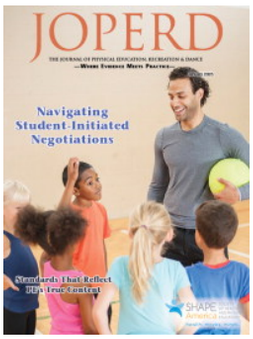

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Exploring the Value of Student Autonomy in Physical Education:

Two Case Studies in the UK and Australia

Rachael Jefferson, Lee Sullivan, and Simon Board

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Traditionally, the activities covered within the physical education (PE) curriculum are decided by the physical educator within their department and according to available facilities. Thus, though direction is provided by government/state policy, it remains the choice of the in-school providers as to which activities are actually taught. An issue occurs with this kind of professional autonomy if the teacher prefers a particular type of physical activity themselves and also feels more confident in teaching it (see Banville et al., 2021; Morgan & Bourke, 2008). Notably, the predominance of competitive sport in PE has been associated with these types of teacher preferences (Banville et al., 2021; Jefferson-Buchanan, 2023; Leeder & Beaumont, 2021) even though many students find these activities neither relevant nor meaningful for their current and future physical activity choices (Macías et al., 2021). Inevitably, this can lead to engagement issues in PE, particularly in the high school context (Grades 7–12 or 13) where teenagers' motivation can decline, a phenomenon that has been widely discussed by scholars (see Gu & Zhang, 2016; Leisterer & Paschold, 2022; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). Notwithstanding this, in the classroom context, many physical educators are endeavoring to better meet the differing needs, motivations, and attitudes that young people have toward being physically active. In permitting students some choice over their learning journey, there is potential to improve engagement and enjoyment, build stronger connections with physical activity, and perhaps even help pave the way toward increased physical activity beyond the school walls into adulthood.

The Value of Autonomy

A six-factor model of eudaemonic well-being by Ryff (1989) described the aspects of positive functioning that an individual who strives to lead a fulfilled life must achieve: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The first, autonomy, might be applied to when students value and take ownership of their involvement in physical activity. This implicitly connects with Fletcher and Ní Chróinín's (2022) work, which proposes democratic approaches to PE delivery to help teachers intentionally and consistently prioritize meaningful experiences for students. More specifically, democratic principles (such as ensuring that students are given autonomy) support teachers in fostering inclusive environments and help students to actively make authentic connections between their lived experiences in and beyond the classroom. Other scholars such as Ladwig et al. (2018) added further weight to the call for greater autonomy in PE. They explored past PE memories and current activity levels, identifying student autonomy as a key driver for promoting students' more "positive and meaningful connection to PE" (Ladwig et al., 2018, p. 127). Considering that physical inactivity levels for adults are of global concern (World Health Organization, 2022), this has important long-term implications.

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This article seeks to explore the value that autonomy can bring to students' experiences in PE. In doing so, it focuses on two case studies of real-life PE scenarios, showing how it is possible to foster autonomy in a number of ways, thereby enhancing choice through student voice. Student voice can be a potent stimulus for students' involvement in decision making, impacting their positive engagement in the learning process (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). The first case study involves one of the author's current school contexts, Upton Court Grammar School (UCGS), in the United Kingdom. The second case study focuses on a second contributing author's context on the other side of the world in Australia, at the International Grammar School Sydney (IGSS). It is recognized that elementary and middle school–age students have different types of PE in these two countries, and elsewhere in countries such as the United States. Baseline experiences prior to high school inevitably influence the content of the autonomy-based PE program, but it is hoped that U.S. teachers reading this article will still be able to make connections between these two case studies and their own teaching experiences.

