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Fostering Joy in Elementary Physical Education Classes: A Collaborative Self-Study

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Abstract

The following study examined pedagogical approaches to foster joyful experiences for students in elementary physical education. This research evaluated the literature on what teaching strategies support joyful experiences and completed a self-study of practice to evaluate implementation of 'joy discovery' strategies to better understand their impact on student experiences. Through critical friend meetings, Ashley and George shared teaching experiences across one school year. Four turning points were identified that supported our teaching for joy and growth as educators: (a) a need to prioritize student centred motor competence, (b) address optimal challenge levels, (c) value of relationships and student voice, and (d) the power of people. Our findings encourage developmentally appropriate movement opportunities, motor skill development and competence development embedded throughout lessons, decision-making with students for social interaction, flexibility in planning based on student feedback and engaging students in discussions and reflective practices to create a space for curiosity and democratic practice.

Keywords**:** joy discovery; teacher role; motor competence; intrinsic motivation; self-study

Résumé

La présente étude a examiné des approches pédagogiques visant à favoriser des expériences joyeuses chez les élèves en éducation physique au primaire. Cette recherche a d'abord analysé la littérature portant sur les stratégies d'enseignement susceptibles de soutenir des expériences joyeuses, puis a mené une démarche d'auto-étude de la pratique afin d'évaluer la mise en œuvre de stratégies de « découverte de joie » et de mieux comprendre leur impact sur les expériences des élèves. À travers des rencontres d'amis critiques, Ashley et George ont partagé leurs expériences d'enseignement pendant une année scolaire. Quatre moments charnières ont été identifiés comme soutenant à la fois un enseignement axé sur la joie et leur développement professionnel en tant qu'éducateurs: a) la nécessité de prioriser les habiletés motrices centrées sur l'élève; b) la prise en compte de niveaux de défi optimaux, c) la valeur des relations et de la voix des élèves, et d) la force du collectif. Les résultats encouragent la mise en place d'occasions de mouvement adaptées au développement des élèves, l'intégration du développement des habiletés motrices et des compétences tout au long des leçons, la prise de décision partagée avec les élèves pour favoriser l'interaction sociale, la flexibilité dans la planification en fonction des rétroactions des élèves, ainsi que l'engagement des élèves dans des discussions et des pratiques réflexives afin de créer un espace propice à la curiosité et à une pratique démocratique.

Mots-clés**:** découverte de la joie; rôle de l'enseignant; habiletés motrices; motivation intrinsèque; auto-étude

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Introduction

As elementary physical education (PE) teachers, we (Ashley and George) are passionate about teaching PE and had joyful experiences in our own K-12 schooling. We strive to create these positive and joyful experiences for our students through our planning and engagement in PE with our students. However, it is evident from our experiences and the literature that the experiences of *joy* in PE are not everyone's. Unfortunately, we often hear teachers remarking that PE is *easy* because teachers simply 'roll out the ball' and there's evidence that PE has been historically a 'low status' subject (Blankenship & Ayers, 2010), not always taken seriously and guilty of poor practices (Williams, 1992; 1994). Students express frustration about PE due to repetitive activities, lack of fun, or feeling unskilled. These issues align with research on 'traditional' forms of PE (Ladwig et al., 2018), which focuses on sports or competition (Kipp, 2017). Therefore, we (Ashley and George) wanted to explore how we can instill more joyful experiences within our elementary PE classes for more positive student experiences. We understand joy as "the feeling we encounter when we are carried away, enthralled and captivated" (Kretchmar, 2008, p. 7). The growing body of research on Meaningful Physical Education (Meaningful PE; Fletcher et al., 2021) positions joy as a core foundation of that approach. We see this as an opportunity to explore how we can implement strategies in our classes that foster joyful experiences for our students and then share these insights with other teachers. Our self-study had two main objectives: first, we evaluated the literature on teaching strategies and practices that support joyful experiences in PE, and second, we engaged in a self-study of practice to evaluate our implementation of *'joy discovery'* strategies, aligned with Meaningful PE, on the student experience.

Allowing students to discover joy in PE is imperative to develop a love for physical activity (PA) that can transfer into adulthood (Ladwig et al., 2018; Stodden et al., 2008). While it is recognized that PE is commonly viewed as only supporting the physical domain of children's growth and development (Gleddie et al., 2018), it clearly can support the cognitive and affective development of children (Gleddie et al., 2018). We feel that centering the research on the affective domain – students' feelings, attitudes and motivations (Casey et al., 2018), such as joy – can contribute to the body of research that indicates PE is a wholistic subject (Davis et al., 2023; Gleddie & Morgan, 2021). Kretchmar (2006) states, "[i]f we take pains to measure and monitor differences between caloric expenditures, heart rates, and time-on-task, should we not also measure and monitor the quality of experience we find written on the faces of our children and in their body language?" (p. 7). Therefore, to improve students' experiences in PE and create more opportunities to experience joy, we need to better understand how we can plan for joy and the affective domain within PE activities.

Literature Review

Ladwig et al. (2018) noted that negative experiences in PE are impactful as they create feelings of embarrassment and anxiety. However, enjoyment and feeling competent in PE leads to positive memories and lifelong engagement in PA (Barnett et al., 2009; Ladwig et al., 2018); therefore, PE can develop positive attitudes towards PA (Stodden et al., 2008). As teachers, we have a direct impact on children's views and attitudes towards PE, and consequently, lifelong PA. We must be cognizant that "physical education is unique in that it is the only class where one's ability is frequently and obviously demonstrated to classmates" (Goodwin, 1999, p. 211). The questions become: How do PE teachers create joyful experiences in PE? What strategies can they

implement for joy discovery? Following, we highlight three key areas that consistently emerged as impactful for the support of joyful experiences in PE: the role of the teacher, motor competence, and intrinsic motivation.

