Are your S's in effect? Ensuring culturally responsive physical education environments

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Are your S’s in effect? Ensuring culturally responsive physical education environments

By Brian Culp

Schools are rapidly becoming a kaleidoscope of ethnicities and cultures represented by demographic changes that have affected America’s schools. As educators in this era of change, a unique opportunity exists to ensure quality physical education for all students. Culturally responsive practices in the classroom can assist in minimizing students' alienation as they attempt to adjust to the different “worlds” often represented in school (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Fortunately, recent scholarship (Brown, 2007; Culp, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2007) has offered a glimpse into strategies of how this can be accomplished in physical education. While ideas have been discussed regarding student characteristics and routines that should take place to account for diverse learners, an area which is in need of further inquiry is what the physical environment of these classes should resemble. The potential impact that this has on our classes cannot be understated. Davis (2006) and Cole (1995) espouse that the appearance of the classroom environment is an important factor in development and growth in student learning as well as preparing individuals from diverse backgrounds to be socially productive members of society.

This observation is especially salient when considering that the physical education class environment differs from other classroom environments. In respect to other classes where students spend most of their time in environments filled with desks and chairs, physical education classes hold the promise of being conducted in multiple venues, filled with a variety of unique cultural and ethnic social interactions. Thus, physical education class configurations that are culturally responsive should be considered.

Given this information, an appropriate question to pose is to what extent we as educators pay attention to the sights, sounds, and symbolism found in the physical construction of our classroom environments? In other words, do we have our “S’s in effect?” The following article highlights ways by which physical educators can construct their classrooms or gymnasiums to provide a more inclusive atmosphere for the myriad of learners who are entering our classes.
Culturally Responsive Environments

Sight: The first effect

What students see before they enter the classroom or gymnasium is impactful for the quality of the physical education experience. Vision is a means for conducting the basic activities of life and provides a portal to language and numerous tasks and physical activity processes. Visual learners as noted by Jensen (1997) tend to comprise the primary demographic of students in our classes. Further reflection on this observation holds particular significance for how our classes should look. Probst (1974) noted that upon entry, individuals of diverse groups assess educational environments using these three questions:

- Can this place be mine or adjusted to me?
- Can I produce results here?
- Can I relate and get along with others who are here?

Students while negotiating these questions according to Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997) accept the environment initially based on whether pictures, symbols and other visual representations remind them of their homes, communities, and values (p. 43). Particularly for Native American learners who have been suggested to learn best by these means (Bland, 1975; Bryant, 1986; Foreman, 1991; Gilliland, 1999; Kleinfeld & Nelson, 1991; Pewewardy, 1999; Ross, 1989; Tafoya, 1989; Wilcox, 1996), this is especially important. Murals, collages, or reflective wall pieces (RWP’s) can be utilized as methods by which to showcase diversity among these students and others in physical education classes.

Collages and reflective wall pieces can be used by diverse learners to express thoughts, feelings, and attitudes related to physical activity. A practical use of this artwork involves first supervising students as they cut pictures related to sport and physical activity from magazines and newspapers, and subsequently require them to mount their individual picture(s) on poster board. The teacher’s next task is to pose questions such as “Why is this activity important to you?” or “Why do you think this particular sport has significance in a particular group’s culture?” The students respond on a notecard and put it underneath his or her picture. This simple task, in which all can participate, helps to foster an appreciation
of the similarities of differences among students in the class. As these works are completed, they should be posted in common areas for all students to see.

**Sound: The second effect**

The effect of sound and the impact on diverse learners is another important aspect of promoting culturally responsive physical education environments. Coupled with students who may best learn via auditory or verbal means, recent classroom changes have left many teachers with non-English proficient learners who may spend a great deal of time initially shuffling from class to class. Currently, there are more than 180 different language groups represented by students in schools (Shore, 2001), with these learners postulated to represent 25% of the total student population in 2026 (Garcia, 2000). Thus, sound and language use helps break down barriers to participation for learners who are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

After non-English speaking learners’ needs are assessed with the assistance of ELL (English Language Learner) programs, methods should be utilized to ease these students’ transition into class activities. Teaching key words and phrases used in the physical education classroom is an important first step because it shows these students there is a program in place that helps foster their success. It can also be helpful for a non-native English speaker to be paired with a student who has mastery of the language. Care must be taken so that non-native speakers’ languages are not devalued, but fostered through bilingual efforts. Atay and Kurt (2006) along with Smlkin and Suina (1996), espouse that students have greater academic success when language is valued because they are allowed to draw on a larger source of background schemata.

Inattention to considerations for students who have difficulty in verbal communication as a result of a static or temporary disorder can be detrimental. Literature (Brinton & Fujiki, 1993, 2000; Davis, 2001; Hummel & Prizant, 1993) has indicated that students with communication disorders tend to display lower feelings of self-concept, which impacts the frequency and quality of social interactions they engage in. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), more than six million children ages 3–21 received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in
2002 (ASHA, 2008). Of this demographic, more than 20 percent of these children were assisted due to speech and language disorders, a percentage which did not include children who had communication problems due to trauma, introversion, shyness, or prior undisclosed mental and physical abuse.

