As physical educators, we can almost universally agree that if we want our middle school students to adopt a physically active lifestyle, then they must engage in movement experiences that are personally meaningful. Many of us probably embrace an active lifestyle because we find movement to be a great source of pleasure, a delightful experience, more than just fun (Kretchmar, 2005). Yet, teaching for meaningful experiences is no easy task.

Understanding the concepts of “meaning” and “meaningfulness” may help us understand why some experiences touch us in a more profound way than other experiences do and why some experiences then contribute to positive lifestyle changes (Kretchmar, 2000b). Chen (1998) explained that meaning in physical education should consist of (a) students’ perceptions of the content of physical education, (b) students’ intention to act when they experience the content, and (c) students’ perceptions of the knowledge and skills in the content. On the other hand, meaningfulness, a related term we also need to understand, represents (a) the students’ desire to achieve a purpose (i.e., setting a personal fitness goal), (b) the students’ striving to achieve a goal, and (c) the inner harmony students derive from engaging in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

To help students create meaning from their physical education experience Chen (1998) suggests that we need to “... help students transform the purpose of an activity into a personal desire, turn their interest in an activity into a personal striving, and bridge their knowledge and skill into willingness so they continue to pursue a physically active lifestyle” (p. 304). Thus, the purpose of this article will be to provide readers with several suggestions and ideas for promoting meaning and meaningfulness for middle school students in physical education based on their unique developmental characteristics.

An overarching objective of a quality physical education program, as defined by the NASPE standards (2005), is to prepare our students for a lifetime of physical activity. Physically educated students possess the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to enjoy participation in a variety of physical activities. The literature indicates, however, that since 1991 fewer high school students are electing to take physical education (Grunbaum et al., 2004). Lower participation in high school physical education suggests the need to make physical education more meaningful for all students in middle school so they find meaning and possibly delight in some physical activities to embrace an active lifestyle.

There is consensus that traditional pedagogies have not created adequate and poignant meaning to accompany the motor skill, fitness, or recreational activities that are taught in schools (Chen, 1998). Derived from the literature there are three basic strategies that have been used, with limited success, for the promotion of meaning in physical education (see Kretchmar, 2000b).
for more detailed description). The prudential approach emphasizes that movement is a useful tool, such as a means to avoid obesity and possible early death. The thought is this: What could be more meaningful than a direct and simple message? The intellectual approach places emphasis on cognitive understanding (e.g., physiological, biomechanical principles) of content as a way to enhance meaning. The thought is that intellectual engagement with movement content is a way to be meaningfully engaged. The affective approach emphasizes enjoyment of physical activities with a focus on fun. The emphasis pedagogically is on participation, achievement, novelty, and other aspects that have the potential to be fun (Kretchmar, 2000a).

Although the three approaches have significant merit and reflect good practice, practitioners find that for many of our students these approaches fall short of turning students on to a lifetime of physical activity. Recently, researchers have suggested that deeper meaning comes from dwelling deep in the subculture of an activity for a period of time (Kretchmar, 2000b), selecting content (e.g., creative dance) and methods (e.g., cooperative learning, critical thinking) that help students access deeper levels of meaning to experience delight in movement (Kretchmar, 2005; Nilges, 2004; Richard & Wallian, 2005).

So, how can physical educators create movement experiences that are meaningful for their middle school students? I propose four ideas that include acknowledging and understanding the unique qualities of middle school students, adopting constructivist student-centered approaches to instruction, using cooperative learning to enhance social interdependence, and using an instructional model and strategies that require critical thinking and foreground delight in movement as steps to create meaningful movement experiences.

First, we must acknowledge, celebrate, and fully appreciate the uniqueness of early adolescence. Middle school students are often the most maligned and misunderstood age group in the U.S. They are often referred to with pejorative phrases such as “range of the strange” and “hormones with feet” (Family Connections, 2006). During early adolescence, children move through puberty at varying rates and times. Middle school is the time that is characterized by significant change in all students. Change includes the type and nature of interpersonal relationships with parents and teachers, an increasing emphasis on peer relationships, increasing cognitive abilities, and rapid physical changes to the body (Mohnsen, 2003).