Case Study 1: Autonomy in Practice: The Personality Pathway

Having argued the need for students to experience more autonomy in the PE context, Case Study 1, UCGS in the UK, will now be introduced. At UCGS, the Sport England (2014) *Under the Skin* research was employed to form the foundation of student groupings. (Sport England is a nondepartmental public body that was established in 1996, operating under the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in England. Its primary role is to build the foundations of a community sport system by working with national governing bodies of sport in England.) The research reported that the complex relationships young people have with sport and physical activity were due to their "own emotional, rational and behavioural relationship with sport and physical activity" (Sport England, 2014, p. 10). Sport England subsequently identified six personality types that would support leaders in their appreciation of youth engagement and help them with their planning of a fully inclusive curriculum. The six personality types were delineated as follows:

- Confident intellectuals (driven/educated/focused)
- Cautious introverts (loyal/careful/self-reliant)
- Everyday youth (mainstream/easy-going/content)
- Thoughtful improvers (mature/non-competitive/self-developed)
- Ambitious self-starters (achievers/proactive/on the go)
- Sports enthusiasts (self-assured/sociable/image-conscious)

Each personality type was associated with different activities, methods of motivation, expectations, and dislikes. Furthermore, the survey found that the sport enthusiasts — the students who were best served by the traditional skills-focused and performance-driven PE delivery — made up only 10% of the young people surveyed. From that figure, 73% were male, which aligns with some of the gender biases in PE curriculum development and delivery that have been confirmed elsewhere (Oliver & Kirk, 2016; Scraton, 2018). Sport England (2014) also outlined how to engage each personality type and keep them engaged. This illustrates the complex needs of students in the PE context and how a traditional "multi-activity, sport-technique-based ('One Size Fits All') approach" (Kirk, 2012, p. 4) is failing to meet these needs.

Drawing on the Sport England Approach Outlined Above

Every student is different, with a range of learning strengths, interests, and needs. As such, students have varied levels of motivation for engaging in PE and physical activity. The principle of identifying physical activities that meet wide-ranging needs in the Sport England (2014) approach effectively shifts the focus away from the emphasis on performative ability to what motivates a student and influences their attitudes toward physical activity. Though it is recognized that not all students or grades can be placed into one of the six personality categories detailed above, there is still value in exploring how a personality-focused method in the context of PE can be useful for curriculum design. At UCGS, instead of grouping them by ability or gender, students were grouped by their attitudes and motivations toward physical activity. They were asked to complete a survey every year to ascertain these. For example, students who wanted to be competitive with like-minded individuals or students who wanted to be more involved in social activities were grouped together accordingly. Figure 1 shows an example of the survey that was issued to all Grade 7 to 13 UCGS students once per year. They work with a Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Once students were organized into the relevant groups according to their individual personality survey data, they were presented with a selection of activities. Though the spaces available were preallocated, the activities were democratically voted on by the whole class; they chose one activity from each menu category (see Figure 2 for a

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Grades 10 and 11 example; this same menu was available for every class). Certain conditions were placed on the choices to ensure breadth; however, the students almost completely designed their curriculum based on their interests. Prior to the selection of activities, students received information on all physical activities on the menu so that they could make informed choices. The school year is naturally split into six half terms in England; therefore, students had a half term (six to eight weeks) on one activity. With some guidance around facilities — for example, advice on activities best suited to the allocated spaces — students voted for one activity from each menu category (one category was chosen twice to fill the sixth half

Statements (golden questions)

Sport is part of who I am.	5
My friends and I talk about sport a lot.	5
I like to use social media to share my sporting/fitness achievements.	5
I am good at most sports.	5
I feel guilty if I have not exercised for a while.	5
Sport and exercise are really good ways to reduce stress.	5
Taking part in sport makes me feel good about myself.	5
I am conscious of my health and fitness.	5
My family has never encouraged me to take part in sport/exercise.	3
I think that people my age who play sport are cool.	3
I'm happy with my body.	3
I worry about looking like a fool when I play sport/exercise.	3
Winning is the most important thing to me.	3
I am close to my family.	3
I would rather do something that is fun and not good for me than something that is not fun but good for me.	1
I am a confident person.	1
Exercise is my "me" time.	3
What motivates you in life? Staying healthy.	No
What motivates you in life? Improving my appearance.	No
What motivates you in life? Developing myself as a person.	Yes
What motivates you in life? Competing.	No
What motivates you in life? Being successful.	Yes
What motivates you in life? Achieving goals.	Yes
What motivates you in life? Doing something worthwhile.	No
Gender	Female
How often do you typically take part in 30 minutes or more of physical activity, which is enough to raise your breathing rate?	2–3 times a month

Labels
5 - Strongly agree
4 - Slightly agree
3 - Neither agree nor disagree
2 - Slightly disagree
1 - Strongly disagree

Your assigned pathway is:

Pathway 2

Figure 1.
UCGS survey to collate attitudes and motivations toward physical activity.

