

Alone in a Crowd: Meeting Students' Needs for Relevance and Connection in Urban High School Physical Education

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Student engagement is a critical issue in education. A key component of engagement is the student's sense of membership. When students believe in and feel a part of the purposes of school and physical education, they are more likely to engage in activities and conform to norms. The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perspectives on school membership and its relationship to physical education. Three teachers and 16 students from a large, urban high school were observed and interviewed. The data were analyzed via constant comparison. The results indicated that school and departmental practices interacted to influence students' sense of membership. In particular, students failed to believe in the relevance and value of their experiences, and felt few social attachments. As a result, students frequently lacked the willingness and ability to engage in physical education.

Student engagement is a central problem for educators in today's schools (Voelkl, 1997). Although educators have traditionally thought of engagement in terms of at-risk students, there is increasing evidence that student engagement is a widespread problem throughout the student population (Finn, 1989). Sedlack, Wheeler, Pullin, and Cusick (1986) described high school students as "more visibly disruptive, less committed to high school, and less engaged in academic activities. They appear to care less about their educational experience and have come to invest their time, effort, and attention elsewhere." (p. 2). When students invest their time and efforts elsewhere, student educational engagement and learning appear to suffer.

Although an important issue, student engagement and the factors that contribute to it are not well understood. Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) suggested that educational engagement is not an isolated construct, but rather is a function of individual and school characteristics. A key component that influences a student's decision to engage in school is the student's sense of membership. When a student believes there is a personal connection to the school, engagement is more likely. This student bond occurs when "a student is attached, committed, involved, and has beliefs in the norms, activities, and people in an

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institution" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 117). When these four criteria are met, a student is more likely to conform to school demands and engage in course activities. This relationship is a reciprocal one as increased engagement in activities is likely to strengthen the sense of membership that in turn cycles back to increase engagement. This overall sense of membership is likely important and related to a sense of membership within specific classes such as physical education.

When a student feels attachment to the school, he or she "feels a personal stake in meeting the expectations of others and conforming to the norms" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 117). Attachment involves caring about what others think and trying to fulfill those expectations. The attachment may rely on the teacher-student relationship (Cothran & Ennis, 1998) or on relationships with peers (Allen, 1995; Benjamin & Hollings, 1997). Tinto (1997) noted that social affiliations likely provide a mechanism whereby academic affiliation and engagement are enhanced. When social and emotional ties are absent, however, students are less likely to engage in positive academic and social behaviors (Ennis et al., 1997; Voelkl, 1997).

The second component of school membership, commitment, also relates to students' appropriate behavior in class, but the rationale changes. In attachment, the student is likely to engage because of an emotional, personal connection. In contrast, commitment focuses on the perceived benefits of engaging. The student chooses to engage to gain some desired benefit. For example, a student may choose to stay in school and engage in class to meet a personal goal of achieving a high school diploma and the economic rewards that may come with graduation. Due to economic challenges in their home neighborhoods, however, many urban youth may not believe that commitment to school will result in post-school success and opportunity (Fine, 1991; Noguera, 1996). Similar challenges exist specific to physical education as prior research has demonstrated that students frequently do not believe the subject matter is valuable to their current or future lives (e.g., Carlson, 1995).

Involvement is the third component of school membership. If students perceive that the activities provided by the school are valuable, they are more likely to be involved in those activities and consequently see school as valuable. For some students, in-class activities are valuable, while other students are attracted more to the school's extra-curricular activities. Either way, students involved in those activities are more likely to feel a bond to the school and its mission. Involved students are also likely to be more successful and therefore more willing to engage. Gerber (1996) found that student involvement in extracurricular activities was positively related to academic achievement.

The final component of school membership is belief. Students must believe that school is a legitimate institution and that engagement will lead to desired benefits. In fact, belief in school may underlie the other components of attachment, commitment, and involvement (Wehlage et al., 1989). As Stinson (1993) demonstrated with her research on meaningfulness, the students' experience in the total school environment impacted and interacted with students' physical education experiences. It seems likely the same interdependence occurs between school and physical education with respect to a students' sense of membership.