The Role of the Teacher

PE teachers must plan for the needs of *all* students, regardless of ability and enthusiasm for the subject. For example, many students may be discouraged by competition; therefore, teachers should consider incorporating cooperative activities that focus on challenges to overcome, rather than competitors to defeat (Wright, 2004). Establishing deep relationships with students helps teachers better understand how to help them relate to activities and interact with one another (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022). Ladwig et al. (2018) surveyed 1028 adults about their experiences and memories in PE. The survey revealed that the most common negative memories were embarrassment (34%) and lack of enjoyment (18%), while the best memories were associated with enjoyment (56%) and physical competence (37%). It is important to note that "Memories of enjoyment of PE via the modified PACES [Physical Activity Enjoyment Scale] were the most substantial correlates of present-day attitudes and intentions for PA" (Ladwig et al., 2018, p. 123). Based on these findings, teachers must ensure that their activities are enjoyable, align with and develop students' physical skills, and minimize risk of embarrassment.

Ingulfsvann et al. (2022) identified two joy-activating strategies teachers can use in PE classes: encouraging small gestures, such as smiles, and fostering student involvement in cooperative activities. When the environment is inviting and students feel engaged in PE, joy of movement can be activated (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022). Additionally, it is beneficial to offer students opportunities to choose and to contribute to the creation of the movement environment (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022). This also aligns with Green's (2014) statement that PE curricula should more effectively align with the changing interests of young people. Teachers should involve students in the planning process, giving them autonomy and a voice, which can help increase their motivation to participate (Beni et al., 2017). Beni et al. (2019) also found that planning with and prioritizing the Meaningful PE features (social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence, personally relevant learning, and delight) can have a positive impact on students' experiences of meaningfulness. Beni et al. (2019) also found that teachers need to be "ready and willing to make adjustments throughout the lesson 'in the moment' and in response to the reactions of students" (p. 606). The teacher's role in creating a positive experience in PE is vital for helping students discover and maintain joy in future movement experiences. This should be a central focus throughout planning and implementation processes, not an afterthought (Beni et al., 2019; Stevens & Culpan, 2021).

Importance of Motor Competence

A key outcome of most PE curricula is the development of motor competence (Barnett et al., 2009; Stodden et al., 2008). Having greater motor competence as a child may result in higher self-esteem related to PA and, in turn, increase enjoyment of participation in PA (Barnett et al., 2009). Simply put, when an individual experiences increased enjoyment in an activity, there is a greater likelihood of spontaneous and regular participation in the activities in which joy could be experienced (Barnett et al., 2009; Ladwig et al., 2018). Stodden et al. (2008) found the pleasure gained in PE through motor competence and PA promotes a positive feedback loop for more PA and higher motor competence.

Zhang et al. (2015) found that before the age of 10, perceived motor competence is based on skill mastery, enjoyment, and effort, amongst other things. After age 10, perceived motor competence shifts to a comparison between oneself and peers. By positively impacting student experiences and their ability to achieve higher levels of motor competence in the younger years before extrinsic motivators and peer comparison begin, opportunities for positive engagement with PA increase (Stodden et al., 2008). It is the responsibility of the teacher to provide developmentally appropriate experiences (Smith et al., 2023) and what Beni et al. (2017) describe as 'just right challenge' for the students, as many students quickly become disengaged when the activity is too challenging (Garn & Cothran, 2006). Beni et al. (2019) found "motor competence paired with an appropriate level of challenge was often found to result in fun" (p. 606). Having movement experiences be focused on developmentally appropriateness is essential for enhancing students' learning and joy. Chen (2013) describes that the acquisition for self-motivation is discovered in early experiences in PE. Therefore, providing an environment that supports students to develop motor competence can increase positive, joyful experiences. Furthermore, Gleddie and Morgan (2021) identified that movement competence is key for students' physical literacy journey; when students have perceived motor competence, their motivation and confidence increase. Therefore, ensuring opportunities for motor skill development and refinement through the physical domain is a necessity for the student experience (Gleddie & Morgan, 2021).

Requirement of Intrinsic Motivation

Addressing intrinsic motivation allows students to discover joy in PE and feel personally satisfied, thus leading to the recognition and appreciation for being physically active now and throughout life (Kretchmar, 2008; Stodden et al., 2008; Wright, 2004). When considering the commitment to lifelong PA, some individuals are more easily intrinsically motivated, while others require extrinsic motivation (e.g., friends or family) to maintain participation in sport. Participation here could entail personal meaningfulness, challenge, satisfaction and joy (Beni et al., 2017; Beni, Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2019). Extrinsic benefits could be building comradery with classmates or being seen as competent and skilled by peers (Zhang et al., 2015). Teachers empowering their students through their motor competency development and engagement in PA will help them develop this intrinsic motivation to participate in PE and in turn, discover this sense of joy (Gleddie & Morgan, 2021). Encouraging students to shift from moving for external reasons to moving out of personal desire is challenging (Kretchmar, 2006). Beni et al. (2017) highlight that students are more intrinsically motivated when they are encouraged to make choices for their own PA compared to students who are not directly encouraged. Therefore, teachers should thoughtfully plan lessons that involve students in democratic ways (e.g., student contributions to decision-making; Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2022), incorporate motor competence and seek to foster joyful experiences. Iannucci et al. (2024) examined teachers' experiences and perceptions of enacting student voice and found that the interactional dialogue of question-answer was not a productive way to bring student voice or agency, or efficient for extended engagement. To do so and enhance students' intrinsic motivation to be involved in the conversations, teachers may consider *how* they are engaging student voices and the types of democratic pedagogies that influence the inclusivity of students (Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2022). Teachers need to go beyond basic question-answer dialogue to thoroughly engage students' voice such as using a variety of engagement strategies (e.g., reflections, surveys, personal dialogue). Fletcher and Ní Chróinín (2022) explain that students' experiences of meaningfulness in PE are influenced by teachers having a democratic classroom, in which students who are "actively engaged, agentic, take ownership of their learning,