Figure 2.
Example of a Grade 10–11 personality pathway that is available to every class at UCGS.

term). This approach ensured that a diverse range of activities was incorporated into the curriculum, fostering a well-rounded learning experience. Teachers subsequently applied the most appropriate model to deliver the activity (e.g., Sport Education, gamification), which was again tailored to the students' engagement and motivation levels.

Table 1 offers insight into the stages of planning and implementing the personality pathway.

Implications and Lessons Learned

A student voice survey conducted at the end of the 2022–2023 academic year highlighted that 93% of students felt that the personality pathway improved their experiences within PE. More anecdotally, it was found that students in personality pathway 1 (sport enthusiasts and ambitious self-starters) were more motivated to select invasion games, whereas personality pathway 3 (cautious introverts and confident intellectuals) tended to select more individual or expressive options. The pathway 2 (everyday youth and thoughtful improvers) option proved the most difficult for predicting activity selections. However, a pattern emerged when selecting groups/teams, because students on this pathway cared more about the people they were working with than the activities they selected. Overall, the number of non-doers dropped dramatically in PE, and attendance in extracurricular clubs also increased. However, although the intervention was successful overall, there are some anomalies to be noted. In particular, some students (pathway 2) clearly had very different priorities in PE, giving precedence to their preferred social groups. Thus, strategies that promote physical activity via different friendship groups at this age could prove to be an effective means of promoting increased physical activity among students. In self-determination theory, individuals have three innate psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Essentially, this means that a student who feels confident moving with their friends is likely to be more physically active. Social aspects in a movement context can also help to build a student's sense of belonging, in tandem with the autonomy to engage in independent physical activity (see Salvy et al., 2008). Furthermore, the cautious introverts and confident intellectuals (pathway 3) who chose more individual or expressive options invite reflection on the balance of activities in the PE curriculum. Indeed, students must have "experiences other than health-driven activities and competitive team sports during their physical education journeys," because these can dominate many school contexts and prove to be demotivating for many (Jefferson-Buchanan, 2023, p. 143).

Case Study 2: Autonomy in Practice: The SOLO Taxonomy Pre and Post COVID-19

The IGSS is a P–12 coeducational school located in the center of Sydney's business district in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The director of personal development, health, and physical education

Table 1.
The Stages Taken to Plan and Implement The Personality Pathway

Stage: Planning and implementation (timing and location)	Actions and processes undertaken
Stage 1 Online survey, at the end of the school year, in preparation for the new school year	A student voice survey was sent to all students (see Figure 1), requesting them to select or offer alternative sports or activities that they would like to see in their PE curriculum. The survey was inspired by the survey used by Sport England (2014) for their *Under the Skin* research. The survey focused on likes and dislikes and personality traits and attitudes toward physical activity. Students were given statements on which they rated themselves, depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with them. From these suggestions, activities and sports that might be effectively delivered were added into the relevant categories (see Figure 2).
Stage 2 Reviewed in a department meeting at the end of the academic year in preparation for the new school year	Using the responses from the survey, students were placed into one of three pathways (automatically calculated by the survey). The department decided to use the Sport England research as the basis for grouping the classes, and these three were selected: • Pathway 1: Sport enthusiasts and ambitious self-starters • Pathway 2: Everyday youth and thoughtful improvers • Pathway 3: Cautious introverts and confident intellectuals
Stage 3 Completed in the new school year during the first PE lesson	Classes were only allocated spaces throughout the year. At the start of the first lesson, the teacher presented the categories of activities (Figure 2). Students received an information packet in advance with links to videos showing the activities in action. Using this information, students democratically voted as a whole class for the activities that they would like to have in their curriculum. The students also decided, with some guidance, which activities best suited the allocated environments (e.g., basketball is best delivered in the sports hall). Students had a half term (six to eight weeks) on one activity.
Stage 4 Throughout the academic year, with regular review and discussion of suitable models as a department	Each activity was delivered through an appropriate model-based approach that could be applied to the relevant pathways. For example, in pathway 1 (sports enthusiasts and ambitious self-starters), a Sport Education Model proved popular.
Stage 5 End of the academic year. Reviewed in a department meeting and in the last PE classes of the year	At the end of each academic year, the survey was reviewed by staff, and students were permitted to revisit their attitudes and motivations toward physical activity. This process informed the following grade's groupings when the process restarted.