Despite the relatively widespread agreement on the value of student engagement, interventions often are based on good ideas and intentions rather than proven theory (Finn, 1989). In particular, the student perspective on physical education and students' sense of membership has been largely ignored. Graham (1995) noted, "The fact is that as a profession we just do not know how students feel about

physical education programs" (p. 364). This lack of information about students' perspectives greatly reduces physical educators' abilities to design intervention and reform efforts to increase students' engagement.

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' experiences in school and physical education from a school membership framework. The specific research questions that guided the project were: (a) To what extent do students experience the theorized components of school membership? And (b) how do class and school experiences interact and influence students' sense of membership? This study was part of a larger project to investigate urban high school students' physical education experiences. This study is significant because the results provide insights into students' perspectives on membership and engagement. The information can be used by teachers to design more engaging classes that, in turn, may lead to increased student involvement and commitment. Additionally, understanding the processes that contribute to or impede a student's sense of membership may provide guidance for school and physical education reform efforts.

Methods

Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were the students and teachers in the Physical Education Department at Smithton High School. (Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.) Smithton is part of a large urban school district (over 110,000 students) on the East Coast. Originally built to accommodate 1,700 students, the school served over 2,100 students in Grades 9–12 at the time of the study.

The Department was staffed by four teachers, three of whom agreed to participate in the study. The new department head, Mr. Brandley, had 13 years of teaching experience in the district. Ms. Smith was also an experienced teacher with 7 years of experience, while Ms. Goetz was a first-year teacher. Mr. Bradley and Ms. Smith were African American, while Ms. Goetz was European American.

The students represented all four grades (9–12) and reflected the overall demographic trends in the school. Smithton's student body was predominantly African American (95.4%) with a very small population of other races: Native American (.23%), Hispanic (.56%), Asian (.99%), and European American (2.77%). All students were eligible for interviews and encouraged to participate. Informed consent was given by all participants interviewed. Formal interviews were conducted with 16 students, 4 males and 12 females, and three teachers. The percentage of male-female student interviews reflected the overall class composition of students, since students in two of the three observed courses (dance and personal fitness) were predominantly female. Eight students, four males and four females, were interviewed from the team sports class, while four female students from both dance and personal fitness were also interviewed. The students were selected to represent the demographics of the classes as well as a variety of participation levels.

Students were required to take one semester of daily physical education to fulfill a state graduation requirement. They were able to select from team sports, weight training, fitness, or dance to complete that requirement. The team sports classes used a multiactivity curriculum. Units were generally 2–4 weeks in length and consisted of a short skill introduction period (less than 1 week) followed by a lengthy game-play tournament format. Mr. Brandley and Ms. Goetz taught the team sports classes.

The fitness course was a recent addition to the district curriculum. It involved cognitive as well as motor exercises related to fitness principles. For example, a cardiovascular unit would include lectures and class discussion of the cardiovascular system anatomy and training heart rate calculations, as well as aerobic movement experiences. Students were encouraged to apply their knowledge gained in lecture-discussion classes in class activities and out-of-school movement activities. Worksheets and personal fitness notebooks were common teaching strategies. Mr. Brandley, Ms. Goetz, and Ms. Smith all taught sections of the fitness course.

The dance classes taught by Ms. Smith also utilized worksheets and personal notebooks in addition to psychomotor activities. The course served as an introduction to dance technique in ballet, jazz, modern, and African dances. Class typically began with a cognitive section involving vocabulary or the history of a technique, then moved into a demonstration and practice phase.

Data Collection

As a non-participant observer (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), the first author observed multiple classes at Smithton on 25 different occasions during the period from September to April of one school year. Field notes were written during and immediately after each observation. Informal discussions with students, teachers, and the school staff occurred regularly. The content of these conversations also was included in the field notes.

Topics from these informal discussions and a preliminary analysis of the field notes provided the guiding focus for the questions used during the formal student interviews held in March. An interview guide (Patton, 1990) structured the discussions. Question topics included class content, teacher actions, and student perspectives in addition to school-class membership. Similar topics guided the teachers' interviews. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

The data sources were analyzed using constant comparison and analytic induction methods in order to identify and extract common themes across participants (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). First, the data for each class were reviewed and themes were identified. We then compared and contrasted the themes from the different classes. Common themes were identified and the data were re-examined with regard to these data categories. Particular care was taken to search the data for negative cases that could serve to disprove an emerging theme or to provide an alternative perspective.

