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# Everyone Matters: Eliminating Dehumanizing Practices in Physical Education

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**K**irk (2020) has suggested that we are living in a time of social turbulence, where the impact of a host of inequities, events and crises have contributed to a society that is perceived to be spiraling out of control. This observation corresponds with the call for institutions to demonstrate inclusive excellence toward the promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion in communities (Russell, 2019). The field of physical education has long

been critiqued for marginalizing those positioned as “different” (Fitzpatrick & Santamaría, 2015). This includes, but is not limited to, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes related to girls’ ability, perceptions of Black and Brown youth as having superhuman physical capacities, and the exclusion of trans, queer or intersex bodies (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Harrison & Clark, 2016; Hodge, 2014; Landi, 2018; Sykes, 2011). Given the renewed focus on



the body over the past few years and the interactions that occur relative to class, race, sexuality, and ability (Blackshear & Culp, 2020; Clark, 2020; Lynch, Sutherland, & Walton-Fisette, 2020), Liberti (2017) challenged professionals to remove preconceived notions of human movement that marginalize certain bodies while normalizing others.

Smith (2011), in studying various periods of history, concluded that individuals under conflict have a propensity to think in terms of hierarchies. This leads to ways of thought that empower persons to complete acts that would be unthinkable under normal circumstances. The demotion of others to a predisposed natural hierarchy is a process of depriving a person or a group of positive human qualities known as *dehumanization*. Haslam and Loughnan (2014) categorized dehumanization as a violation of our belief in a common humanity that is “blatant, subtle, influenced by hate, indifference, collectively organized, or intensely personal” (p. 401). Further, dehumanization promotes the denial of uniquely human attributes to individuals or groups in a manner that is cruel and often systematic. This article gives an overview of the practice of dehumanization and the implications for learners in our classes and provides strategies to help students succeed.

## Dehumanization in Today’s Climate

The history of dehumanization is robust and varied. Dehumanization has been witnessed in the possession of slaves as

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property, genocide perpetuated against groups, and laws that discriminate against marginalized individuals (Haslam, 2006). In everyday life, dehumanization is more subtle and evident, cutting across domains such as race, religion, nationality and gender. Further, dehumanization can be applied to smaller groups of people, such as those who are mentally ill, intellectually disabled, physically disabled, of lower social classes, or involved in professions deemed low status (Bastian et al., 2011). Recent examples of dehumanization have included political leaders comparing immigrants to infectious diseases, Asian athletes during a high school soccer playoff match being told to “go back to where they came from,” anti-LGBTQ participation policies that specifically target transgender athletes by barring them from certain bathrooms and locker rooms, students being asked to re-create the roles of master and slave in a physical education class during Black History month, and anti-Semitic messages being drawn on playgrounds (Culp, 2020).

The late Don Hellison (2011) provided a depiction of how focusing on positive human qualities, dignity and basic conventions of respect could be realized in physical education through the teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) model. Level 1 in the TPSR model focuses on respect. Students should (1) control their own behavior and show respect for the feelings and rights of others, (2) understand that all have the right to participate, (3) have the right to resolve conflicts peacefully, (4) be taught to recognize and respect differences of opinion, (5) negotiate conflicts, and (6) develop increased awareness of empathy and understanding of the impact of one’s behavior on others. Human connection and the valuing of one another is of profound benefit and should be encouraged as part of a quality physical education program (Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention, 2010). Yet, there is mounting evidence that people have become less trusting in past decades, less connected to their communities, and more isolated (Pew Research Center, 2019). Thus, dehumanizing practices can work to undermine the goals we wish to obtain in physical education.

## How Dehumanization Affects Students

Kelman (1973) explained that dehumanization is a violation of two qualities (identity and community) that we accord to an individual. His concept of community envisioned humanity as an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other while recognizing each other's individuality and rights (Kelman, 1973). The loss of identity is a significant occurrence for victims of dehumanization. Not only is agency (the capacity for a person to act individually and freely) lost but, effectively, a dehumanized individual is excluded from community and the promise of what it has to offer.