(PDHPE), sport, and outdoor education wanted to establish a strengths-based approach (McCashen, 2005) toward practical PE to encourage students to become empowered and autonomous through their participation in the design and assessment of activities. A strengths-based approach emphasizes the importance of developing a "competency cycle" whereby people's strengths and resources become the focus in the process of change, which effectively "creates positive expectations that open the way for the development of competencies" (McCashen, 2005, p. 11).

This type of strengths-based and flexible content approach is particularly important, because only 26% of students ages 5 years and over will play an organized sport (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Moreover, the current NSW P–10 PDHPE syllabus (NSW Education Standards Authority [NESA], 2018) and the PDHPE 7–10 draft syllabus (NESA, 2023b) both encourage the development of a broad selection of skills across three domains: self-management, interpersonal, and movement. The development of these domains should be undertaken in a variety of contexts, not merely through sport, to engender a more holistic and student-centered approach to PE. Indeed, the 2018 syllabus emphasizes the need for "rhythmic and expressive movement; individual/group/team physical activities; initiative/challenge physical activities; aquatics and lifelong physical activities" (NESA, 2018, p. 29).

Traditionally, many assessment procedures in PE classes in Australia have focused on the motor domain and have only been partially concerned with knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Bradford, 2021). This is a phenomenon that is also observable internationally (see López-Pastor et al., 2013). In effect, this can marginalize other more holistic learning outcomes that can be evaluated using differentiated assessment processes. For example, NESA (2023a, para. 2), advised how differentiated assessment "may take into account the differences between individual students, such as their: current level of understanding and ability in relation to a particular topic or skill, prior learning experiences, learning preferences, motivation and engagement with learning, interests and talents."

SOLO Taxonomy Explained

Taking into account the need to develop student autonomy, alongside adopting a more holistic and inclusive approach to teaching and assessment processes, the decision was made at the IGSS to explore the SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) Taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982). The SOLO Taxonomy is a systematic method for building students' understanding as it develops from simple to complex in different tasks or subjects. Students' level