A variety of measures were taken to insure the trustworthiness of the data collected. Regular meetings with peer debriefers were utilized to insure the emerging themes were grounded in the data. The debriefers were familiar with the school setting and had access to the data. During sessions, working hypotheses and potential biases were examined. Triangulation of data sources was provided by comparing observations in different classes (dance, fitness, team sports) with different content and teachers, and interview responses of both students and teachers.

Although important, these findings are limited by the use of one site and a primary focus on physical education. It is likely that social and school factors beyond the scope of this investigation affect student's school membership.

Belief, Attachment, and School Membership

The student-school bond necessary for membership and engagement occurs when a student believes in the school and has a sense of commitment, attachment, and involvement (Wehlage et al., 1989). If these criteria are met, a student is more likely to conform to school and department demands and engage in activities. The students at Smithton High, however, reported that many of their physical education and school experiences did not promote a sense of membership. In particular, the students' sense of membership was impeded by their failure to believe in the value and legitimacy of physical education and school, and by their lack of attachment to their classmates.

Belief and School Membership

Belief in the school and its purposes is key to a student's sense of membership. As Wehlage et al. (1989) noted, "If there is no belief in the legitimacy or efficacy of an institution, social bonding ultimately fails" (p. 118). Unfortunately, many of these students did not believe in the efficacy or legitimacy of Smithton. They saw little relevance between school and their lives. Additionally, the legitimacy of the school and physical education were questioned when students did not believe the rules of school and class were relevant and fair.

Belief in the Relevance of School. Many students did not believe that school and physical education had significant meaning or value in their lives. They saw few connections between physical education, school, and their life outside of school. Like the students described by Carlson (1995), even those students who enjoyed their classes were not convinced they were learning or learning anything of value. School was one world that was disconnected from their other world in their homes and neighborhoods. The following conversation conveys a sense of this disconnection between school and students' lives outside of school. Two girls were arguing loudly in the hall as Ms. Smith approached:

Laurie: Damn you. I said I'd bring it tomorrow.

Ms. Smith: That's not how we talk here. Please stop.

Laurie: This is how the real world talks.

Ms. Smith: Well, school is not the real world. You need to rise above it.

School was not the real world for these students. Stacey reported that she wished all her teachers would, "Tell us real life stuff and not just the book. We need to know how to handle ourselves in situations outside of school. They should tell us how to use stuff we learn in school in the future."

Phillip, like Stacey, did not believe what he was learning in school would be useful to him. He was not convinced school would help him reach his goal of being a mechanic, but he was willing to give school the benefit of the doubt:

Well, I guess it does [help]. In math you learn to count your money and all that. It helps you. You don't know it when you're here, but after you get out it helps you. Yeah, it helps you, but you just don't know it.

Although he was willing to concede that school might have some unknown meaning that would be revealed to him at a later date, he was much clearer on the value,

or lack of it, in physical education. When asked if physical education would help him in the future he laughed and said, "Well, when you think about it, gym and mechanics really don't add up."

Other students reported similar doubts about the relevance of their experiences within physical education. In particular, students in the team sports classes often held negative views about the meaning and value of that course. In team sports, the teachers designed each semester's curriculum to include a mix of traditional sports (e.g., basketball, football) and sports new to the school and area (e.g., team handball, lacrosse). When Jacqueline was asked about the sports played in class she replied:

We're playing sports I've never heard of. I mean everybody knows how to play the basics like basketball, football, and baseball. I never heard of these. I mean some sports sound right, and some of these just don't sound like nothing to me. I don't know why we played lacrosse or now this handball. I never heard of neither one of them before. It's like what is that, what is it, and what is this? I don't know nobody who plays them.

With no personal frame of reference for these sports, students had difficulty believing that the subject matter was valuable. The students were unaware of the potential educational benefits of various sports that the teachers selected. For example, Mr. Brandley's rationale for including lacrosse in the curriculum seemed educationally sound. He believed lacrosse was an appropriate sport to include in the program because it was a unique way to emphasize eye-hand coordination, the strategies involved in the game borrowed from familiar games like soccer and basketball, and it was a popular sport in nearby colleges. Although he did not explain these reasons to the students, for him at least, lacrosse was a worthwhile, meaningful unit. For the students who had never seen nor played the game, the end result was a unit in which they had no desire to participate and, not surprisingly, often did not.