and are willing and able to use their voices to advocate authentically for their own experiences and those of others" (p. 459). We see student voice, agency, and democratic practices in PE as central for students to be intrinsically motivated.

Methods

Pedagogical Framework

Our research draws on Meaningful PE (Fletcher et al., 2021) as a pedagogical framework to make connections between our teaching experiences and our use of practical strategies to support students' experiences of joy. When considering the Meaningful PE approach, we saw direct links from the literature on the teaching strategies and practices that support joyful experiences in PE. Specifically, Beni et al. (2017) share five features which aid in guiding planning and delivery of PE experiences: social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence and personally relevant learning. We prioritized several Meaningful PE approaches in our planning: motor competence (focusing on just right challenge and student skill development for success) and intrinsically motivating students (making PE fun, just right challenges). We also supported making learning personally relevant and facilitating social interactions in the class. These were intentional strategies used to assist students in finding meaning and joy in their PE experiences. We also reflected on what we were noticing about students' joyful and meaningful experiences and how their experiences may have been influenced by these planning choices to help us better understand practical strategies to support students' experiences of joy.

Research Design/Study Design

Self-study as a methodology is the study of the self in practice (Casey et al., 2018). We wanted to engage in a clear process to improve our teaching practice, rather than only sharing stories. We followed LaBoskey's guidelines for self-study research design, which include: "self-initiated, self-focused, aimed towards improvement, interactive, drawn from multiple data sources and based on trustworthiness" (Casey et al., 2018, p. 58). These design characteristics are highlighted and described in the section(s) below. The research was carried out across the span of eight months between November 2023 and June 2024. As part of two courses (with Doug and Lauren) in our Masters of Education, we were tasked to create a self-initiated and self-focused research study using a practitioner-based research methodology of our choice. We (Ashley and George) decided to collaborate with our shared interest in Meaningful PE/ joy and both taught in elementary schools. The interactive aspect of self-study encouraged us to establish our critical friendship formally and support one another in the planning process of implementing joy discovery strategies as a team. Given that the goal of this research was to evaluate our implementation of *'joy discovery'* strategies and understand the impact on student experience, we used multiple sources of data collection, including observing and collecting data on students' attitudes and feelings towards the lessons. We engaged in teacher observations of student engagement, which allowed for students' perceived feelings and attitudes to be documented. That process supported our self-reflection towards improvement in our teaching and allowed us to draw insights from multiple data sources. With the chosen method of self-study, all research revolved around discussing and unpacking the teaching practices used by us that were effective in facilitating joy discovery for our students. The study received formal ethical approval from the University of Alberta (#Pro00132287) and the involved school districts.

Context

Ashley is a generalist trained teacher who has worked full-time in her elementary school for six years. George is a PE specialist trained teacher who has worked full-time in his elementary school for five years. The authors met in July of 2022 when they began their Masters degrees and had a shared interest in improving student experiences in PE, which inspired this work. Data gathering occurred while Ashley and George were teaching in two elementary schools in two western Canadian provinces. Ashley's school was a public K-6 elementary community school with approximately 340 students that also offered a sports academy for an additional fee. The academy program she taught in had approximately 110 students who were split into three PE classes. Students were aged 7 to 12. Programming was scheduled for three afternoons per week, which equated to approximately 7.5 hours of PE per week. At George's school, there were 272 students ranging from age 5 to age 11 and to attend the school, parents pay an annual tuition. Lessons for each grade took place three times a week, for 50 minutes each, which equated to approximately 3 hours of PE per week.

Data Gathering

Data was gathered through observations and field notes taken on student's participation, as well as a collection of teaching artifacts and critical friend meetings/reflections.

Observations and Field Notes

Anecdotal observations of students' levels of active participation, body language, and verbal communication (comments made, feedback given, etc.) were documented weekly using researcher reflective notes. We (Ashley and George) kept journals to note our observations and documented critical incidents (which consisted of teacher recollections of discussions with students)[1] and brought that data to critical friend meetings for discussion. Spontaneous discussion groups with students led us to take notes and apply the feedback for future planning. Specific open-ended verbal questions and prompts were also asked within discussions with students on a weekly basis. Example questions included, 'What parts of our PE classes need to change? What parts of our PE class would you keep the same? What parts of our PE class did you feel more joy in and why?'