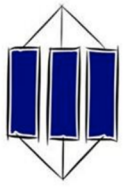
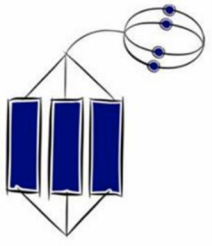
My level of thinking and learning is …	Skill activity: Goal:
 Prestructural *I am not sure about …*	*I don't know what to do, I need help, I'm not sure where to start.* What techniques did you need to learn? Where did you access help? Where was your starting point to learn this skill?
 Unistructural *I have one relevant idea about …*	*I can do it if you show me, I can tell you one strategy, I'm still making lots of mistakes, I find it hard to put it into a game.* Who showed you how to do the activity? What is the strategy that you have learned? What are the mistakes that you are making? What would be challenging when trying to put this skill into an activity/sequence?
 Multistructural *I have several ideas about …*	*I can demonstrate a range of skills, it's still trial and error, I am learning from my mistakes, I can follow instructions.* Which skills can you demonstrate? What aspects of the skill are trial and error for you? What mistakes are you making and how are you trying to improve on them? What instructions are you following and how challenging has it been to follow them and adjust your technique? What makes it easy for you to follow instructions?
 Relational *I have several ideas about … I can link them to the big picture.*	*I can demonstrate and explain a skill or technique; my skills are consistent and controlled; I know what to do, when, and why; I can link skills together in a successful sequence.* What gives you the ability to explain a skill or technique? What allows you to be able to demonstrate skills that are controllable and consistent? How do you understand what to do and when and why when attempting your skill, and how to adjust your actions to perform a successful movement? What gives you the ability to link skills together in a successful sequence?
 Extended Abstract *I have several ideas about … I can link them to the big picture. I can look at these ideas in a new and different way.*	*I can predict what might happen with skills, I am a role model for others when learning and demonstrating skills, I evaluate my own performance and refine as needed, I can see how things I have learned could be applied elsewhere, I can help others improve.* What do you think allows you to be able to predict what might happen with your skill while you are participating? How are you able to be a role model for others when learning and demonstrating your skill? What has led to you having such confidence in your ability? What aspects of the new skill are you able to refine and what allows you to be able to evaluate your performance as you are completing the skill? What have you learned from your skill development that could be applied in other activities and what has led you to be able to recognize this opportunity? Why do you think you would be able to help others improve? In relation to your specific skill, what gives you the ability to help others improve?

Figure 3.
SOLO Taxonomy new skill task at IGSS (Grade 7 example).

of understanding is identified as prestructural, unistructural, multistructural, relational, or extended abstract (Biggs & Collis, 1982). The SOLO Taxonomy can be used to help design the curriculum with varying levels of learning outcomes, as well as assessment tasks. Notably, it supports students in becoming more autonomous, gauging where they currently are — and what their next steps are — in respect of their level of understanding.

SOLO Taxonomy Implementation Stage 1: Autonomy in Practice (COVID-19, 2021)

During the COVID-19 period, staff at the IGSS identified the need to offer opportunities for students to be increasingly autonomous and have physical activity alternatives, while establishing ways to assess their growth in a valid and reliable way. This involved the design of a Grades 7 to 10 task that asked students to select a skill of their choice that they had limited experience with; for example, handstand, juggling, or doing a kickflip on skateboard. They subsequently researched the skill and implemented a four-week training drill, while producing a five-minute video journal that documented the questions asked on the SOLO Taxonomy template (see Figure 3). The two assessed Grade 7 and 8 (Stage 4) learning outcomes from the current NSW P-10 PDHPE syllabus (NESA, 2018) were "refines, applies and transfers movement skills in a variety of dynamic physical activity contexts" (PD4-4: PDHPE, Stage 4, Outcome number 4) and "transfers and adapts solutions to complex movement challenges" (PD4-5: PDHPE, Stage 4, Outcome number 5). Throughout the duration of the task, staff provided feedback online and shared ideas through class Zoom sessions.

SOLO Taxonomy Implementation Stage 2: Post COVID-19 (2023)

Following this experience, a post COVID-19 SOLO Taxonomy activity was designed for Grade 9 as a pilot project in an "Enhancing Performance" unit. This was based on the need to empower students as they returned to in-person classes, offering opportunities for them

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to choose how they wanted to be assessed via three key skills areas: (1) attack skills, (2) defense skills, and (3) team play skills (see Figure 4). Classes were face-to-face, and autonomy was essential to engage all students in activities related to their personal interests and their developmental needs.

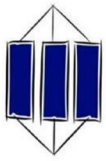
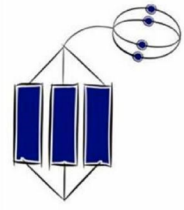
The staff member used the first lesson to demonstrate practically the three categories and what each of the skills comprised. From this point onwards, students selected two specific skill areas (from attack, defense, and team play skills) they wished to research and focus on. Over the next few weeks, the class teacher observed students in these skill areas as they participated in a variety of traditional and modified games. Students were assessed in three areas, using three distinct weightings: 8% growth; 5% persistence/effort; and 2% pre/post documentation of their SOLO Taxonomy journey. Figure 5 shows an example of how one of the two selected skills was assessed, pre and post activity.

