopped down on the bench and let out an audible sigh, “I really hate floor hockey”. Rick, one of the most athletic children in the class, yelled from the floor, “That’s a foul, he pushed me”. Two girls played with their pinnies on their heads as the action continued around them. The fast paced rhythm of the game seemed to separate the more skilled participants from those more noticeably on the outskirts of the action. The teacher whistled, then shouted, “Game over!” It was obvious that for some it was a very short time to play; for others, an eternity.

**Degree of Control**

The theme of degree of control reflected the alienation construct of powerlessness. In discussing issues related to control in PE, the children responded by describing experiences and situations on a continuum from having to not having control. The importance of skill and choice were discussed often as the children spoke about control in the PE context.
**Skill Level.** Low skill level in particular was highlighted when discussing lack of control, primarily because of the consequences associated with it. Feeling judged by peers because of lower skill levels was commonly referred to by the children and was often associated with feeling embarrassed. Not having the ability to play was recognized as important in games in particular. When talking with the interviewer about dislikes in PE class, Tessa, who demonstrated low skill, shared being “afraid to get embarrassed…like you’re afraid you just don’t fit into the game and you don’t do well and you’re afraid that your team’s gonna get mad at you for doing the wrong thing.” In addition to feeling embarrassed, being ridiculed by peers due to lower skill levels was also a reality for some children. Don, who through observation was perceived by the field researcher as also having low skill and the only child in the study who was overweight, shared his experience: “Push ups, I can’t do those very well. It bothers me ‘cause everyone else can do it and I can’t. Abe makes fun of me. ‘you’re sucky, you don’t even know how to do a push up.’” Similarly, in her “bad day in PE” drawing Karen wrote the caption, “Why does she have to be in goal?” Karen explained that this was what she thought the other players would be saying about having her play goalie for the team because she didn’t think she was very skilled. Skill level was also an important component of team selection that contributed to a sense of having little control. Mary conveyed a story about a nonskilled player at her previous school. She said, “[They] didn’t pick him ‘cause they thought he was a bad player, and at goalie and stuff he’d always let these goals in….everyone calls him names.” The consequence of not being selected resulted in some children’s nonparticipation, as Jess described one classmate who would “just sit on the bench” for the whole class. Lack of control was also discussed by the children in relation to bad days in PE when teams were unbalanced, because “most of the good players were on the other team.”

Although lack of control with regard to low skill tended to dominate the interview discussions, instances of having control were associated with being skillful. In particular, gender differences in discussions of skill, with boys more often identified as, “more athletic” and “better”, were perceived as resulting in them having more control over outcomes. Not surprisingly, situations related to skill level were associated with enjoyment and lack of enjoyment. Talia, who had a lower skill level, suggested that “you’d probably want to do gym more often because you’re better at the activities.” In contrast, Alison said, “If you’re not good at soccer, and you play soccer a lot, then you’re not really having fun cause you’re not very good.” Finally, Mary shared, “I’m like bad at it [floor hockey], and I just hate playing,” illustrating how low perceived skill level in specific activities affected enjoyment.

**Choice.** All of the children spoke about the importance of choice when discussing control in PE. A number of children referred to voting on which activity to play, as a way to exercise choice. This could have positive or negative outcomes. Mark and Carson both talked about getting “to choose what we do for gym” as something to look forward to. However, Karen described how children having choices did not always work out in her favor. She said, “Sometimes we’ll have a vote between floor hockey or dodgeball…maybe you feel like playing dodgeball one day, and everyone else votes floor hockey so then you might feel kind of like you wouldn’t want to play as much.” Not wanting to play or putting in low
effort was often discussed when the children spoke about not having choice and little control. In discussing what might happen when the teacher makes unilateral activity decisions, Rachel, the most highly skilled girl in the class, said, “All the other girls don’t like ball hockey….they don’t try and they just sort of sit there.” Carson suggested that when children do not have choices “they don’t feel good, they don’t like it and wish they had more say.”

Some children talked about choice and degree of control in terms of partnering and team selection. Ann described a situation of being a team captain and the positives of getting to pick her friends. However, she indicated that the children who were selected last “won’t like playing that game anymore because [of the fear] of being the last one picked again….they’d probably fake an injury or fake being sick.” This example illustrates a dichotomy in that when choice is afforded to some children, such as captains selecting teams, it removes a sense of control for the children being selected or not selected. This is further complicated when team captains reluctantly pick from among the last few children.