In contrast, another group of students found the familiar sports, such as volleyball, meaningless because the current class experiences were so similar to previous experiences. Although Rochelle participated regularly in volleyball, she described the class as boring, "You get tired of the same old things after awhile. We kept playing the same stuff." Franklin no longer bothered to participate in class because, "I already know how to play all these. It's the same thing as before." Later in the interview he mentions that he planned to participate in basketball and football because, "basketball or football are, I don't know, better. They're a challenge. Like they're something to challenge you."

Although the basketball and football units followed similar instructional formats as other, less popular sport units, many students, particularly the males, cited these two units as the most valued experiences. The challenge and interest seemed to arise not from instructional differences, but from differences in student skill, enthusiasm, and cultural relevance. Observations suggest that the students entered these units with more skill, displayed more engaged behavior, and achieved a much higher quality performance than in any other unit. The interest and engagement levels in these two sports seemed to be culturally influenced. Within their home neighborhoods, these two sports were the most popular and most likely to be played outside of school. More students dressed regularly for these units, and students were generally eager to begin the lesson every day and quickly moved to comply

with teacher requests at the beginning of class in order to maximize participation time. It seemed that the students believed these sports were more important and would be used in their lives outside of school. Unfortunately, students reported that few of the other sport units were personally meaningful.

Some of the students in the fitness and dance courses were more positive in their evaluation of the value of their classes. Dana described her fitness class, "It's not really like gym. You learn about your body and how to take care of yourself and aerobics and different stuff." The dance students also described meaningful components of their class. For Ingrid, dance was meaningful because "it's all about the way you show yourself, the way you present yourself to others. You always going to be doing that." Tiffany focused more on the skills of dance: "It's a good class. You really work on your mechanics and being technical with your moves and stuff."

The fitness and dance classes, however, were not seen as personally meaningful or relevant by a majority of the male students. Antoinette said that males wouldn't take the fitness class because "they think they don't need to get fit." Justin, a student in team sports agreed, "It's [the fitness course] just stupid stuff. I don't need no aerobics or anything." Since the male students did not believe the course held any value, they did not enroll in the courses. Although the courses were available to both male and female students, there were only three male students enrolled in the seven dance and fitness classes offered at Smithton.

Belief in Legitimacy of School Rules. A significant part of believing in school is believing that the institution is relatively fair and that rules are in place for personal benefit and safety. These students did not believe that Smithton operated in a fair, nor logical manner. The students' questioned the legitimacy of school and class rules for which they saw little need or value.

Students often expressed frustration with strict rules that seemed unreasonable to them. One of these rules forbid the use of candy and soda machines during the school day. The machines were located in the lobby just outside the gymnasium doors, and the lobby became a contested area as students attempted to use the machines, and the physical educators and administrators attempted to keep them from using the machines. Jamal described his frustration with the situation, "There's no eating candy in school, but there's a candy machine. There's no drinking soda in school, but we've got soda machines. We've got telephones, but we can't use them." When asked why he thought the administration did not want them to use the machines he replied, "I don't even know. There's no call for that." For the students, there also seemed to be "no call" for many of the procedures within physical education.

For example, one of the interview questions asked the students to describe changes they would make if they were in charge of the physical education class. A frequent response was to quit making students perform flexibility stretches, the regular beginning to all classes. The students saw no reason to stretch and constantly resisted the teachers attempts to encourage them to stretch while the teachers took attendance. Although the teachers initially provided a rationale for stretching related to reduced risk of injury, for the students, there was little reason to stretch. The low levels of cardiovascular and muscular intensity required and expended by the students during class activities, combined with their relatively young age, made the threat of injury relatively meaningless. Further, the teachers' failure to modify the stretching task during the year for different sports reinforced the students' belief that stretching was something teachers made you do for no reason. Although they

failed to believe stretching was needed, students were forced to stretch or lose points from their daily grade. The most extreme example was provided by Antoinette who said, "Why we be stretching every day? What does stretching have to do with ping pong? Tell me what I need to stretch for ping pong for." When rules seem arbitrary and useless, students might be less likely to believe in the legitimacy of the subject.