Artifacts

Artifacts included student exit tickets (written and via 'Kahoot') and lesson plans. At the end of each unit, which fluctuated from 6 to 15 hours of instruction, students completed the exit tickets (Appendix A)[2], providing feedback for the teacher based on enjoyment of the activities. The exit tickets were provided and formatted differently for students in K-2 vs 3-5 due to their writing abilities and used a scale of 1 (let's never do that again) to 5 (loved it). Students were also asked how they would rate the unit compared to other units and asked them to mention their favorite and least favorite parts. Students who were capable of writing responses did so, but others who were unable to formulate legible writing would offer their opinions verbally instead. Due to the age of students in Kindergarten to Grade 2, most were unable to write their responses; instead, an interactive Kahoot containing prompting questions was used. Students were read the questions

[1] When describing student data or recalling information from student journals, pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

[2] Questions were not all mandatory and due to student absences or neglect to answer, the total numbers may vary question to question.

to select answers based on their thoughts and feelings towards each PE unit. Lesson plans were shared between us (Ashley and George) during the duration of the research to discuss the activities and provide feedback to one another on their planning.

Critical Friend Meetings and Reflections

The use of critical friends (Costa & Kallick, 1993) was intended to help minimize bias and assumptions on the part of the researchers. We provided each other with suggestions to improve practices and ideas on how to better meet our objectives. Critical friend meetings occurred monthly and were guided by questions: (a) What specific tactics did you leverage to foster joy discovery in your classes this past month? (b) How did you facilitate the development of motor competence in your lessons? (c) What evidence of intrinsic motivation did you collect? (d) What did the student data show you? (e) What themes came out of your class discussions or exit tickets? These prompts were a starting place for the collaborative nature of the self-study. By sharing experiences from our contexts, we were able to probe further with questions that made one another think deeper about assumptions and pedagogy. Data gathered across the month was brought forward at the critical friend meetings for discussions. Notes from the meeting were documented in a shared Google Document with approximately 20 hours of meetings over 16 conversations.

Data Analysis

With self-study, there is a need to continuously analyze and interpret the data (Casey et al., 2018). Rather than waiting until the end of the study to evaluate the implementation of *'joy discovery'* strategies and understanding their impact on student experience, the analysis process was ongoing. During critical friend meetings, discussions of observations, field notes, lesson plans, and exit tickets were organized to find recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Data was individually reviewed prior to meeting and notes and specific questions were brought to discuss. For example, Ashley read George's lesson plan he implemented and then his field notes and observation notes; Ashley posed questions like "I noticed you said in your field notes that students thought activities were repetitive but you were trying to focus on motor competence in your lesson plan, was there something you did or could do to inform the students about why you chose to repeat the activity?" Together, we looked for threads of tension (e.g., how to communicate to students that they are at different competence levels with their motor skills) and moments of success (e.g., high participation rates of students) to discuss and better understand how we influenced joyful experiences. We concluded whether or not the chosen teaching strategies were effective in promoting joy discovery. For example, a discussion topic was whether having different levels of challenge supported or hindered joy discovery. We further inquired into how to present these levels of challenge to students and how much voice and choice students should have towards what level or station they choose to participate in to better understand the implementation of this strategy. To record discoveries and identify themes that arose, a joint document was created, followed by reflection on the theme ideas, which adjusted the next month's teaching practices. After all of the data was gathered and initial themes were created in the shared document, Hayley joined the conversations (two Zoom sessions, emails, and comments / discussions through the shared Google Doc) as an external critical friend to help better understand the whole experience and to thoroughly describe the initial themes.

Initially, the themes from our shared process and analysis included: the importance of the role of the teacher, motor competence, and intrinsic motivation and each of their significance to PA and joy discovery in PE contexts. However, Hayley provided us with an added layer of inquiry

as we discussed these initial themes, which led us to realize we (Ashley and George) had 'turning points' from the self-study and teaching experience (Fletcher & Bullock, 2012). Fletcher et al. (2016) describe that an external critical friend, someone who was not immersed in the teaching experience themselves, has the benefit of being an outsider to question, challenge, and support the self-study process. It was not until this point in our self-study and analysis that we fully realized our learning experience, as we had an opportunity to evaluate our assumptions, the tensions we had with our beliefs and values as teachers, alongside our pedagogy and implementing joy discovery strategies. Having multiple three-way conversations with our stories of experience led us to write up our turning points that occurred throughout, which were associated with our initial themes.

Bullock & Ritter (2011) describe that turning points occur when researchers notice, "a situation that challenged the authors' prior understandings of a particular context or situation; these situations turned [their] thinking toward new perspective" (p. 175). A turning point can be something emotionally connected or motivating, something that identifies a problem we faced where we needed assistance from our critical friend and something that we can still impact in our practice by taking action (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Fletcher & Bullock, 2012). An example of establishing the turning points was in the three-way critical friend conversations, where we discussed the initial theme 'the important role of the teacher' that came forward from multiple reflections such as "teachers' physical position in the class" and "social interactions with students," etc. Hayley asked how we viewed ourselves as teachers and what values we placed on our roles; we started to understand that it was not just about having an 'important role' but that we were central to the relationships in class and how student voice was being elicited, promoted, etc. (See turning point (s)). In this study, four key turning points were identified as we collectively analyzed our experience *doing* the self-study and analyzed the data *from* the self-study. We present these turning points below in our findings and discussion section.