Oliver (2011) outlined that the dehumanization of individuals perpetuates what is perceived as the in-group versus the out-group. Dehumanized individuals are not part of the in-group. Subsequently, they are considered "outside the moral kinship or scope of justice, and thus become a legitimate target for more active oppressions and exclusions" (Oliver, 2011, p. 87). Kelman (1973) mentioned that the exclusion of people from our moral community makes it possible to act inhumanly toward them, allowing for harm to occur to them by others and contributing to moral disengagement and indifference.

In addition to the loss of identity and community, students who are dehumanized in schools are more likely to develop a negative attitude toward themselves, hide emotions and disassociate with learning over time. When the actions of dehumanized students are misinterpreted by teachers and administrators, students are often rendered infantile, labeled as difficult and criminalized (National School Climate Council, 2007).

Recent studies in physical education from various parts of the world have drawn attention to the issue of dehumanizing practices and possible implications for teaching and learning. In examining students' interactions in a multiethnic Norwegian physical education class, Thorjussen and Sisjord (2018) mentioned that attitudes on physical education are closely linked to a focus on Western ideals of health, sport and fitness. These ideals place an emphasis on White, slim and fit bodies and perpetuate stereotypes and marginalization for some students due to their ethnic/cultural background. This was espoused in a narrative by a Persian student, whose parents are Muslim and immigrants from Iran. The student discussed the clear division between what he termed as *us* (foreigners) and *them* (real Norwegians), recounting stories of Muslim girls being bullied for their hijabs and boys with a non-Western background waiting to shower for fear of being ridiculed for their body size.

Landi (2018), in advocating for a queer-inclusive physical education, commented on the prevalence of spaces and behaviors in physical education that exist under the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm. This assumption fosters the long-existing practice that keeps the physical education environment from being a place



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where all can grow, experience pleasure and be successful. In discussing a classroom conversation he had as a first-year physical educator, Landi recounted a co-teacher's questioning of a male student's effort during a warm-up exercise in the gym. The co-worker expressed the need to "change the student" because of his personal belief that the student was gay. After listening to other vile remarks from the co-teacher, Landi, frustrated and angry, walked with the student during the remainder of the exercise. Later, when Landi asked the student why he hated gym, the student replied, "Because gym sucks. ... If I wanted to be pushed around by muscle-head dumb jocks and be made fun of by old men past their prime, I would play football" (Landi, 2018, p. 8).

Pang and Hill (2016) explored young Chinese girls' aspirations and ideal environments for health, physical education and physical activity using a strengths-based approach. They highlighted discourse in popular media and research that promotes the narrative that Asians are passive, high achievers who are uninterested in sport (Malik, 2004). Pang and Hill noted that this narrative fails to account for cultural expectations and challenges these girls may face, which include (1) balancing expectations of White, Eurocentric, Western cultural norms of participation and traditional Chinese ideals that stress femininity and obedience; (2) their families' opinions of sport participation being related to a lower social class and future career advancement; and (3) that some girls desire to engage more in sport but lack the economic resources. Consequently, the authors promoted a holistic perspective of teaching health and physical education that allows for Chinese girls to make meaning of their experiences while demystifying existing narratives that marginalize their desires.

## Humanizing Strategies in Physical Education

Despite a host of current economic and social crises dominating the headlines, Shih (2018), espoused that there is a need to humanize individuals amid a society characterized by emptiness, meaningless and hopelessness. Though not a new concept, humanizing education establishes teaching as a dynamic process and a vision for life in schools and beyond that is unifying for the teacher and student (Price & Osborne, 2000). Well-designed physical education programs are inclusive, active, enjoyable, dynamic and supportive (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2015). Furthermore, they add to the promotion of a positive school climate by supporting student learning, well-being, time, space to be active, and opportunities for social and emotional growth (Beale, 2015; Osher & Berg, 2018). Here, it is suggested that physical educators take a proactive approach to work against dehumanizing classes by recognizing language, introducing a pedagogy of somebodiness, democratizing the classroom, using restorative practices, and positioning learning as "light." Each of these suggestions will be briefly described next, with examples of how each of these ideas can be utilized provided in Table 1.