Students who cannot audibly communicate words, phrases, and dialogue are placed at a disadvantage if teachers lack an appreciation for the impact of nonverbal instruction. While sign language has been proven to be effective in engaging inaudible learners, many physical educators are not versed in this method of speech. Lue (2001) categorized four additional means of nonverbal instruction which can aid teachers:

1) **Prosody** - patterns of speech such as pitch, duration, loudness and rhythm
2) **Kinesics** - visual signals sent by the body to the receiver
3) **Proxemics** - the distance of interpersonal and social space
4) **Paralanguage** - the production of sounds that are verbal, but nonverbal.

Classified as one of Gardner’s (1993) multiple intelligences, the sound of music fosters an appreciation of diverse learners. Employed appropriately in class, music can stimulate the brain and form connections between the body and mind, while prompting memory and improving gait and coordination (Archer, 2007). Music which reflects the diverse cultures of students played during the beginning of class or during transitional activities is an integral part of the learning experience. Musical involvement can also include the use of instruments, which can lead to a discussion on how these instruments have contributed to cultural groups represented in the class (Figure 2).

Tripp, Rizzo and Webbert (2007) espouse that cultural storytelling helps create and accommodate diversity, where every member of the physical education community can feel a sense of connection and belonging. Including a wide variety of books exploring different cultures makes the learning environment more inclusive for all (Anderson, 2002). It also makes it more likely that all students will have opportunities to find narratives that are meaningful and relative to them. As stories are told, students need to be given time to reflect upon the impact of these narratives on their peers. Particularly for African
American and Hispanic students, the oral tradition of storytelling provides an additional means of self-expression rooted in the cultural upbringing of many of these learners (Carter-Black, 2007; Tileston, 2004). A listing of books which can be used in the physical education classroom is found in Figure 3.

**Symbolism: The third effect**

Symbolic representation is a final consideration in creating culturally responsive physical education environments. If used correctly, symbolism can reinforce positive ideas and constructive behaviors, as well as empower students. It is seldom that the transmission of these ideas is apparent at first glance, making it important for the physical educator to make a genuine effort to ensure that what is visually seen or heard in the classroom is truly representative of an inclusive atmosphere.

Essentially, inquiry on what is found in physical education environments and how artifacts and sounds are interpreted by our learners are topics worthy of exploration. Posters of individuals engaged in athletic pursuits are frequently found on the walls of many physical education classes. While this is a valid means of assisting in the promotion of physical activity, the perspectives of all groups being represented needs evaluation. For instance, when reflecting on visual representations of posters and wall art hung in our classes, particular attention should be focused on the ratio of male to females. The occurrence of more males than females on these representations could inadvertently communicate to females in the class that male participation in physical education is valued, while female participation is accepted but not equally on par.

Additionally, focusing on the effect of symbolism in the makeup of our physical education environments has cultural ramifications. While an initial step in expressing culture in our classes should be to introduce content as appropriate to meet the needs of the diverse learners in our classes, far too often music, dance, or rhythm based lessons are chosen as the only vehicle by which this content is provided. When the value of these activities is diminished due to overuse, stereotypes such as Latinos and African Americans having a “natural predisposition to perform well in rhythm and dance related activities” can be perpetuated.
Culturally Responsive Environments

Conclusion

Attention to providing culturally responsive environments shows a commitment to diversity and allows for an education that is conducive to lifelong physical activity. Regardless of ability or background, students from different cultural groups who see aspects of their life demonstrated in the routines and procedures of the physical education environment have an instant investment in the overall goals of the class. The failure to address cultural differences within these environments, combined with inadequate preparation in teacher training, may very well lead to a host of negative repercussions.

Cultural divisions between students and teachers, which could lead to teachers having biased beliefs and negative classroom actions toward some children, are reasons why culturally responsive environments should be created and maintained (Grant & Gomez, 1996). These negative views of others permeate every aspect of teacher-student interactions, including achievement expectations of students, teaching strategies for diverse students, and the willingness for teachers to have a vested interest in the community where students live. As part of responsible pedagogy in an era where cultural differences are intertwined within the fabric of society, it is important that physical educators strive to promote safe environments where everyone has the same opportunity to succeed.

References


Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.


Brian Culp is an assistant professor of physical education at Indiana University Purdue University in Indianapolis, IN.
**Figure 1. Various components of nonverbal instruction in physical education contexts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Examples in the physical education environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Prosody** refers to the rhythmic pattern of speech such as pitch, duration, and intonation. Prosodic features carry meaning and may serve to confirm or contradict the spoken language. Problems in this area can include inappropriate responses and use of variations in pitch, duration, loudness and rhythm. | Placing emphasis on a certain word when giving feedback on appropriate routines to students:  

**Correct**  
Teacher: “Guys, I really think we can do better with putting up our equipment. Remember to place the paddles back in the bin, next to the closet.”  

**Misinterpretation**  
Teacher: “Guys, I really think we can do better with putting up our equipment. Remember to place the PADDLES, back in the BIN, next to the CLOSET.”  