A closer look at some of the physical changes experienced by middle school students is warranted to understand how the changes to the body may influence students’ meaning making of physical education. According to Family Connections (2006), young adolescents experience rapid, irregular physical growth often resulting in clumsiness and a feeling of having “two left feet.” Movement experiences that allow for a variety of responses, such as challenge tasks or creative dance, may be more appropriate for the middle school curriculum than sport-related games that require a specific skill response. In addition, middle school students are concerned with bodily changes that accompany sexual maturation and a rapid growth spurt that may leave them tired, restless, and with awkward posture. Their concerns become magnified because they begin to make comparisons with peers who may experience physical changes at a different time or rate. Middle school students, therefore, come to the gymnasium with a complex combination of new intellectual abilities, new social interests, and with changing, unfamiliar bodies. Movement experience must be designed cognizant of these developmental characteristics.

Second, meaningful movement experiences must include pedagogical practices that engage the unique and emerging physical, intellectual, social, and emotional characteristics of middle school students. Using activities that place the student at the center of the learning process is a strategy to increase meaningfulness. Student-centered learning is congruent with their emerging cognitive and social developmental readiness characteristics. Student-centered learning is consistent with a constructivist theory perspective of learning that suggests that students are capable of directing their own learning (Fosnot, 1996). Students in a constructivist class learn to ask questions, discover in their own way new knowledge, and make connections for themselves between new knowledge and previous knowledge. In short, student understanding of content (i.e., the skills, traditions, commitments, and pathways to competence) is the focus in the teaching-learning process. Students must be given time to search for deeper levels of meaning by exploring an area of interest in depth, and in their own way. It is important to remember that meaning comes after a student enters the subculture of an activity as a result of committing to learning and staying with an activity for some time. Meaning is not a precursor for activity as is often assumed (Kretchmar, 2005).

Third, a specific instructional model aligned with a constructivist approach, the cooperative learning (CL) model (Perkins, 1999), may enhance meaningfulness of movement experiences for middle school students (Dyson, 2005). CL provides students with opportunities to work cooperatively in small groups or teams and require reliance on each other to learn content (Perkins, 1999). Students are responsible for learning the content and for helping group members learn (Dyson, 2005). For example, a teacher may introduce a CL activity such as the Pairs-Check-Perform. Students work in pairs and provide feedback to each other, similar to Mosston and Ashworth’s

“... acknowledge, celebrate ... appreciate the uniqueness of early adolescence.”

Richard & Wallian, 2005).
(2002) reciprocal style of teaching. As students develop the ability to work in different roles, they could then work in groups of three as coach (provide learning cues), encourager (motivational feedback and praise), and recorder (record classmates progress on task sheet; Dyson, 2005). By taking on multiple roles, and completing tasks with their group that requires positive group interdependence, students have opportunities to engage meaningfully with the content and with each other.

A fourth strategy that can be used to promote meaningfulness is to engage students in learning activities that require critical thinking, a key aspect of a constructivist approach to learning (McBride, 2004; McBride & Cleland, 1998; Woods & Book, 1995). Several broad critical thinking strategies have been shown to support student learning of games. Critical thinking strategies include (a) letting students explore and figure out a problem, (b) asking open ended questions to encourage debate among the students and with the teacher, (c) having students practice a solution to a movement problem to stabilize their use of a movement, (d) comparing and contrasting specific characteristics of motor skills, and (e) examining similarities and differences among motor skills, game strategies, and creative dance sequences (Richard & Wallian, 2005; Woods & Book, 1995). Researchers have found that verbalization and questioning can improve students’ learning of information, their learning of modeled actions, and their self-efficacy, which contributes to self-regulated learning (Richard & Wallian, 2005). The opportunity to self-regulate or practice on your own is a feature that meaningful movement experiences often contain.

A current approach that foregrounds critical thinking is the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) approach. TGfU is a learner and game-centered instructional model that engages students in critical thinking about games (Griffin & Patton, 2005). TGfU grew out of dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to teaching games that focused on technical aspects of games [see Bunker & Thorpe, 1986; Mauldon & Redfern, 1981] to include ways to make games more relevant to learners and to increase learners motivation [Griffin & Patton, 2005]. An important aim of TGfU is to teach students to play well and to enjoy activity (Kretchmar, 2005).

TGfU holds considerable promise as a pedagogy aimed at affective excellence. As a holistic approach that relies on understanding and meaning . . . it is well positioned to pursue ambitious subjective goals. (p. 210)

As a final note, physical education is being positioned as a tool to reduce obesity and promote a physically active lifestyle; however, physical educators can not neglect the importance of striving to provide movement experiences that fill students with both delight and pleasure. A teaching and learning environment that includes student-centered learning, cooperative learning, critical thinking, and curricular models such as TGfU are steps we can take to create meaning for our students in physical education.

References


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