Finally, the children also spoke about choice and control when describing situations where PE was used by the teacher as a privilege or punishment to manage behavior. Carson explained that when the children behaved well the teacher would let the students pick teams so everyone could play with someone they knew. In contrast, Mary shared that “there was this time when my class wasn’t behaving and we had to do like push-ups and jumping jacks and stuff, and we had to run laps.” The consequences of not having a say over time were also explored. When asked about the long term impact of not having choices, the children indicated it would result in “not lik[ing] gym” and not wanting to play leading to eventual withdrawal.

**Meaning**

The second major theme represented in the data was meaning. This theme reflects the alienation construct of meaninglessness and was explored in terms familiar to the children such as, useful and having value. Although the meaningfulness of PE was described by a few of the children, most often they shared perspectives related to a perceived lack of meaning.

A number of children identified boredom with a lack of meaning in PE. Conversations with the children about the usefulness of PE revealed that repetition of activities or activities perceived to be purposeless contributed to the feeling that PE was not personally relevant. Activities were perceived in this way when, according to Jess, “every gym class we did the same thing and it gets boring after a while.” These sentiments were echoed by Colby, who said, “the activity – that could also get boring too – cause if it’s something they don’t like…” Several of the girls associated specific activities, such as soccer, floor hockey, and running, with boredom and expressed a desire for more meaningful activities, such as dance and gymnastics, to be included in the PE program. When asked why she thought “running laps is the worst thing ever” and was part of PE, Rachel said, “I don’t know….there’s no reason, just for running.” A number of the children indicated that running laps “wastes time,” taking away opportunities to play games. Children also questioned the meaningfulness of PE in relation to learning. Alison shared that some students might not find PE useful “cause you don’t really learn anything.” Similarly, Ann shared how fun could contribute to meaningfulness despite not
recognizing learning outcomes as central to PE. She enjoyed PE because it afforded “a period where you just don’t really have to learn anything, well, you kind of are learning things, but in a fun way.”

Although many children described a lack of meaningful participation opportunities in PE, they also referred to meaningful aspects linked to future relevance associated with employment and health. A frequent reflection shared by the children was that PE involvement could lead to professional sport opportunities in the future. Colby, who was highly skilled in PE, shared, “For me, I want to grow up and try to get into the national hockey league...now that we’re doing kind of floor hockey and things like that, like teamwork and things.” Mary shared that PE would be meaningful “if you’re gonna be like an Olympic person that’ll [PE] help.” Physical education was viewed by some as meaningful for the future if someone wanted to be a PE teacher or have “a job that you need to be active” but not relevant “if you have a job that you are sitting down.” Several of the children, however, did view PE as a way to be “active and healthy.” Jess attested that PE was “helping you build up your energy…and you’re getting lots of exercise.” She saw this as valuable for later, as “exercising helps you when you’re older...then you’d be more energetic later and it would be easier for you to walk a long ways.” While Don also recognized the potential health benefits, his dislike of PE remained a barrier. He shared that, “some people don’t really like gym. I wish, I wish I liked it so I could be healthy.”

The students were also asked to share ways to increase the meaningfulness of PE. In particular, children desired “activities that everyone liked” and “something new every week.” Children suggested activities such as swimming, horseback riding, trampoline, and tennis. Beyond the type of activity, children also spoke about changing activity delivery. Mary saw the value in changing rules to involve more players in a game and create equal chances to touch the ball. Likewise, Jess and Colby shared a desire for more active involvement in games instead of “sit[ting] down until the whole class goes.” Finally, children also shared a desire for better equipment, more space, and opportunities to have PE outside more often, as ways to make PE more personally meaningful.

**Social Factors**

The final theme of this study was tied to the social experiences in the PE setting. When asked questions about the construct of social isolation, children shared dichotomous perspectives. On one hand, children spoke about the importance of having friends and how taking part with friends in PE increased enjoyment. On the other hand, children also referred to feeling rejected in PE and not having friends. These feelings were associated with feeling left out due to low skill, not being selected for teams, and being ridiculed or bullied.

The opportunity to be with friends in PE was very salient for the children. For Kristine, a “good day” in gym, was when “all my friends are on my team.” In her drawing of a “bad day” in gym the importance of having friends was further emphasized in the caption above her illustration of running laps, which read, “The only good thing about this is I’m running with my friends.” Rachel suggested that, “the reason you want to be with your friends is because you work better with them and then if you work with them better, then you’ll have a funner time.” While Rick indicated it did not matter to him if he was on the same team with his friends, he
did recognize that for many children this was critical as they would feel “sad, kind of, ‘cause you don’t get to be with your friends ever.”