*The latter statement could be interpreted by students as demeaning, based primarily on the method and emphasis on key words in the instructional phrase.*
**Proxemics** represents measurable distances between people as they interact in interpersonal and social space. These distances can be described as intimate, personal, social, or public. Problems occur with inappropriate actions or misinterpreted meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario:</th>
<th>Being aware of cultural considerations in teaching students:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Reynolds has begun a golf lesson which focuses on putting. As he walks around to assist students, he stops at Mai Sue, a Hmong student who is having trouble keeping her head down on the ball during her follow-through. He watches a few strokes and places his hand upon her head and encourages her to keep her head down. After a few strokes with his hand on her head, Mr. Reynolds steps away to watch her continue without his assistance, and is puzzled when Mai Sue continues to look down at the ground without any movement.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comment:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unbeknownst to Mr. Reynolds, Mai Sue’s traditional Hmong culture discourages individuals placing hands upon the head, as it is believed to be the place that a person’s soul resides. In this and similar situations, it is best to always ask permission, because interpersonal and social space is interpreted differently among individuals and cultures.</td>
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</table>

**Kinesics** describes the visual signals sent to the receiver (student) by the body, utilizing any part of the body or the body as a whole. Kinesics assumes that all movements of the body have meaning. Problems can occur if the visual signals are misinterpreted by the student or if the message sent by the visual signal fails to match the verbal message sent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Reminding students about appropriate signals used to being a routine.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Larkin speaks to her kindergarten class who is sitting in a circle in the middle of the gym on the first day of class. She discusses the difference between general space and self-space, demonstrating to students that the signal for finding self-space in the gym is her stretching her arms out wide. The students watch, stand up when prompted, and imitate her to demonstrate their understanding of this concept.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Misinterpretation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brett, a new student in Ms. Larkin’s class who has arrived the second week of school, gathers with the rest of his classmates in the middle of the circle in the gym. Ms. Larkin upon seeing that they are attentive, smiles at her students and stretches her arms out wide. The students get up and find their own self-space. Brett however, walks up to Ms. Larkin and hugs her. His classmates giggle.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Given that Brett is a new student in class and has no knowledge of the routines in place. Ms. Larkin could have assessed (by asking for a demonstration) whether students’ remembered how to find personal space.</em></td>
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</table>
**Paralanguage**—refers to the production of sounds which are vocal, but nonverbal and can include sighs, muttering words, increased rate of speech, crying and laughing. These sounds are not articulated into speech or words, but can modify meaning and convey emotion such as anger, joy, sadness, and fear. Problems again occur with misinterpreted meanings.

Speaking and instructing to benefit all learners:

**Scenario:**

Jennifer is a new student teacher instructing badminton to a small group in a gym. One of the members of the group is Tim, who is hearing impaired and sits clustered behind his classmates near an empty whiteboard. Jennifer glances at the clock and hastily finishes pointing out the parts of a racket before asking students to partner up and practice hitting shuttles to one another. Tim and Ben (who has in one hand a racket and in the other several shuttles) walk up to Jennifer. Tim holds out his racket with an inquisitive look on his face. Jennifer as she chews her gum smiles and responds tersely, telling Tim that she “can’t be his partner, because she has to teach.” Jennifer begins to walk away to the rest of the students, motioning to Tim and Ben to hurry. The two students look at one another and shake their heads as they follow the student teacher.

**Comment:**

*Jennifer should be cognizant of arranging her group so that everyone is able to see her instruction. She should utilize the whiteboard or captioned videos in order to address new terminology or illustrate important parts of the racket. Her instruction should be deliberate, clear, unhurried and unobstructed (i.e., gum), as this can be difficult for students who lip-read to do so. Jennifer’s facial expressions could convey mixed messages. Each students’ attention should be gained before giving instruction and students should be asked clarification questions to assess learning. Interpreters and peer helpers if deemed necessary can be used.*
### Figure 2. Selected instruments and their cultural uses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Asian Families</th>
<th>Sri Lanka</th>
<th>Scandinavia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gong</td>
<td>Historically, in Asian families, the gong was an attribute of wealth and served as a status symbol. In China, the gong is used in religious ceremonies, state processions, marriages and other festivals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drums</td>
<td>Drums in Sri Lanka, date back over 2,500 years and have been used for communication between the government and the people. The talking drums used in many African cultures can imitate the inflections and pitch variations of a spoken language and are used for communicating over great distances.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bells</td>
<td>Many farms in Scandinavia had a small bell-tower resting on the top of the barn. The bell in the tower was used to call the workers from the field at the end of the day's work. Additionally, “singing bells” are in wide use in many parts of Tibet and Nepal for the purposes of meditation.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Books which can be used to promote culturally responsive outcomes in physical education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors/Editors</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Teammates</em>: Peter Golenbock and Paul Bacon (1980)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball</em>: Kadir Nelson (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Winners Never Quit!: Mia Hamm and Carol Thompson</em> (2004)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Soccer Game (Un Partido de Futbol)</em>: Grace Maccarone and Meredith Johnson (1998)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Bravo, Tavo!:</em> Brian Meunier and Perky Edgerton (2007)</td>
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