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"Psychological Safety" in Physical Education: A Neglected Instructional Dimension

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In research on physical education, students' skill levels, fitness, and motivation have received sustained attention, while a more fundamental question has long been neglected: whether students feel safe in this classroom. This paper introduces the construct of "psychological safety" from organizational behavior and argues that physical education is markedly higher than ordinary classrooms in the degree to which interpersonal risk is exposed—bodies are publicly watched, ability differences are highly visible, and evaluation is immediate and public—so the influence of psychological safety on participation behavior may be greater. The paper identifies three classroom manifestations of the absence of psychological safety (embarrassment and shame, implicit withdrawal, and mockery and bullying) and analyzes their formation mechanisms from two aspects: teacher behavior and peer interaction. On this basis, two actionable instructional design recommendations are proposed: reducing the cost of "being seen" and establishing and enforcing anti-mockery rules. The paper concludes by emphasizing that psychological safety is not a soft requirement for making students comfortable but a key condition determining whether physical education can truly produce long-term exercise behavior.

Keywords: psychological safety, physical education, classroom climate, embarrassment, participation

Introduction

Physical education differs fundamentally from classrooms in other subjects: Here students' "incompetence" is public, visible, and presented bodily. Running slowly, moving clumsily, failing to catch a ball—all of this is seen by peers at the same moment and in the same space. Students in this classroom therefore face not only academic evaluation but also interpersonal risk at the bodily level.

For this reason, many teachers observe a phenomenon: Some students are not averse to physical activity itself, yet they strongly avoid performing in class—they hide at the back of the line, deliberately choose "unimportant" positions, act indifferent when groups are being formed, or suddenly feel "unwell" when required to demonstrate a movement. Such behavior is often interpreted as "not liking exercise" or "laziness", but from the perspective of psychological mechanisms it is closer to a self-protective strategy.

This paper attempts to introduce the construct of "psychological safety", already well established in organizational behavior, in order to explain such phenomena, and to shift part of the attention of physical education instructional design from "how to improve skills and fitness" toward "how to reduce the interpersonal risk of participation". Drawing on empirical studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses indexed in the open-

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access databases PubMed and OpenAlex as its evidence base, the paper discusses in turn the applicability of the construct, the manifestations of its absence, the mechanisms of its formation, and practical recommendations.

“Psychological Safety”: The Construct and Its Transfer to Physical Education

Concept and Core Elements

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief among the members of a group that it is safe to take interpersonal risks—that expressing doubts, admitting mistakes, offering dissenting views, asking for help, or trying something will not be punished or humiliated as a result. A meta-analysis covering 136 independent samples, more than 22,000 individuals, and nearly 5,000 groups systematically mapped the network of antecedents and consequences of this construct and compared the relative strength of various antecedents (Frazier et al., 2017).

A concept analysis of the construct (based on 88 articles) further distilled five attributes: perception of the consequences of taking interpersonal risk, strong interpersonal relationships, a group-level phenomenon, a work environment in which interpersonal risk can be taken safely, and a non-punitive culture (Fujiyoshi-Ito et al., 2022). These five attributes have direct counterparts in physical education: whether students feel that “making a mistake in a movement is okay”, whether teacher-student and peer relationships are supportive, whether the class as a whole shares a sense of safety, whether classroom rules punish failure, and whether mistakes are ridiculed afterwards.

It should be noted that psychological safety is not a synonym for “requiring teachers to be gentle”, nor does it exempt students from challenge. A systematic review of intervention research points out that even in the medical field, where team learning is valued, intervention studies targeting psychological safety remain scarce and their theoretical bases often unclear (O’Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020)—which means that introducing this construct into physical education is itself a field yet to be developed.

Why Physical Education Needs Psychological Safety More Than Ordinary Classrooms

Table 1 shows that the core instructional resource of physical education—the body—is also the part in which students most easily feel vulnerable. When a classroom lacks psychological safety, students’ optimal strategy is often not to try harder but to reduce their visibility.