*Recognizing Language.* Brown (2017) mentioned that dehumanizing always starts with language, often followed by images that creates a false narrative. She also observed that once people are seen on the other side of a conflict as morally inferior and dangerous, the conflict is framed as good versus evil (Brown, 2017). This othering over time eventually promotes the idea that there is a winner and loser. In considering the use of language, Brown suggested that we periodically ask ourselves whether we are using value-neutral terminology (impartiality and without bias and judgment), person-first language (i.e., "a person with diabetes"), and refraining from using metaphors (i.e., "that boy is an animal on defense") to describe the characteristics of individuals and groups.

*A Pedagogy of Somebodiness.* *Somebodiness* is a community recognized idea rooted in African American history and expanded upon by theologians such as Howard Thurman and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Johnson, 2016). In short, it asserts that dignity is inherent to human beings and a value to be fought for. King believed that without a deep sense of somebodiness, an individual would be incapable of being fully mature and would struggle to maximize his or her potential. Physical education teachers can inspire a pedagogy of somebodiness in students by instilling the belief in students that they all have a purpose. This can occur using verbal, written and visible affirmations; emphasizing the positive; and acknowledging the diverse cultural lives of students.

*Giving Students Voice.* Butler (2016) mentioned that to embrace human rights and create spaces that are fair and equal, students must be prepared in a democratic environment. Students who put democracy in action, along with discussing situational ethics and inventing games, in Butler's view, are prepared to work with a diverse range of people when they leave our classes. Butler noted two main challenges for teachers seeking to foster more democracy in the classroom. The first challenge for teachers is to minimize ways to limit their privilege and biases while assisting them in finding positive ways to participate in the construction of the physical education experience. Another challenge for teachers involves deciding how much autonomy students will have in making group decisions and the creation of rules. If teachers do not facilitate well, students could marginalize their peers and perpetuate the behaviors that we wish to eliminate (Morrison, 2008).

*Restorative Circles.* Restorative practices help students build social and emotional skills by focusing on relational practices, empowerment and conflict resolution. Hemphill et al. (2018) and Lynch and Walton-Fisette (2019) have advocated for the use of restorative practices in sport and physical education, with specific attention to the utilization of restorative circles as a means of building community and encouraging student voice (Lynch, Schleider, & McBean, 2020). When facilitated correctly, the circle considers everyone on equal ground. Each person in the circle shares responsibility for its functioning. Answers to questions are typically phrased as "yes-and" than "either-or." In the restorative circle, each person takes a turn to lead and communicate with guidelines created by the group. Decisions are made by consensus of the whole group and can be unexpected and navigated over the course of time (Clifford, 2015).

*Learning About Others.* Teachers who are prepared to respond to the educational needs of students from diverse backgrounds in a pluralistic society are an integral part of providing resistance to the scourge of dehumanization (Smith, 2020). These teachers should demonstrate cultural humility, defined as a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique where the individual learns about another's culture and examines her or his own beliefs and cultural identities (Cervantes & Clark, 2020; Culp, 2013; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998; Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). This critical consciousness requires self-awareness and intentional work to uncover one's own assumptions, biases and values (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). Another critical step in this process involves teachers learning about the cultures of their students and their challenges, fears and aspirations.

## Recommendations

Suyatno and Wantini (2018) found that dehumanization can be combated by the creation of classroom environments that consider human needs while reinforcing universally accepted values such as

honor, respect, love, dignity and friendship. Each of the strategies listed in this article can be enhanced using several educational design approaches centered on the value of humanity as the basis for student growth (Nwafor & Nwogu, 2014). First, teachers should structure curriculum and educational objectives in accordance with the needs and interests of youth. Second, teachers must view students

as active beings with talents and interests, not as passive entities that require coercion to force behavior change.