Belief in the school and its purposes is the bedrock upon which student membership is based. Curricular practices and administrative policies that the students did not understand created a lack of faith from the students' perspectives. They did not believe physical education was relevant to their lives and as a result did not believe engagement in activities was worth their time or effort. The result was that for most units, students offered minimal levels of effort and engagement in learning activities. Also contributing to this lack of engagement was the students' lack of attachment while in class.

Attachment and School Membership

Attachment occurs when a student believes that social and emotional ties to others within the school are important. If attached to others, students are more likely to consider the needs and norms of others and act in a more positive manner. School size, scheduling, and personal decisions made by the students interacted to limit the students' attachment to school. This lack of social connection between students and teachers impacted the students' willingness and ability to participate in class activities.

In support of Grant's (1994) contention that large school size negatively impacts students, the size of Smithton High, and the related scheduling difficulties, impeded the development of students' sense of belonging and being known. Ms. LeBlanc, the head of the Academic Center, described the crowding problem, "The school is just too big for the kids to know anybody. Thank goodness they don't all come on the same day, or we'd never fit them all in the lunch room. It's about to blow the way it is now." Navigating the crowded hallways in the allotted 6 minutes to reach one's next class was no small achievement for the students. Ms. Smith described the crowding, "It's worst in the hall. If you're ever here during a class change go out there and try to move. You can't do it. You have to look for holes and dodge." Students struggled through crowded halls to get to class on time and then were together for one class period before moving on to a new class with new classmates for another few minutes.

The crowding problem extended into physical education. Large class sizes affected the students' opportunity to interact and to learn in the physical education classes. Classes in the gymnasium might have up to 90 students at one time, while the fitness and dance classes often approached 40 students. The physical education staff did not believe the guidance department understood the challenges of teaching a large physical education class. Ms. Smith described the guidance department, "I don't think they take into account when scheduling that people moving are not the same as people sitting in a class." The crowded conditions were particularly constraining in the dance and fitness classes that met in the dance room rather than the gym. When asked how the large class size affected her students, Ms. Smith replied:

Sometimes when I was in the front of the room I could see kids moving to look around and try to see me. It was hard for them to see the instruction, so

I was forced to use some different formations and move differently. I also notice that in those larger classes, the shy kids, the unsure kids, they congregate in the back of the room. The more aggressive kids move forward to the front of the room. With the smaller classes, they can't hide.

The team sports classes also were affected by the large class size. The crowding and large classes limited the teachers' ability to get to know their students and thus impacted their effectiveness. Ms. Goetz described her team sports class:

Well, the way gym class is you don't get to know them. By the time you take roll, deal with their slips of paper, get them organized into teams, then you miss a lot of things that you should be focusing on. You just try to run them through like a big faucet that you try to get everything through in 30 minutes.

The administrative requirements of large classes demanded so much attention, that little time or energy remained for teaching or building relationships with students. Disengaged students, however, need personal connections and attachments. Schlosser (1992) found that perceived distance between teachers and students was related to at-risk students' willingness to engage.

The lack of attachment to classmates and teachers in physical education was also accentuated by student scheduling. Classes were composed of students from all four high school grades. Even the student who could somehow manage to know all 600 classmates in the same grade level could be in a physical education class with all upperclassmen and be alone again. It was common for students not to know the names of their classmates, even mid-way through the semester. For example, at the beginning of the third unit (8 weeks into the semester), team captains were selecting team members but were unable to draft teammates by name. The first captain selected a player, and the draft turned to team captain #2, Angela. She pointed to a boy and said, "Him." Mr. Brandley asked who she wanted, and Angela replied she did not know his name. Mr. Brandley walked over to the general vicinity of Angela's point, held his hand over a boy's head, and said "This one?" Angela nodded yes. The same point and nod procedure was used to select over half the students in the class.