Table 1

Differences in “Interpersonal Risk” Between Physical Education and Ordinary Classrooms

Dimension	Ordinary classroom	Physical education
Visibility of performance	Mostly individual written work; low visibility	Bodily movements displayed immediately in front of the whole class
Exposure of ability differences	Can be partly hidden through answering techniques	Differences are direct, public, and hard to hide
Immediacy of evaluation	Feedback is usually delayed	Scored on the spot; seen on the spot
Physical cost of failure	Low	Real risks such as injury and being collided with
Grouping and team selection	Seldom occurs	Routine, and readily produces a public “picked last”
Emotional exposure	Relatively low	High (panting, blushing, sweating, clumsy movements)

Three Classroom Manifestations of the Absence of Psychological Safety

Embarrassment and Shame

Embarrassment is one of the most common emotional responses in physical education. A study of 604 secondary school students specifically examined the influence of physical education teachers on students’

motivation, embarrassment, and intention to be physically active; the results showed that perceived autonomy support was positively associated with basic psychological need satisfaction and negatively associated with need frustration, whereas perceived controlling behavior was associated with need frustration and was further linked to embarrassment and intention to participate (Trigueros et al., 2019). In other words, the way teachers behave can directly shape students' experience of embarrassment in class, and embarrassment in turn affects their willingness to take part in exercise in the future.

This finding redefines "students are afraid of losing face" from a matter of personal disposition into a product of instructional approach.

Implicit Withdrawal: A Rational Strategy

When participation is perceived as high-risk behavior, students adopt a series of avoidance strategies that teachers can hardly detect: choosing inconspicuous positions, reducing the intensity of attempts, avoiding taking on tasks, and withdrawing when required to perform. Research in education and work-organization settings suggests that the degree of engagement is jointly influenced by the "level of challenge" and the "level of support": One study examined the predictive role of students' perceived challenge, teacher support, and teacher obstruction in immediate classroom engagement and found that teacher support and teacher obstruction had opposite effects on engagement (Strati, Schmidt, & Maier, 2017). This yields an important implication for physical education: raising the challenge without raising the support pushes students from "participation" toward "withdrawal".

Mockery, Exclusion, and Bullying

An association does exist between physical education and school bullying. A systematic review of physical education and school violence included 16 studies—10 quantitative (n = 12,795), 5 qualitative (n = 79), and 1 mixed-methods (n = 86)—and pointed out that the measurement instruments used in the relevant studies were highly heterogeneous, but that bullying and exclusion in physical education settings deserve systematic attention (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020).

In the team-sport context, a study of 359 adolescent players (64% girls, mean age 14.47 years) examined the occurrence of 16 bullying behaviors and analyzed the associations between bullying experiences and perceptions of relationships with peers and coaches (Evans, Adler, MacDonald, & Côté, 2016). This shows that exclusion and bullying do not occur only in classrooms or online spaces; the sports field is also a venue for them.

What teachers should note even more is the indirectness of the mechanism. A structural equation modeling study of 602 secondary school students (mean age 12.88 years, from 10 schools) showed that students' perceived teacher controlling behavior (especially negative conditional regard and intimidation) was associated with anger and bullying behavior through the mediating role of basic psychological need frustration (Hein, Koka, & Hagger, 2015). In other words, teachers' inappropriate controlling practices may not directly "cause" bullying but indirectly foster aggressive behavior by eroding students' psychological need satisfaction. This suggests that anti-bullying work cannot deal only with behavior among students; it must also examine the power and evaluation structures of the classroom.

Formation Mechanisms of Psychological Safety

Teacher Behavior: The Divide Between Need Support and Need Thwarting

Self-determination theory offers a clear classification for understanding teacher behavior. Teachers' need-supportive behaviors include providing choice and autonomy (autonomy support), giving valuable information

and feedback (competence support), and creating an emotionally supportive atmosphere (relatedness support); need-thwarting behaviors are manifested as controlling language, vague goals, and emotional coldness. A study situated in physical education examined students' motivational experiences under different combinations of need-supportive and need-thwarting teacher behaviors, showing that the two types of behavior are not two ends of a single dimension but independent dimensions that can coexist (Burgueño, García-González, Abós, & Sevil-Serrano, 2024). This suggests that improving classroom climate cannot rely only on "a bit more encouragement"; controlling practices must be specifically reduced.

