

Implementing Proactive Circles to Increase Student Voice in Physical Education

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Abstract:

Many students are hesitant to provide class input while others are eager to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings about physical education. As a result, some attempts to provide students with a voice risk overlooking students who are already reluctant to express themselves. Systematic approaches to provide voice to all students may help promote inclusion in empowerment-based practices like student voice. Restorative justice practices in education commonly employ “circle processes” that provide voice to all students. The purpose of this article is to introduce proactive circles as a strategy that physical educators can use to provide voice to all students.

Keywords: students | physical education | restorative justice | circle processes

Article:

Many physical educators are using innovative strategies to empower students in their programs. Student voice is an empowering strategy that allows students to share their opinion about their school experience with educators (Howley & O’Sullivan, Citation2020). Feedback from students can help teachers understand how students are experiencing physical education (PE) and help to promote an inclusive learning environment. However, teachers face practical limitations, including the lack of instructional time and difficulty including all students in conversations. Many students, for example, are hesitant to provide class input while others are eager to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings about PE. As a result, some attempts to provide students with a voice risk overlooking students who are already reluctant to express themselves. Systematic approaches to provide voice to all students may help promote inclusion in empowerment-based practices like student voice. Restorative justice practices in education commonly employ “circle processes” that provide voice to all students. The purpose of this column is to introduce proactive circles as a strategy that physical educators can use to provide voice to all students.

Restorative Pedagogy

Restorative justice in education is a movement that aims to empower students to develop social skills, address structural inequalities, and build sustainable relationships in schools. Many teachers

may be aware of “restorative justice” as a specific process to adjudicate punishment following misbehavior. Many schools claim to practice restorative justice, but teachers seem to be excluded from the process, which reflects an instinct to use restorative justice only in reaction to misbehavior (Hemphill et al., Citation2021). Unfortunately, this narrow view has overshadowed a holistic vision to transform schools by centering the importance of relationships in education. More discussion is needed on “restorative pedagogy,” which includes specific strategies aimed at building relationships and ensuring that all students have opportunities to participate in relational learning. Restorative pedagogy embraces an inclusive vision of education where the voice of all students is valued, moves students toward active (instead of passive) roles, and provides students with opportunities to solve practical problems (Pointer et al., Citation2020). The problem-solving aspect of restorative pedagogy often relates to resolving interpersonal conflicts. While this reactive stance is important, more attention is needed on the use of proactive restorative pedagogy in PE.

Proactive restorative circles provide physical educators with a systematic way to provide student voice. Several essential components are recommended to ensure that students develop familiarity with the restorative circles. First, all students should be organized in a circle where everyone is visible to each other and at a distance where everyone can be heard clearly. Proactive restorative circles are guided by open-ended questions that increase in their complexity over time. For example, a simple question like, “What is something you liked about class today?” might prompt a reply from most, if not all, students. As students gain experience in circles, a question like, “How can we improve upon today’s lesson?” may invite constructive feedback from students. The circle keeper is an important role for ensuring that the circle is carried out in a respectful and inclusive manner. Circle keepers work best when they listen with interest and empathy, ensure that students understand the questions and have opportunities to respond, and often summarize the circle in a manner that reflects the student voices that were shared. This role is typically held by teachers but may eventually be a leadership role taken on by students. A talking piece is a meaningful object that is passed sequentially around the circle. Possession of the talking piece indicates who is answering the guiding question of the circle and that others who do not possess the talking piece are expected to listen to the response of their peer. Finally, circles often include a centerpiece including a variety of objects that are grounded in the values and preferences of the class. Many classes will negotiate expectations for circles and then place those in the centerpiece as a reminder for participants. With these guidelines in place, student voice can be systematically provided in PE by introducing guiding questions that are responded to by each student as the talking piece progresses around the circle.

Example of Proactive Circles in PE

Through my community-engaged scholarship, I have offered a ninth grade PE class at a high school in Greensboro, North Carolina grounded in restorative justice with assistance from students at our university. Our program is an extension of the teaching personal and social responsibility model (Hellison, Citation2011) that I have developed with colleagues, which we call “Restorative Youth Sports” (Hemphill et al., Citation2018). Our PE lessons begin and end with a restorative circle, as described above, providing two student voice opportunities to every student in every lesson. Our classes are allotted 90 minutes, which provides enough time for circles and for physical activity. I recall having a couple of months of growing pains as we tried to implement this model the first time. The students were impatient, and I was not yet skilled enough as a circle keeper. But we found some early wins through the growing pains—a very shy student seemed more

comfortable speaking in a circle, other students began to suggest guiding questions for circles, and we began to cocreate a set of shared norms for circle participation. After a couple of months of trial and error, we consistently implemented circles that ranged between five and 30 minutes in length. To me, the presence of the circles alone felt like a success. But I also knew that circles were not going to be realistic to many physical educators without a stronger connection to the content standards (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, Citation2014).

To make circles a more integrated feature of PE, we began to integrate circles with physical activity. Warmup and stretching routines were moved into the circle, often guided by student choice. One of the students noticed the various skills that students had in the class related to athletics, art or music. At the suggestion of students, the circle embraced student demonstrations and explanations of gymnastic routines, self-defense techniques, poetry, drawings, and other creative works. I realized that the circle was indeed transformative for me and for the students. These experiences built community, but also included physical activity promotion, teaching life skills, and practicing motor skills. The circle was indeed an educative experience for students. An evaluation of our program explained that the circles served three purposes: listening, community-building, and healing (Hemphill et al., Citation2021). Listening circles provided student voice and community-building circles extended that foundation by exploring more complex questions and connecting circles to the physical education curriculum. Healing circles were used in response to conflict and harm. For the purpose of this column, I emphasize that the proactive circles were a prerequisite to providing responsive healing circles as a space to repair harm. Therefore, if schools and teachers aspire to implement restorative justice more attention is needed to proactive strategies.

Challenges and Opportunities

My success with implementing proactive restorative circles has assured me that restorative justice practices are applicable to PE and inspired me to learn more about how to support this transformative practice. But I also know that challenges remain for physical educators who are interested in this work. Large class sizes and limited class time make it difficult to implement circles given the time required to allow each student to speak, even if students are asked for brief responses. Large gymnasiums are also a challenge, especially if other students or teachers are in view of, but not participants within, the circle. Teachers also need additional support to develop in the role of a circle keeper and help student leaders prepare for that role. This suggests to me that we need more advocacy for the use of proactive restorative pedagogy. First, if a school claims that “restorative justice” is guiding its discipline practices, then teachers should advocate for additional support for restorative pedagogy. Note that the use of restorative justice only as a means for punishment is not a best practice. Second, use proactive circles to demonstrate the types of student engagement that are possible in your program. You may find that teachers and administrators will be surprised to see students engaged in circles. Finally, seek professional communities of support for this work outside your workplace. These practical approaches may help to advance the use of proactive restorative pedagogy in PE. Restorative justice practices are not for every teacher. They are, in fact, a values-based approach to education. But if we are going to practice restorative justice in schools, we should do it the right way. That means restorative schools need to consider proactive and relational strategies to systematically include student voice in the teaching and learning experience.

Additional Information

Notes on Contributors

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