In addition to the structural influence of school size on attachment, students also chose to be disconnected from other students. They may have been selecting an isolation strategy as a defense mechanism. By isolating themselves and remaining unknown, they believed they were controlling some of the threat to their personal safety. One of the student interview questions asked the student to give advice to a new student. John explained how to do well at Smithton:

You just keep to yourself and you'll be okay. I mean there's some people that like to start something, but basically if they don't know you, they won't mess with you. The people that they don't know, they won't try to mess with. Like if they've heard of you, they'll try to mess with you. They'll be saying this and that. Like me, I just stay to myself, and nobody bothers me much.

This isolating strategy led to few friendships in class. When they did exist, friendships were seen as transient bonds rather than authentic relationships. I asked Susan if she saw her friends during the school day, and she replied, "Well, you have certain friends in certain classes. So since you don't get to see your other friends, they're your friends when you're in that class." When asked to describe his friends

in team sports class, John replied, "Well, I don't really have friends really. I mean I've got friends, I just don't know them very well. I wouldn't say social friends 'cause I have other friends, but in class we're friends." John's strategy for seeing his "real" friends was to get to school early and hang out in the lobby area. "Basically then I don't see them until after school or sometimes until the next day."

This lack of connection to classmates played a key role in the students' willingness to participate in class and interact with others. For example, it impacted how successful the staff was in implementing one of their primary goals, increased student participation. The teachers implemented a common teaching strategy of using peers to encourage one another to dress out and play in order to help the team. Tyrus described the class rule, "We have to play everybody, and if somebody doesn't dress out, then we don't get a sub, and we have to play with who's there." If part of the team or dance group failed to dress or participate, the group was expected to continue as best they could. For the dance students, that might mean a sequence was missing. In the team sports class, teams were required to play short-handed against teams with full squads. The intent was to have peers encourage each other to participate in order to be fair to their teammates or group members.

The strategy, however, met with limited success. The teachers failed to realize the lack of student attachment and, consequently, the lack of student involvement with and concern for their peers. One day Charlotte did not dress for a volleyball game, and her team had to play short-handed. The investigator asked her if she felt bad for letting them down, "No. I don't even know who most of them are. Everybody just do their own thing around here." The students did not have the personal attachments with each other necessary for the peer pressure strategy to work. Students did not care if they let their peers down, because they did not know who was on their team. Relatedly, they also did not know how other people on their team would respond to them. One of the interview questions asked students about how people act in physical education as compared to their actions in other classes. Students were generally unable to answer the question. Dean answered the question like several of his classmates, "I wouldn't know [how students act in other classes]. I don't have no classes with none of these kids in here."

Student isolation was also a factor in how willing the students were to engage and possibly fail in front of each other. Without caring connections between classmates, a social comfort zone was missing. In particular, the low skilled students often quit participating or participated on a limited basis because of peer comments and attitudes. Latonya described her class, "People be sore losers. Like I want to be in here with people I don't even know and have them be yelling at me. People got attitudes in this school, and in PE it's worse." The competitive nature of the team sports class seemed to accentuate the negative influence of student isolation and the lack of caring relationships between students. Dana, a new student, initially tried to play in the games despite her relatively low skilled status but said, "I don't play no more. I tried to play once, and they just yelled at me. I was so embarrassed, I just quit playing." For students already embarrassed by their low skill level, the pressure of the games was motivation not to play at all, or if playing, to avoid any real involvement with the game.

Alternative Perspectives

Particular care was taken to search for negative cases that did not fit within the overall patterns that emerged from the data. Two instances may serve as alter-

native conceptions of the themes presented in the previous sections. Mr. Brandley, the department chair, did not believe students were isolated or negatively affected by the large school size. In fact, he believed larger classes were better for the students, because there were more students to fill teams for competition.

Another instance of possibly competing views arose from the student interviews. Some of the students provided inconsistent answers to questions. These inconsistencies were related to the questions that addressed attachment in class. For example, when Lee was asked initially about her friends in class, she replied, "Oh, I've got good friends in class. I know most everybody." Later in the interview, however, Lee mentioned that she did not really talk to very many people in class, and her advice to a new student was to "just keep to yourself."