In contrast to how having and being with friends could contribute positively to PE experiences, the children often shared stories and experiences related to feeling rejected in the PE setting. Similar to the discussion of skill in the theme degree of control, being lower skilled than classmates could result in feelings of rejection. Mary shared, “There was this one time…in handball the other day no one was passing me the ball so I kind of felt left out, ‘cause I can get goals and stuff but not all the time.” Jess recounted a story about a classmate who felt left out. She said, “If someone wants to be goalie and then someone says ‘no you can’t ‘cause you’re not good enough,’ they feel like they aren’t good enough to play so you feel left out.” Also, in keeping with degree of control, the team selection process was significant in children’s experiences as evidenced in the following quote from Mary about a classmate:

Nobody really liked him ‘cause he was annoying ‘cause he bothered everybody and stuff and nobody would pick him first for the team, nobody would pass him the ball, no one would like let him be goalie, nobody would let him do anything. Then finally one day we were playing soccer outside and I was a team captain and I pick Shawn first and he was so happy.

Being given “a chance” by other children to play on a team or have a specific role was viewed as important to countering feelings of rejection, but, overwhelmingly, the team selection process was associated with feeling left out and not wanting to take part. Instances of bullying in PE were also recounted by a number of the children, intensifying the experiences of rejection. The children shared examples of being called fat, being yelled at, made fun of for cultural reasons, and being tripped on purpose. For example, in referring to an incident she observed, Tessa said, “he says to Abe, ‘you’re fat.’ …well look at him, they’re both the same, and then they pick on him….and everybody makes fun of First Nation [i.e., Aboriginal] and we’re like, ‘what’s wrong with First Nation?’” Jess provided a personal example when she shared, “if you don’t make the shot people yell at you…it makes me feel bad” and then added that other kids “don’t like to be yelled at [either].” The children indicated that, over time, these kinds of experiences would lead to activity drop-out and overall disengagement from the PE setting.

**Closing Vignette**

It was a beautiful day for gym outdoors. “I hope we won’t have to run laps around this field,” pleaded one of the students. As we waited for the teacher, clusters of children socializing filled half the field and a few began a spontaneous game of tag, chasing and fleeing. The children seemed to enjoy the wide open space and the opportunity to interact with each other for the brief moments before the teacher arrived. “Get into groups of three,” requested the teacher. Students quickly called each others’ names, ran toward each other, or waved their friends over. Group division happened rapidly, except for Alice. She stepped back and stood at the perimeter, waiting and watching the action, as if expecting to be the “left over”. Tessa was also without a group, and looked around anxiously. Within a minute all the groups were formed leaving Alice, Tessa and me. A few awkward glances followed by the
shrugging of shoulders in unison. Although the effects were obvious, the children expected and accepted it, not being chosen again.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this exploratory research study was to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of alienation in the PE setting from the perspectives of sixth grade children. The phenomenon was explored by asking children about the three constructs of alienation (powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation) in neutral terms the children could understand and these constructs were reflected in the three themes presented in the results. In the discussion, we highlight similarities to existing research, implications for practice, considerations for future directions and limitations.

**Degree of Control**

When asked questions related to powerlessness, the children expressed the importance of having some degree of control over what occurs in PE. With regard to skill, most often the children spoke about low skill and the possible negative repercussions, such as judgment by peers, embarrassment, ridicule, and not being selected for teams, which were also associated with not enjoying PE. These findings are in agreement with the literature that highlights that students' perceptions of their own low skill or the low skill of others may be associated with feelings of alienation, in the form of lack of control or powerlessness (Carlson, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Portman, 1995a; 1995b). This was evident in the case of one boy who was observed as having low skill. This finding adds to the literature that identifies boys, who have low skill, as especially vulnerable to negative experiences that could lead to alienation from PE (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). An important consideration for PE teachers and PE teacher training is the selection of activities that teach skills and provide opportunities for improving skills in a nonjudgmental class atmosphere to provide learning opportunities for children of all skill levels. Choice was also a critical part of perceived control from the perspectives of the children and was associated with various positive aspects of PE such as, enjoyment and having a sense of control. However, the children more often spoke about having a lack of choice and the frustration, lack of effort, and disengagement that could potentially ensue. Similar to skill, several researchers have recognized the importance of choice as a factor affecting the degree of control students have over what happens in PE (Carlson, 1995; Couturier et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2008; Martel et al., 2002; Olafson, 2002).