Third, teachers are advised to move away from roles where they are seen primarily as a class ruler, moving toward archetypes that allow them to be seen as facilitators, guides, study partners and “heroes” in the journey of teaching and learning (Mayes, 2020).

**Table 1.**  
**Examples of Humanizing the Physical Education Classroom**

### 1. Fostering appropriate language

Though language is a facet of human culture that always evolves, demeaning others through language is one of many practices that is unnecessary for the promotion of quality physical education. The effectiveness of lessons and classroom culture is heavily influenced by language. Words convey assumptions and expectations about people and when negatively used can fracture the learning environment. To promote a positive community in the physical education classroom Borba (2001) and Nucaro (2017) suggest that:

- Teachers model inclusive language (i.e., using preferred pronouns, explaining American idioms for the benefit of nonnative English speakers, avoiding gendered language).
- Students should be given opportunities to demonstrate respect toward each other using language (i.e., daily compliments, defining respect in different activities, writing down affective words for weekly use).
- Demeaning language should be interrogated, explained to the offender why it is demeaning, and corrected immediately. For instance, the casual use of the phrase “that’s so gay” is pejorative and a slur that could indirectly lead to more harassment of a student or group in the gym.
- Positive language used by youth should be reinforced during class via comments or nonverbal expressions of approval. “*I’m hearing lots of friendly conversations and seeing people helping each other.*”
- A tone that conveys a teacher’s belief in youth is encouraged. One might state, “*You can look at our board to remind yourselves when you walk into to the gym what the rules are.*”
- Direct language that notes positive behaviors that is clear, free of innuendo or sarcasm helps to avoid shaming or judging youth, while reducing the likelihood of power struggles.

### 2. Creating a culture of somebodiness

In developing the concept of somebodiness, Dr. King advocated for concepts of respect, equality and empathy. He believed that everyone — no matter what race, position in society or income — deserves respect. Somebodiness is a multidimensional and culturally relevant concept that celebrates human worth and dignity and is also concerned with self-determination, self-definition, self-acceptance and self-love. The latter ideals are inherent qualities that can be nurtured and are influential for the (1) psychological functioning of the individual and (2) the perception of one’s belief that one is in control of one’s own situation (Abdul-Kabir et al., 2003; Baker-Fletcher, 1993). Teachers should:

- Model resilience and the behaviors that they want to see in students (Beale, 2013).
- Provide high expectations with students, with an emphasis on “best effort” with activities that are not focused on comparing one student to another.
- Reinforce resilient behavior and introduce resilience-based strategies for students early in the school year (Tudor et al., 2020).
- Design physical education experiences that focus on building confidence irrespective of the activity level of the student or his or her motor skill (Goodwin, 1999).
- Consider a reflexive teaching style that includes documenting performance, asking questions that encourage self-reflections, and providing opportunities for self-observation (Rubeli, et al., 2020).

### 3. Giving students voice

Teachers are encouraged to establish ground rules for appropriate behavior early in the school year to help promote student buy-in and rapport. However, how does a physical classroom go from rules established at the outset of the school year to an ongoing product of interaction that is ethical, culturally relevant and real for those in the class? (Da Matta et al., 2015; Enright et al., 2017; Fiset, 2011; Lorente-Catalán & Kirk, 2014) Some strategies include:

- Providing students with opportunities to co-construct curriculum (i.e., cooperative activities or create-a-game activities).
- Having students design and teach lessons. Task force teams of inquiry can be created, with students in each group being required to explore, research and present on a topic related to the lesson.
- Leading students in periodic reflection activities and self-assessment using a task card with questions.
- Creating a group that shares roles where criteria is transparent (i.e., sport education).
- Reducing power dynamics by the teacher redirecting from an instructor to a facilitator of content using critical thinking questions and changing group roles at the end of an activity.