Ethical Considerations & Trustworthiness

Along with the formal ethics approval, throughout this research process and in disseminating this research, as an authorship team, we considered additional ethical implications. Confidentiality, anonymity and transparency were at the forefront of these considerations (Casey et al., 2018). In particular, we gained student consent for observational data and survey data to ensure students were aware of our intentions behind some new planning approaches and reflective tools that were used in the classroom. Because this research stemmed from a Masters of Education course, it was also Ashley and George's choice to disseminate their findings and work alongside Hayley, Doug and Lauren to learn about the process of writing for publication and the ethical considerations for disseminating research. Ashley and George decided where and what they wanted to publish, and how they saw the other Authors' (Hayley, Doug, and Lauren) involvement. This was important to keep the integrity of the research their own and true to their experience. This overall process was an opportunity for the authorship team to learn about being reflexive (looking inward to the self) and reflective (looking back on) on their beliefs and assumptions around joyful and meaningful experience, and their experiences as critical friends throughout the phases of the research. Lastly, we believe the reflective process throughout the self-study was central to ensuring trustworthiness in the research. The self-study methods allowed us to craft thick descriptions of our experiences, use multiple data sources, and share all of these details with outsiders to hopefully resonate with and this process allowed us to better understand our assumptions and the interpretations of our students' experiences as teachers and practitioner-researchers.

Results & Discussion

In this section, we share four turning points that improved our practice and the student experience: (a) prioritizing student centred motor competence, (b) addressing optimal challenge levels, (c) recognizing the value of relationships and student voice, and (d) the power of people. We expand on these four key points alongside pertinent literature and new insights about our teaching.

Prioritizing Student Centred Motor Competence

During George's verbal discussions with his students, the desire to work on specific fundamental movement skills (FMS) that developed and enhanced their motor competence was expressed. Specifically, the students shared examples of how rhino skin balls could be used to help their throwing because they are "softer and safer". They also desired more "running-based games" or activities, which would allow them to exert more energy. Some students even said they were "not tired enough" following PE classes. As a result, we planned for and prioritized motor competence based on the students' comments in our PE activities. In-class discussions with students on 'what they would like to see more of' revealed that the "warm-up activities were too repetitive"; not all students were given "equal opportunities for demonstrations" and the students wanted "more gameplay time" to refine skills. These responses helped us realize how important prioritizing motor competence throughout lessons was – including setting goals. Here, we felt emotionally connected and motivated by hearing from our students about their ideas. "Today I only returned the birdie two times when I had my turn with the teacher, but when we come back Friday I think I can do it all three times" reported one grade 3 student. This particular student expressed excitement over getting to play badminton on a real court but was nervous about getting it over the net since she was not very tall. Having explicit instructions for how to hold the racquet and where to be on the court when the serve was coming was one element that elevated her confidence; the other was enjoying "how the teacher just kept hitting the birdies at us, and we had to quickly hit ours back and get out of the way". Learning from our students shifted our thinking – a turning point – as we felt motivated to plan to prioritize their motor competence.

Planning for motor competence in PE is not new; Stodden et al. (2008) identify that teachers should structure lessons to maximize the chance of motor competence being achieved. Barnett et al. (2016) also highlight that teachers should consider how they teach FMS and move beyond a 'skills and drills' approach to teach FMS in game-like situations and through a mastery approach that could increase student intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and perceived competence. As we replanned our lessons to focus on game situations (e.g. practice their dribbling and passing skills in a field hockey relay race – Ashley's journal), we found student engagement increased. Exit tickets and dialogue from students demonstrated an increase in enjoyment when motor competence was achieved through games; we wondered, "why haven't we always been teaching this way!" Greater motor competence can result in increased self-esteem and consequently increased enjoyment of activities (Barnett et al., 2009). These combined increases could potentially result in greater spontaneous and regular participation in PA (Barnett et al., 2009). However, as we reflected on the exit ticket data, we came to realize that there needs to be a balance of skill development (hopefully through game-like scenarios) and actual game play/ performance to keep students engaged and developing competence. It was not that we had been teaching it incorrectly, but we were now motivated to figure out how to balance these priorities in our pedagogy.

Barnett et al. (2016) outline how not all children will have access to the appropriate conditions or capacity to learn FMS independently without explicit instruction. Simply demonstrating the proper technique does not ensure they will have the ability to become competent. It was essential in our mission to enhance students' joy discovery; therefore, we needed to dedicate time in our lessons for these skills to be developed. Zhang et al. (2015) stated that opportunities to practice motor skills in PE are necessary to increase overall motor competence. Ladwig et al. (2018) found that 37% of students' best PE memories were due to physical competence. Stodden et al. (2008) had similar findings in their research on the relationship between motor competence and PA with children persisting to engage in mastery attempts when they believed they were already skillful. Our experiences from this self-study assert that it is important to plan lessons to support students' growth in motor competence.

When we considered this finding in relation to the Meaningful PE approach, we learned that we can support students' motor competence by creating appropriate challenges and personally relevant learning (Beni et al., 2017). When students felt like they could do the movement skill or activity, they were more likely to participate and keep doing it. In Beni et al. (2019), the *how* of Meaningful PE through implementation in primary school found that 'competence' was more than just motor competence. Although we agree that teachers need to focus on a broader approach to competence - including physical, cognitive, and affective domains - our study further emphasized that students found joy in successfully achieving physical skills for movement. As children get older, their perceived motor competence becomes more accurate; however, feelings of incompetence could lead to disengagement and lower PA (Stodden et al., 2008). Therefore, we found that for joyful experiences to occur, students needed to practice desired movement skills through activities regularly (warm-ups, games, etc.), and as teachers, we have to balance *how* that is being implemented in practice.