Perhaps Lee and the other students who gave inconsistent answers did not feel isolated and unattached with their classmates and school. The preponderance of evidence, however, suggested they were. Their initial responses to interview questions may have been an attempt to provide the investigator with their desired image as a popular student. Generally, their later responses that indicated isolation, were more believable due to the intensity, length, and more personal nature of their reports. Class observations also failed to support the student responses of an involvement with several good friends in class.

Meeting Students' Needs for Relevance and Connection

These students described school and physical education experiences that frequently were detriments to, rather than positive contributors to, school membership. They did not believe school or physical education were relevant and valuable, nor did they feel a sense of attachment to others in the school. These two primary issues, relevance and connection, must be addressed if educators hope to engage students in their own education.

Relevance

To meet students' need for relevance, educators should critically examine their curricular choices and how those choices are presented to students. For example, many of these students could not see the relevance, rationale, and benefits of some curricular choices. Should lacrosse remain in the curriculum for a student body who has never seen it played? The answer might be to choose a more appropriate sport for inclusion in the program. Another equally viable option is to retain lacrosse, but provide students with a strong rationale for its inclusion. Teachers may need to help students develop the conceptual understanding of sport that allows them to make connections between sports and potential types of benefits (e.g., lacrosse as a fitness opportunity, a cultural experience, or as another means to develop eye-hand coordination). When students understand and believe in the value of the subject matter, engagement is more likely.

A more important consideration than the inclusion or exclusion of a specific sport, however, is to examine the ability of the school's multiactivity program to meet the needs of the students. Student displeasure with and disengagement from the current curriculum suggested that the traditional multiactivity program used by Smithton High may have contributed to the students' sense of meaninglessness. The multiactivity approach may limit the teachers' ability to assist students in

meaning making, because each sport stood alone and isolated from each other and the meaningful constructs of health, culture, and socialization.

In many ways, the multiactivity program was similar to Nieto's (1994) description of the general school curriculum that "is at odds with the experiences, backgrounds, hope, and wishes of many students" (p. 399). The Smithton High curriculum focused on traditional games of "American" culture, games based on a white, male, Christian tradition—a tradition that many of these urban students did not share. The disparity between the students' world and the world of sport they were required to engage in was wide. Fernandez-Balboa (1993) described this gap between school and the students' reality as the uncontextual nature of physical education curricula. It may be impossible to close this gap with traditional curricular approaches to physical education, and instead, physical educators may need to think about how to transform, not modify, physical education (e.g., Tinning & Fitzclarence, 1992; Vertinsky, 1992).

Although the dance and fitness courses appeared to provide relevance and meaning for some students, the two courses are not a panacea. As evidenced from the enrollment trends and student comments, male students generally did not assign value to these two courses. Merely switching to a curriculum of dance and fitness would not address all students' needs for meaning and relevance. Other curricular models based on sport may need to be considered to meet the needs and values of all students.

Connection

In addition to meeting students' needs for relevance, educators must begin to consider how to increase students' attachment to school and each other. This is likely a new role for many educators. Teachers may need to learn communication and caring skills that allow them to build a personal relationship with students in order for their professional expertise and the curriculum to be effective. Additionally, teachers must explore alternate instructional strategies that provide frequent and positive student interactions with each other.

Physical education may be uniquely situated in the school environment to promote student attachment to peers and the school. Physical education provides a rare opportunity for the students to interact with a large number of other students. The students know physical education is more interactive, and they appreciate the difference. As Brett noted "You can have fun in here [physical education class]. In English class you basically sit, and you don't get to work with anybody." Students come to physical education classes expecting and wanting to work with other students, and educators can use this desire for interaction to counteract the isolation students experience. A variety of curriculum models (e.g., Siedentop, 1994) and instructional methods (e.g., cooperative learning) are available to physical educators seeking to enhance positive interactions between students. Teachers cannot, however, put students on teams and assume that will be enough to promote student interaction.

The impediments to school membership at Smithton High are an unfortunate reality for many students at a variety of schools. It is no wonder that students disengage from such a meaningless educational experience. To reverse this pattern of alienation and disengagement, physical educators must implement curriculum and instructional methods that allow students "to acquire a personal sense of compe-

tence and success, to develop a sense of identity and social integration and to acquire the socially useful knowledge and skills" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 27). Only then can we expect students to become school members actively involved in their education.

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