#### 4. Restorative circles

Restorative circles are touted as a means by which to promote and strengthen positive school culture while enhancing prosocial relationships within the school community. With respect to dehumanization, there is ample evidence in social-psychological research that suggests that the perception of the other impacts how “we” relate to “them,” which can lead to negative relationships. Leidner et al. (2013) noted that in the present context, we should cultivate *sentience*, or the capacity to feel and experience emotions. This capacity is central to our understanding of human nature and is a building block of empathy that is key for negotiating issues of intergroup justice, peace and conflict resolution. Restorative circles can be arranged in multiple ways. Clifford (2015) and Costello et al. (2010) explicitly discussed the following four configurations:

- *Basic Circle (Sequential Circle)*: Everyone sits facing center. Students are reminded of the norms and use a talking piece that is passed around the circle from one participant to the next in a sequence. Participants can use the “right to pass” or “right to come back to me.”
- *Popcorn Circle (Nonsequential Circle)*: Everyone sits facing the center. Students are reminded of the norms and use a talking piece that moves around the circle in “popcorn” style. Students signal for the piece when they are ready to contribute.
- *Fishbowl Circle*: Four to six volunteers or selected students form a small circle in the center of the larger group circle. An empty chair is placed in the inner circle so that others can join in the discussion. Dialogue is focused within the small circle (with an optional talking piece). The participants in the outer circle remain quiet. They can only contribute to the inner circle’s discussion when a person leaves an empty chair in the inner circle for them to sit in. When their contribution is done, they return to the outer circle.
- *Wheelhouse Circle*: Known also as an “inside/outside circle.” Two groups of participants are split in half, with one group on the outside and one group on the inside. The inner group faces the outer group to discuss a topic. When prompted by the facilitator, students in the outer or inner circle move “x” number of spaces to the right or left so that they can discuss another topic with a new partner.

#### 5. Learning about others

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) described the construct of dehumanization as a constant struggle for those facing oppression, having to fight for their given right to be treated as an equal (fully human), while the ones inflicting the oppression create a feeling of inferiority around them. When students are humanized, they navigate from a state of oppression to emancipation. Thus, it is important to understand that the role of the teacher in stopping oppression is integral. The teacher is the archetype and guide for students in the journey of learning about themselves and how they treat others. Some questions to reflect upon in the pursuit of eliminating dehumanizing practices in physical education include:

- Is the application of a social justice framework evident in the curriculum and routines of the physical education program to help foster actions that promote equity, diversity and inclusion?
- Is there understanding of the impact of trauma on student learning and are aware of how to use models (i.e., TPSR) to help spur interest in the backgrounds of students and information that could be beneficial for them? (Ellison et al., 2019).
- Is there a concerted effort to participate in border crossing? *Border crossing* is an ongoing examination of the boundaries that exist between students’ lifeworlds and school culture and the subsequent valuing of students’ experiences relative to race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality and geography (Phelan et al., 1991).
- Have there been efforts to reach out to others (i.e., networks, communities of practice) in order to develop community ties and support for transformative educational practices that can nurture every aspect of a student’s being? (Blackshear, 2020).

Fourth, teachers who humanize classes have adopted the premise that school is a “miniature society” and make learning activities beneficial for both the classroom and community through problem-based learning (i.e., teaching students about advocacy so they can help garner support for a new bike path in a local park). Finally, humanizing classes employ democratic practices that incorporate student voice, while involving positive role models who understand the distinctions, singularities and different patterns of behaviors in student populations (Suyatno & Wantini, 2018).

## Conclusion

Humanizing pedagogical practices centers students as valuable and active members of the learning process (Walton-Fisette, 2020). Strong (2019), in commenting on equity, diversity and inclusion, challenged physical education professionals to *think* in a humanizing way so that they can *respond* to students’ behaviors in a humanizing

way while helping them reach their potential. As Noddings (2005) urged, each of us can provide a pedagogy of care that reminds students daily that they and the individuals around them have value. Rising to the challenge helps contribute to the promotion of quality physical education for students in our classes.

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