Implications and Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from this activity have been significant. The idea of collectively measuring growth was initially found to be a

AREAS		
1	2	3
ATTACK SKILLS	DEFENSE SKILLS	TEAM PLAY SKILLS
• Passing and receiving • Keeping possession • Progressing in the required direction • Using and creating space • Principles of attack	• Marking/covering • Intercepting • Anticipation • Effort and recovery • Principles of defense	• Communication • Encouragement • Strategies and tactics • Patterns of play • Rules

Figure 4.
SOLO Taxonomy skills at IGSS (Grade 9).

My level of thinking and learning is…	**Skill:** Defensive skills **Activity:** Marking/Covering **Goal:** Shut down options for the opposition to receive the ball by decreasing opportunities for a clear pass
Starting point (Pretest)  Prestructural *I am not sure about….*	*I don't know what to do. I need help. I'm not sure where to start.* I have asked a friend who is a good defender, and they have begun to teach me the basics. I also accessed an online site. What techniques did you need to learn? I need to learn to: close down space, stay 1-2 steps away from the attacker, be patient and don't dive in, be on my toes and keep my feet moving, watch the ball and anticipate movement.
 Unistructural *I have one relevant idea about…*	*I can do it if you show me, I can tell you one strategy, I'm still making lots of mistakes, and I find it hard to put them into a game.* Who showed you how to do the activity? What is the strategy that you have learned? What are the mistakes that you are making? What would be challenging when trying to put this skill into an activity or sequence?
 Multistructural *I have several ideas about…* **End Point (Post-test)**	*I can demonstrate a range of skills, it is still trial and error, I am learning from my mistakes, and I can follow instructions.* I am learning how to anticipate the attacker's movement, I can think about closing down the space and try to keep 1-2 steps away from the player. I have been focusing on the ball more as well. Which skills can you demonstrate? I can demonstrate good speed through my footwork and the ability to reduce space. I have watched space and learned to anticipate movement, including the ability to not dive in. What aspects of the skill are trial and error for you? I am still struggling to know when to initiate movement to dive in or not, but have improved my consistency and feel more confident being patient. What mistakes are you making and how are you trying to improve on them? My footwork is at times slow, and I struggle to be on my toes, ready to react consistently. What instructions are you following and how challenging has it been to follow them and adjust your technique? What makes it easy for you to follow instructions? I am following the instructions of hold hold hold… strike when anticipating the attacker's move, and it's making it easier to watch the attacker's movements and I'm learning to more consistently see signs that signal the strike to shut down the defender.
 Relational *I have several ideas about….* *I can link them to the big picture*	*I can demonstrate and explain a skill or technique; my skills are consistent and controlled; I know what to do, when, and why; and I can link skills together in a successful sequence.* What gives you the ability to explain a skill or technique? What allows you to be able to demonstrate skills that are controllable and consistent? How do you understand what to do and when and why while attempting your skill and how to adjust your actions to perform a successful movement? What gives you the ability to link skills together in a successful sequence?
 Extended Abstract *I have several ideas about…* *I can link them to the big picture* *I can look at these ideas in a new and different way*	*I can predict what might happen with skills, I am a role model for others when learning and demonstrating skills, I evaluate my own performance and refine as needed, I can see things I have learned could be applied elsewhere, I can help others improve.* What do you think allows you to be able to predict what might happen with your skill while you are participating? How are you able to be a role model for others when learning and demonstrating your skill and what has led to you having such confidence in your ability? What aspects of the new skill are you able to refine and what allows you to be able to evaluate your performance as you are completing the skill? What have you learned from your skill development that could be applied in other activities and what has led you to be able to recognize this opportunity? Why do you think you would be able to help others improve? In relation to the specific skill you have learned, what gives you the ability to help others improve?