The stories shared by the children in this study support the idea that the consequences of low skill and lack of choice on an occasional basis, could include nonparticipation, frustration, and a lack of enjoyment. The key consideration for alienation, however, appeared to be degree of control. According to some of the children, the frequency of negative experiences associated with low skill and no choice, therefore no control, could over time lead to a strong dislike of PE. This dislike is one factor that has the potential to contribute to the alienation process. Improved pedagogical knowledge could significantly reduce these experiences. For example, the approach of shared control may be one way practitioners can
address some of the issues tied to low skill and lack of choice that might lead to feelings of powerlessness and alienation in the PE setting. Shared control in PE can be practiced by the teacher through clear communication of goals, open negotiation by consultation, allowing group work, and offering appropriate options and choice (Stork & Sanders, 2000). While the teacher in this study did provide choices, providing the same choices over time does not constitute developmentally appropriate choices for all students. Through an intentional design to include the perspectives of children, “students can be physically and emotionally drawn into lessons when teachers share control with them” (Kovar, Combs, Campbell, Napper-Owens, & Worrell, 2009, p. 278). Exploring how the benefits of shared control could contribute to a climate of comfort for children of all skill levels and afford choice leading to a sense of control over their PE experiences, may be one way to positively engage children and reduce the likelihood that feelings of powerlessness leading to alienation may emerge. This type of caring relationship between teacher and students could also enhance the experiences of children, who have low skill, in creating a safer environment to take part. It could also assist teachers in developing a curriculum that resonates with children’s needs and varied skill levels.

**Meaning**

In exploring the construct of meaninglessness, the children spoke about meaning in PE in relation to both the present and future on a continuum from meaningless to meaningful. A lack of meaning in PE was associated with boredom and repetition of activities. Suggestions for change included adding variety to activities and alternative forms of activity delivery. Lack of meaning was also associated with “not learning anything.” While some children made connections between “not learning anything” and meaninglessness, others related the meaning of PE to the future vocation one might pursue. Taking part in activities that were personally meaningful and seeing the relevance of participation led to a desire to engage in the PE setting. In contrast, a perceived lack of meaning and relevance led to disinterest and withdrawal. Cothran and Ennis (1999) found similar results in exploring students’ need for relevance and connection in PE. Furthermore, Carlson (1995) outlined the importance of meaning and the need for PE to make sense for children. When this is not the case and students do not find personal value in PE, being required to take part may leave some children feeling alienated. Although this study was not an evaluation of the children’s current PE context, the description of activities that did not hold personal value for the children suggest a disparity in purpose and pedagogical content that have the potential to result in disinterest and withdrawal from PE.

From the perspectives of the sixth grade children in this study, the most salient component of lack of meaning was described in terms of activities (e.g., running laps) that were perceived as meaningless. It is possible that the persistence of meaningless situations over time in the form of activities that children view as irrelevant may contribute to alienation. Pagnano (2006) suggested the use of best pedagogical practices, such as, cooperative learning, critical thinking, student-centered learning, and curricular models such as TGfU [Teaching Games for Understanding], as ways teachers can promote meaning in their PE classes. While many of these concepts
are not new to physical educators, it remains challenging to implement them, yet critical to emphasize them in PE teacher education training. Chen (1998) suggested that educators need to recognize the interests and desires of their students to help them transform PE activities into a personal challenge to result in ongoing interest and engagement in long term physical activity. It appears that the actual activities themselves (content) and the teaching methods (delivery) have a significant influence on meaning in PE for students. It is advantageous for teachers to be aware of the perceptions children have about PE (engagement and alienation) in terms of the meaning it holds for them, to consciously align pedagogical intentions with the needs of students. If PE teachers are cognizant of planning for meaningful experiences, it follows that children will have opportunities to apply meaning to their experiences and reap the benefits in the long term.

Social Factors

The children in this study reported a dichotomy of social factors in PE tied to having friends and feeling rejected. Having friends was viewed as particularly important and contributed significantly to the enjoyment of PE. Conversely, feeling rejected was tied to situations of being left out, which was often associated with having low skill, not being chosen during team selection, and being ridiculed or bullied. Some of these experiences may be the result of ineffective PE lessons that did not promote positive social interactions because of an emphasis on competition or alienating practices such as partner or team picking. These findings are illustrative of previous work exploring the experiences of students in PE (Carlson, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Martel et al. 2002; Portman, 1995a).