Addressing Optimal Challenge Levels

An issue that arose in our meetings was around competitive vs. cooperative activities. We wondered about the balance between the two and how it may be impacting student experience. Questions that came up when we thought about achieving more joyful experiences and implementing the Meaningful PE approach were: How do we plan for optimal levels of challenge for students? Who was going to feel challenged and joy through competitive situations? Who would get more fulfillment and development through collaborative participation? These questions were prominent in our discussions, which led us to this turning point to better understand the problems we were facing, which needed input from our critical friend(s). As we progressed in our research, we discovered together that creating opportunities for engagement at various skill levels and planning to have more cooperative or recreational opportunities alongside competitive options increased student engagement. The collaborative self-study allowed us to share ideas on how to do this, but also provide feedback about those ideas to one another.

That point really became evident when we posed questions to our students in the interactive Kahoot exit ticket (KET; See Appendix A) for the younger students. Specifically, in George's classes, students were asked whether they preferred competitive or cooperative activities or a mix of both. Out of 109, 43 students said they would prefer activities to be competitive, 23 wanted more cooperative activities, and 43 liked the idea of both. Ashley's classes yielded similar results. For instance, following a table tennis unit and a final 'tournament' in Ashley's context, students were asked to provide feedback on their experience. As there were more teams than tables, instead of just having groups rotate in the same direction or play King's Court, students played three-

minute games: if they won, they got to stay, if they lost, they had to run to find another table (musical ping pong tables!). During the post-unit discussion, students from Ashley's class said they liked that the games were short and that challengers/peers changed so frequently. Students seeking competition aimed to stay at their table the whole time and enjoyed the challenge. Those less competitive enjoyed that they did not feel defeated because the games were so short. Ultimately, it seemed as if students' opinions ranged from their preferences for cooperative, competitive, or both types of activities.

When we discussed the exit ticket results in our critical friend meetings, we noticed a connection to optimal levels of challenge for students through choice and autonomy (Beni et al., 2017; Beni et al., 2021), length of activities, and embedded breaks. Ashley's planning for a subsequent pickleball unit enabled students to choose from competitive or recreational courts. One grade five student reported, "I hate when the boys get too excited during games and yell. I like that me and my friends can just hit the ball and not keep score," where another said, "Me and [Jason] are for sure the best at pickleball, we are going to beat the other teams." Therefore, together from our conversations, we realized competitive games focused on following all of the rules and keeping score, while cooperative games allowed students to choose which rules to implement and whether or not to keep score. All of the students who opted to provide feedback in these units were in favour of the options available and reported positive experiences with the activities.

Our turning point of addressing optimal challenge levels has reminded us to consider how opportunities for differentiated levels of challenge (e.g., cooperative vs competitive, short challenges, frequently changing groups, etc.) could increase overall student engagement and frequency of joyful experiences. Wright's (2004) research aligns here as they stressed the importance of PE catering to the needs of *all* children, including those who are not naturally competitive or those who do not have any particular talent. Garn and Cothran (2006) further mention that it is crucial teachers choose activities that are not too challenging, as students quickly become disengaged and do not feel competent to complete the activities. Recent research focused on Meaningful PE from Harding-Kuriger et al. (2024) found "small-sided defense-type games or open-space games where it was two on two, and students had to guard their chosen partner" (p. 10) led to 'fun' and 'optimal challenge', two key features for students to experience meaningfulness. Therefore, we see it as essential for student feedback throughout PE as it can reveal the importance of tailoring the level of challenge and type of activities to align with students' skill levels and preferences (Beni et al., 2017).

To prioritize meaningfulness, including considering students' skill levels and preferences and the critical range in student developmental levels, we have learned from the literature that curriculum models are a strategy that could promote developmental appropriateness (e.g., Teaching Games for Understanding, TGfU). Beni et al. (2019) found that using TGfU and Sport Education aligned with the unit of instruction and were "well-received by students [and] may help teachers foster fun" (p. 631). Bracco et al. (2019) also found that TGfU supported girls' engagement in PE; implementing a model like TGfU could further support students' motor competence and skill development, which in turn could lead to more meaningful experiences (Beni et al., 2019).

Our self-study has demonstrated that teachers can facilitate experiences where students feel empowered to participate and succeed by allowing them to modify activities for their own level of competency (e.g., being closer to or further from a target). Mandigo & Holt (2006) examined the importance of challenge in elementary PE classes and determined that children who found the activity to be optimal experienced opportunities to modify the level within the activity as well as

possessing the skill or ability needed to find success. Our research findings align with those of Harding-Kuriger et al. (2024) in that we see factoring in optimal levels of challenge can help increase student participation. Beni et al. (2019) also affirmed that when students are encouraged and engage with modifying activities, they can "recognise ways their choices could [might] lead to an optimal level of challenge" (p. 608). This reinforces the importance of planning *with* students to enhance their joy in PE.

Recognizing the Value of Relationships and Student Voice

PE teachers need to know their students well and be approachable regarding feedback (Ingulfsvann et al., 2022). We learned that there will never be a flawless lesson or unit that resonates with every student; however, it is important to understand *why* lessons did not resonate with students. That only occurs by listening to them. From our reflections, we learned that building relationships with students and seeking their input was critical to us. Our turning point arose from the fact that we did not realize how much students wanted to contribute to the planning process and provide us with feedback. Until we actively inquired with exit tickets and discussions with our students, we had not recognized a gap in our teaching practice that could support joyful experiences. This turning point was something that we are drawn to that we can still impact in our practice by taking action to include students' voices more in our planning. Throughout the year, we aimed to consistently gauge and reflect on our class dynamics and the joyful experiences we thought students were having. But from reviewing all of our data, it was evident that the students' voices and their desire to offer feedback were essential to promote joyful experiences. What made the whole process more meaningful was that students *saw* and *experienced* their feedback being listened to and integrated into the lessons (Iannucci & Parker, 2022a). We gathered evidence of students routinely sharing ideas for future units based on their experiences.