Growth

Figure 5.
SOLO Taxonomy Skill 1 pre- and postassessment tasks at IGSS (Grade 9).

challenging concept. There was experimentation with a variety of rubrics and a simple rubric was finally settled on, with staff selecting top, middle, and bottom levels in terms of student growth within this. Some consistency was established with the marking process across all five classes via regular department conversations. In addition, how a teacher presented this information to their class was

found to be critical. One teacher might talk of attack and defense more broadly and apply them to a variety of generic games played by the class, whereas another might allow (and even suggest) a student to choose two skills and apply them to a specific sport. Although this was not the true intent of the activity, it is an example of the interpretation of the content by staff members. Moreover, it demonstrates how an innovative approach to assessing practical PE can still result in teachers introducing a traditional style of assessment. Regular monitoring of this and related discussions as a department can help to minimize such issues.

Future Practice and Research

Overall, both case studies outlined in this article illuminate how future PE practice might be transformed and how allied research can inform the process. Notably, many teachers implement traditional models of teaching PE, which are heavily influenced by the school environment and culture in which they operate (Gubacs-Collins, 2015). Thus, future research needs to investigate the barriers that contemporary teachers face in adjusting their practice to allow opportunities for autonomy throughout all students' practical experiences and associated assessment processes. Continuing to evolve as a profession in this manner and offering more student-centered PE will help to prevent this subject from becoming outdated. Many scholars confirm that PE is "in crisis" due to the dominant multi-activity, sport-based model that has been resistant to change since the mid-20th century (Jefferson-Buchanan, 2023; Kirk, 2010; Stolz & Kirk, 2015). This model has been described as "narrow, unappealing to many young people, and therefore counterproductive to the promotion of a healthy, active lifestyle" (Cale, 2023, p. 6). Though each school has facility and resource limitations that can inhibit greater autonomy, it is important to openly discuss these matters with students and still attempt to accommodate their interests in some way. By encouraging students to be actively involved in curriculum design through co-construction of the PE program, their pleasure in physical activity can be heightened (see O'Connor, 2019).

Although the two case studies outlined here are high school interventions, they could easily be adapted for younger students in PE, with reduced cognitive load and modified skill/activity options being offered via rudimentary changes in space, equipment, grouping, rules, tasks, and more. This kind of adaptation is warranted, because studies affirm that physical activity can decline in early adolescence, implying that middle school–age students should be targeted to enhance their enjoyment and intrinsic motivation in movement contexts (see Dishman et al., 2018). Interestingly, SPARK PE (sparkpe.org) was originally developed for elementary school and expanded to include a middle school curriculum. Like the respective UK and Australia case studies here, SPARK PE has a student-centered approach to gauge enablers and barriers that students experience in relation to physical activity (see McKenzie et al., 2009).

Teachers can implement these autonomy-led approaches in diverse educational settings, by undertaking an initial audit of facilities, resources, and staffing prior to future modifications. Undertaking a process such as this can subsequently inform parent and student surveys, enabling fruitful discussions before changes are implemented in collaboration with all stakeholders. Inevitably, this would take time to initiate, and if consensus proved impossible, concessions would need to be made. In alignment with this type of groundwork, future research in this domain could also consider sociocultural effects on students' PE motivation and their attitudes toward autonomy-led curriculum models versus more teacher-constructed subject offerings. This could be broadened to include parental/guardian influences on students' PE motivation, because it is widely recognized that children and adolescents have higher physical activity levels when their caregivers support their participation (see Su et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Initiating a shift beyond traditional PE regimes of practice to more autonomy-infused pedagogical approaches requires teachers to be both open-minded and critical of their own training and existing classroom conventions. Following the implementation and review of the two case studies outlined herein, staff in each school are seeking to increase opportunities for student autonomy. This involves consciously moving away from traditional competitive team games to students co-designing their own preferred physical activity experiences and being actively involved in self-assessment processes. In sharing the tried-and-tested autonomy-focused approaches here, readers are given tangible examples of the impact that these can have on students' learning experiences in PE. Readers are concomitantly invited to reflect on their own PE programs and how much autonomy is afforded their students. How might a bespoke offering that meets the individual needs of all students be provided, and how might student autonomy be harnessed to enhance motivation in PE?

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