Intervention research provides direct evidence. An eight-month intervention study in which teachers were trained in autonomy-supportive teaching (32 students in the experimental group, 29 in the control group, aged 12-14) showed that autonomy-supportive teaching had positive effects on basic psychological needs, self-determined motivation, and satisfaction with exercise (Fin et al., 2019). Another study of 1,127 secondary school students also found that physical education teachers' teaching style was associated with students' dietary habits and physical activity behavior through basic psychological needs and self-determined motivation (Trigueros et al., 2019).

Peer Norms and Shared Responsibility

Psychological safety is a group-level phenomenon (Fujiyoshi-Ito et al., 2022), so it does not depend on teachers alone. Whether peers treat mockery as "a joke" and whether anyone is willing to speak up when another is being ridiculed actually constitute the substantive content of classroom norms. The systematic review on physical education and school bullying indicates that exclusion and bullying do exist in physical education settings (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020), and bullying among teammates in the sport-team context has also been empirically documented (Evans et al., 2016). This means that teachers' stopping individual acts is not enough; "protecting peers" must be established as a shared class norm.

Existing research shows that teacher support and peer support are simultaneously associated with adolescents' motivation, classroom engagement, and school belonging (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015), indicating that the two are not substitutes. Feasible practices for teachers include: writing "do not mock peers" into the classroom agreement and explaining the reasons; intervening immediately when signs of exclusion appear rather than waiting for conflict to escalate; and creating recognizable roles for marginalized students so that they gain positive visibility in the eyes of their peers.

Recommendations for Teaching Practice

Reducing the Cost of "Being Seen"

Concrete practices include: using small-group practice rather than whole-class one-by-one demonstration at the initial stage of skill learning; allowing students to complete certain assessments in a non-public setting; avoiding "public picking" when forming groups and instead using teacher-prepared or random grouping; and offering low-pressure roles (e.g., recording, timing, refereeing) to students who are visibly anxious, giving these roles real responsibility rather than treating them as "marginalization". The key principle is that reducing visibility does not mean lowering expectations.

Establishing and Enforcing Anti-mockery Rules

Given that systematic evidence exists for bullying and exclusion in physical education settings (Evans et al., 2016; Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020) and that teachers' controlling behavior may indirectly foster aggressive

behavior (Hein et al., 2015), anti-mockery efforts cannot remain verbal advocacy. Recommended practices are: clarifying the rules and stating the consequences at the start of the term; handling mockery on the spot, briefly, and without exception; proactively approaching mocked students after an incident to confirm that they are supported; and making "protecting peers" an explicit part of classroom responsibility rather than leaving it to individual students.

Table 2

Four Levers for Psychological Safety and Their Concrete Practices.

Lever	Practice that needs to change	Concrete operational examples
Reducing the cost of "being seen"	Whole-class spectator-style demonstration and immediate public scoring	Rotating demonstrations within small groups; allowing movement tests to be completed individually after class
Shifting evaluation from ranking to progress	Predominance of rankings and absolute scores	Recording individual longitudinal progress; adding cooperative and process-oriented assessment
Establishing anti-mockery rules	Treating mockery as "a joke"	Clarifying rules and enforcing them on the spot; giving immediate support to mocked students
Adjusting feedback language	Oriented toward ability and outcomes ("you're just no good")	Oriented toward strategy and effort ("try again from this angle")

Conclusion

The goals of physical education are often stated as mastering skills, building fitness, and developing exercise habits. But if students remain in a state of "afraid of being seen, afraid of doing wrong, afraid of being laughed at" throughout the class, these goals lack a psychological prerequisite. Psychological safety is not a soft requirement for making students comfortable; it is the key condition determining whether physical education can produce long-term behavioral effects—only a student who feels safe may be willing to try, and willingness to try is where skills and habits truly begin.

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