> Students enjoyed picking their bowling groups and asked to pick their golf and dance groups as well. Surveying students for what activities they'd like to revisit during the final week of programming. Choosing future gymnastics locations based on feedback for which facility was better. Adding a spring biking unit after the fall unit was so well received. (Ashley's journal)

Cardiff et al. (2024a) found when students "began to observe their voices being listened to, they were eager to share their opinions and ideas" (p. 391). Iannucci and Parker (2022a) point out that "Student voice, like all social and emotional skills, must be taught and facilitated; start small, start smart, and don't quit" (p. 49). Our experiences affirmed that teachers need to use a range of methods to allow student voice to be authentically present and they must *respond* to student voice to ensure students know it is being genuinely received (Iannucci & Parker, 2022a). Engaging in the collaborative self-study process also set us up to encourage one another to seek out feedback from students regularly (formally and informally) to bring back for conversation. The act of engaging students in discussions about their learning and having them see themselves in the lessons had a positive influence on our students' perceptions of PE broadly. Data in our study revealed most students preferred a variety of warm-up games and a student music playlist. When students saw changes to warm-ups and had their song played in class, their engagement increased and it seemed they found the learning to be more 'personally relevant' (Beni et al., 2017; Harding-Kuriger, et al., 2024). Wright (2004) explains the crucial role teachers have in promoting pleasure and keeping the intrinsic value of enjoyment at the heart of PE so that students' lasting experiences are personally relevant and meaningful. Additionally, Iannucci and Parker (2022b) encourage democracy and reflection in PE to support student voice and choice to positively correlate to an

enjoyable and personally relevant experience.

In our research, we note that student voice was closely aligned with student choice; we had not previously made this association prior to engaging in this research. However, Iannucci and Parker (2022a) remind us:

> Choice is a strategy teachers use to support children to learn to access and use their voice. Though we are suggesting that choice can be a strategy used to scaffold toward voice, choice alone is not authentic voice. Nor should it be used synonymously. (p. 43)

Enabling student voice in the planning process means students become more invested and can take ownership of their learning (Iannucci & Parker, 2022a). Cardiff et al. (2023) explain "how a pedagogy of choice can be used to support children in considering their learning needs, while facilitating movement towards a more collaborative approach to decision-making in PE, providing both an audience and influence to students' voices (Lundy 2007)" (p. 669). They emphasize not only student voice but also intentionally creating space for children to share and to see their ideas being implemented or actualized in the classroom practice (Cardiff et al., 2023).

We were fortunate that we had strong relationships with our students; they were willing to share their opinions with us, and we felt confident in allowing student choice to be embedded regularly in our planning. These takeaways are not new; however, we feel our emphasis on building relationships supported students' willingness to provide feedback. Alongside Iannucci and Parker (2022b) and Cardiff et al. (2024a), we see value in future research *with* and *for* children rather than *on* them. Collecting data directly from students about their experiences and opinions, enabling voice and involvement in the planning process continue to be beneficial for PE research and will continue to be beneficial to us in teaching.

The Power of People

One of the most motivating aspects of our planning that stood out as a turning point we found in our experience and the data was choice-based peer/ groupings. Students experiencing activities with social groups of their choosing increased their joyful experiences and aligns with the feature of social interaction in Meaningful PE (Beni et al., 2017). A recurring response in exit tickets and discussions was that participating with their friends and chosen peers positively affected their feelings about a given activity. Students sought to be able to pick which game to be a part of based on their experience, comfort and exposure. It became a focus of ours – something we were emotionally invested in throughout our planning – to balance how we were having students interact socially within activities but also to embrace the democratic pedagogies that allow students to be part of the conversations and actions (Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2021).

Cardiff et al. (2024b) highlight "Children value working with their friends in PE…" (p. 8). Within the literature, Koekoek and Knoppers (2015) explored how social interaction can facilitate youth learning in PE, specifically looking at how perceptions of friendships and peer relationships influence skill development in PE. Their findings indicated positive perceptions of friendships and peer support correlated with increased skill acquisition and greater enjoyment of PE and the research underscores the significance of nurturing positive peer relationships and allowing students opportunities to work with their friends. We have learned from this research and the literature that it is not simply grouping or allowing students those chances to engage with peers, but it is a willingness for teachers to shape a democratic learning space, enact democratic pedagogies and facilitate meaningful and joyful experiences (Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2021).

In their post-golf unit discussion in Ashley's class, nearly half of the students reported that getting to choose their groups for both the driving range and putting course were highlights of the unit. "Getting to be outside with my friends and be as serious or silly as we wanted was really fun" (grade 4), "I liked trying something new with my friends" (grade 3). In contrast, a group of students that was made by putting two different self-chosen groups together had the most conflict and self-reported issues: "We didn't get along and Michael was being too competitive which made it not fun". Learning from our experience and the research Cardiff et al. (2024b), students may need to learn about what makes a good teammate and how to collaborate in order to maximize more meaningful engagement in activities. "Some children came to the realisation that choosing their own groups was not always a positive experience and recognised that the process sometimes impacted negatively on others" (Cardiff et al., 2024b, p. 9). While we believe teachers should still use their judgment to make groups appropriate for meeting lesson goals, it is also important to find opportunities for students to choose – and choose wisely. For example, structuring parts of lessons, such as the warm-up or skill development portion, to allow students to choose their own groupings is planning with social interaction in mind (Beni et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2023), studying prioritizing meaningful PE experiences, fostered social interaction with student voice and choice by embedding exploration time in class. They explain, "Purposeful exploration allowed for opportunities for students to socially interact with each other in real time" (Smith et al., 2023, p. 140). Further, Fletcher and Ní Chróinín (2021) emphasize the impact that creating space for individual and collective decision-making can have on students' experiences in PE.