While the literature suggests that peer relationships become increasingly more important in early adolescence than in early childhood (Salkind, 2002), it was clear from the responses of the children in this study that peers factored significantly in their PE experiences. According to Gallahue and Cleland Donnelly (2003), social interaction is one of the potential healthy benefits of PE. However, there is also evidence to suggest that children “feel alone, they withdraw, and feel isolated from their peers in physical education class” (Carlson, 1995, p.467). Strategies to encourage positive social interactions among children in PE have also received attention in the literature. Group membership (Cothran & Ennis, 1999) is one approach with the potential to not only improve social interactions among peers within the PE setting, but to also address other issues associated with alienation. According to these authors, school membership occurs when students display the components of sense of attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief in PE. Cothran and Ennis (1999) emphasized PE (beyond regular school subjects) as a unique opportunity to promote positive interactions between students and between students and teachers. They recommended that connection be addressed to meet students’ needs to increase attachment to each other socially (social factors) and to PE (meaning). Furthermore, these authors suggested that relevance of PE could be addressed by scrutinizing the choices provided in the curriculum and also how those choices are offered to students. By directing attention toward students’ need for connection and relevance through these recommendations for membership, teachers may also be addressing issues related to all three constructs of alienation. Addressing these needs may have the potential to negate some of the circumstances
that lead to alienation. Teachers can play an important role in helping to develop positive relationships among peers in the PE setting, not only through the implementation of appropriate curriculum, but also by creating a caring climate. As part of establishing a caring climate, teachers could also sensitize students to the issue of weight and cultural difference.

**Future Directions**

The findings of this study, while supportive of much of the literature already produced about children’s experiences in PE, expand on previous work in important ways. One of the key questions emerging from our study surrounds the issue of persistence of negative experiences and threshold in understanding when these experiences constitute alienation. It is critical that PE teachers and teachers in training recognize the potential long term implications of pedagogical structures that not only produce negative experiences and feelings on the part of children, but have the potential to lead to alienation. Exploring how concepts such as group membership, student-centered learning, shared control, and different curricular models, are perceived by children is likely to encourage effective pedagogical practices that lead to positive participation. Incorporating the child’s perspective is an important part of enhancing these practices that can significantly influence if children find connection, meaning, and relevance in PE. Finally, we also encourage the use of case study as an important way of learning about the intricacies of children’s experiences in PE and about best practices. According to Merriam (1998), “insight gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research” (p. 19).

**Limitations**

While the perspectives of children are recognized as essential for the understanding of childhood issues (Scott, 2000), interviewing children about a complex issue, such as alienation, was particularly challenging. The interviewer took special care to balance her research interests of gaining knowledge with a respect for the integrity of the participants (Kvale, 2007). There were many occasions where some of the core issues that may be at the heart of alienation, were not further explored due to the researcher’s ethical responsibilities to attend to the comfort levels of the children. Although techniques to ensure understanding were effectively used (e.g., pilot interview, child friendly language, checking for understanding), translating alienation from an adult concept to a child concept presented some difficulty. Understanding alienation as a phenomenon in its entirety may be significantly different from understanding each of the three constructs separately. Children’s perceptions about how the three themes (degree of control, meaning, and social factors) might be interrelated, despite significant overlap, is still unclear. The use of instrumental case study was effective in exploring alienation; however, to add more significantly to pedagogical practice, having a broader unit of analysis that also included the teacher, PE specialist and the aide would have been beneficial. Finally, while a strength of case study is its ability to add depth to the understanding of particular issue in a specific context, transferability of the knowledge it generates is challenged by the depth it seeks.
Conclusion

The results of this study serve as a reminder that despite efforts to counter the negative experiences that may lead to alienation, PE continues to be a site of discomfort for many children and that the processes we employ in PE require ongoing scrutiny and problem solving. Studying other settings to learn about best practices is one important way to learn about what constitutes effective PE and to prevent the withdrawal and frustration children experience when the pedagogical structures we employ are not effective. Finally, we also encourage the use of self-reflection and listening to the voices of children as key contributors to the development and implementation of pedagogical practices that are proactive and responsive to the needs of children.

Note

1. Karl Marx is credited with the original version of alienation in the 1840s, but this work is outside of the scope of this paper (see Coser, 2003 for more information).

References