Limitations

This study was conducted with a small sample of students from two schools. As such, the implications may not be suitable for all contexts (e.g., access to novel activities requiring specialized equipment). The study was conducted using information from a single school year, making it more of a cross-sectional study. A longitudinal study following students over the course of several years, interacting with Meaningful PE approaches, would create stronger causal inference support for increased joy in PE. We also recognize that although we attempted to plan for joyful and meaningful experiences for our students in PE, the data is from our own interpretation of these experiences, not specifically from students and how they found joy and meaning in their PE experiences based on our planning initiatives. Future research that involves direct data from children (e.g. photovoice) is certainly needed. However, we feel that this study adds to the Meaningful PE literature where the focus was on 'joy' and key learnings from this work reinforce recent research done in the area of Meaningful PE (e.g., Cardiff et al., 2023; Cardiff et al., 2024a & 2024b; Fletcher et al., 2021; Harding-Kuriger et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In our self-study, we evaluated the literature on teaching strategies and practices that support joyful experiences in PE, and evaluated our implementation of *'joy discovery'* strategies on student experience. From our research, we found there was a need to: (a) prioritize student-centred motor competence, (b) address optimal challenge levels, (c) consider the value of relationships and student voice, and (d) recognize the power of people. We came to these findings throughout the self-study as turning points rose - problems of practice, insightful learnings, or instances of collaboration and questioning that occurred through our critical friendship(s). When unpacking these experiences and learnings alongside the literature, we have come to understand

how important proactive and intentional planning for joy and meaningfulness is. Joyful experiences in PE must be intentionally planned for, just as Meaningful PE experiences do (Fletcher et al., 2021).

In respect to implications of this research, first, other teachers may consider operationalizing our findings for their PE class by: (a) ensuring developmentally appropriate movement opportunities; (b) creating opportunities for motor skill development and competence development embedded throughout lessons (e.g., small-sided games, warm-up activities); (c) making decisions with students supports social interactions; (d) engaging students in discussions and reflective practices before and after lessons to create a space for curiosity and democratic input (e.g., prompts, exit tickets), and; (e) having flexibility to change plans and activities based on student feedback. Second, we see self-study as a methodology and reflective practice framework that PE teachers may consider embracing to improve their pedagogy and to better understand their identities, values, and assumptions in relation to their teaching. The collaborative self-study process has allowed us to learn not only about our teaching but also about ourselves as teachers and who we want to become through our teaching journeys. And third, in respect to future research in the field, although we have embraced joy-based PE in our own practice, we are still cognizant of the tensions that may remain between differing perspectives and approaches to teaching PE. As Kretchmar (2008) stated, "The challenge is to find ways to prioritize a life-enhancing brand of physical education over its utilitarian counterpart but then to compromise in a manner that promotes health for those who will always need to be talked into moving" (p 169). As this was a self-study, broader research on joy in PE is necessary in the field.

Through this self-study experience, our practice has changed, with a new purpose to centre learning opportunities in PE on students' joy and meaning. As such, to conclude this paper, the teacher-authors shares a short reflection:

> **Ashley**: Moving forward, I will maintain the practice of using feedback from students to guide and influence which activities are planned throughout the year. I will continue to offer different challenge choices wherever possible to meet students at their optimal challenge level. I want students to have a say in their grouping and teams and work towards eliminating the standard of 'simple skills and drills' being the initial introduction to activities but rather have more 'fun' activities embedded in my lessons. I plan to continue to have regular guiding questions and check-in time with my students every class to help with planning, particularly, questions to help students become aware of identifying joy and meaning when it happens, to hopefully impact their future engagement in movement.
>
> **George**: I will continue to check in with my students before and after lessons to have them share opinions on their PE experiences. My students seem to love to share their ideas; they feel empowerment and autonomy. In my planning this year, students choose their level of comfort when participating in scrimmages and game-like situations. There has been a noticeable increase in engagement for students who usually are not active as participants. I will continue to be reflective in my practice, engage students in reflection and provide options for feedback throughout lessons and units to support their overall learning.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Kahoot Exit Slip Questions and Responses for K-2 Students Part 1

	Yes	No	Yes, but it was not my favourite
Did you enjoy the soccer unit?	59	24	35
Did you enjoy the basketball unit?	58	19	31
Did you enjoy the hockey unit?	62	23	30

Table 2
Kahoot Exit Slip Questions and Responses for K-2 Students Part 2

	Yes	No
Was this the first time you learned soccer?	52	61
Was this the first time you learned basketball?	40	58
Was this the first time you learned hockey?	58	53

Table 3
Exit Slip Questions and Responses for Grades 3-5 Students

	Let's never do that again	I didn't totally hate it, but it was not my favourite	It was okay	It was almost perfect	I loved it
How would you rate the Soccer unit?	0	3	8	18	11
How would you rate the Handball unit?	0	2	3	10	24
How would you rate the Volleyball unit?	4	14	42	36	21
How would you rate the Basketball unit?	3	10	25	33	47
How would you rate the Hockey unit?	8	23	29	24	34