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# Developing Social-Emotional Learning in Physical Education Through Appropriate Instructional Practices

DAVID BARNEY, KEVEN A. PRUSAK, AND LIANA DAVIS

In our ever-changing world, K–12 students are faced with many challenges in their education. These challenges make a teacher’s role important in assisting their students to navigate what comes before them. This also applies in physical education (PE). PE is a unique content area in that students receive instruction in three domains of learning: affective, cognitive and psychomotor. The affective domain develops positive attitudes and appreciation for participation in physical activity. As part of this domain, students learn fair play, sportsmanship and cooperation with classmates during games and activities. The cognitive domain focuses on students learning to acquire, comprehend and evaluate knowledge. In this domain they learn values, strategies, skills and safety in various activities. Lastly, the psychomotor domain is the physical domain where students learn fundamental motor skills to be used throughout their lives. Skills such as throwing, catching, striking, kicking and others are taught throughout the curriculum (Lumpkin, 1998).

One affective goal that PE teachers strive to teach their students is to demonstrate positive social behaviors as they interact with one another in PE and other physical activity settings. SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators created five national standards as guides to assist PE teachers in educating their students (SHAPE America, 2014). The fifth standard reinforces this concept of students exhibiting positive social interactions, stating: “The physically literate individual recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenges, self-expression and/or social interactions” (SHAPE America, 2014). This national standard closely aligns with the concept of social emotional learning (SEL). SEL has been described as a process through which students are able to better manage their emotions, feelings and care and concern for others, as well as solve problems and have positive peer relationships (Zins et al., 2004). As a result of PE students incorporating SEL behaviors personally, self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, building positive relationships, and making healthy decisions manifest themselves in class activities (Jacobs & Wright, 2014). For many students these SEL skills do not come naturally or automatically. Just like skills such as throwing or catching, these SEL behaviors can be learned in PE. The PE teacher will teach, reteach, model, give feedback and then provide opportunities for students to practice these skills throughout PE class (Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018).

## Appropriate Instructional Practices in PE

One tool that can assist PE teachers in teaching SEL to their students is the appropriate instructional practice (AIP) guidelines for K–12 PE. Three documents were created by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) for informing best practices in elementary school, middle school, and high school PE (NASPE, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The documents offer specific guidelines for recognizing and implementing developmentally appropriate instructional practices in PE (Barney & Strand, 2008), thus enabling students to be active throughout their lives (Barney et al., 2013). The documents state that instructional practices should be in the best interests of students and those that are counterproductive

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should be avoided. Furthermore, the middle and high school documents state:

Physical educators will design activity experiences that develop personal and social behaviors consistent with responsible behavior in sport and in society. That includes an understanding of conflict resolution, the importance of rules and ethical behavior, and the positive social interaction required in physical activity settings. (NASPE, 2009b, p. 5; 2009c, p. 5)

The guidelines clearly place responsibility on the PE teacher to implement AIP in their lessons and activities, and this includes teaching positive social and emotional behaviors.

The AIP documents are divided into five categories: (1) Learning Environment, (2) Instructional Strategies, (3) Curriculum, (4) Assessment and (5) Professionalism. Within these categories there are more specific appropriate and inappropriate instructional strategies to aid PE teachers. The sections that follow will highlight 10 instructional practices — two from each of the five categories — from either the elementary school, middle school or high school documents that have potential to impact SEL (see Table 1). PE lesson ideas targeting the development of SEL are provided for each practice. The authors felt that using two instructional practices were sufficient to illustrate the point. The purpose of this article is to emphasize the importance K–12 PE teachers have in implementing AIP in their lessons to support student SEL in PE.

## The Learning Environment

Appropriate Practice: “The teacher systematically plans, develops and maintains a positive learning environment that allows students to feel safe (physically and emotionally), supported and unafraid to make mistakes” (NASPE, 2009c, p. 8).

Inappropriate Practice: “The teacher does not establish a positive, supportive and safe learning environment. As a result, some students feel embarrassed, humiliated and generally uncomfortable in physical education class” (NASPE, 2009c, p. 8).

For this AIP, the PE teacher should plan for activities that will give students multiple options when participating in a given activity. For example, if students are practicing their set shot in basketball, the PE teacher can allow students to choose the distance from the basket in which they shoot (2 ft, 5 ft, 10 ft, and so on). Here the PE teacher is allowing the student to make a choice. If the distance from the basket is too close (not challenging) or too far (too challenging), students can adjust their own distance. Another instructional practice the PE teacher can implement is to remind students that this is not a competition with others. Rather, students should focus on the mechanics of the shot. For this instructional practice, PE teachers can implement a program practice sheet (PPS; Prusak, 2005). The PPS are designed to help all students in their individual skill learning process. The PPS evaluates the learning process, which is reported as the product/outcome. This allows students to be successful in their learning process. The PPS has the student pick the level of difficulty from the skills being practiced. On the PPS there are three levels of the activity from which the student can select (beginning, intermediate, advanced). The PPS can be created for any skill being taught. Students can work with a partner or individually (see Table 2).

Appropriate Practice: “Teachers promote exercise for its contribution to a healthy lifestyle. Students are encouraged to participate in physical

**Table 1.**  
**Appropriate and Inappropriate PE Practices Related to Social-Emotional Learning**

Appropriate Practice	Inappropriate Practice
<b>Learning Environment</b>	
The teacher systematically plans for, develops and maintains a positive learning environment that allows students to feel safe (physically and emotionally), supported and unafraid to make mistakes	The teacher doesn't establish a positive, supportive and safe learning environment. As a result, some students feel embarrassed, humiliated and generally uncomfortable in physical education class.
Teachers promote exercise for its contribution to a healthy lifestyle. Students are encouraged to participate in physical activity and exercise outside of the physical education setting for enjoyment, skill development and health reasons.	Teachers use activities/exercises (e.g., running laps, performing push-ups) to punish misbehavior.
<b>Instructional Strategies</b>	
Physical educators form pairs, groups and teams in ways that preserve every student's dignity and self-respect (e.g., randomly, by fitness or skill level, or by a class system such as birthdays, squads, colors or numbers).	Teachers inadvertently promote exclusion by allowing student captains to pick teams or by arbitrarily separating teams by gender or skill level (e.g., "popular" or highly skilled students are chosen first and cliques are evident).
The teacher allows students guided choices in matters such as equipment, rule modification or type of skill practice (e.g., completing individual task sheets or small-group instruction).	The teacher controls the curriculum tightly and students rarely have input regarding rules, activities covered or equipment used for practice.
<b>Curriculum</b>	
The physical educator extends experiences from in-class activity lessons to community and family activities, promoting a physically active lifestyle.	The physical educator makes no effort to connect physical education instruction to community offerings, recreation opportunities or family involvement.
Physical educators design activities throughout the program that provide students with opportunities to work together, for the purpose of developing social skills (cooperative and competitive) and learning responsible behavior (e.g., "good sport" skills are encouraged instead of trash talking). Situations are designed purposefully for teaching these skills; they're not left for "teachable moments" only.	Physical educators fail to systematically enhance students' affective development. They don't use activities and instructional strategies such as choice of equipment, peer teaching and class involvement in establishing rules that foster cooperation, social skills and personal responsibility.
<b>Assessment</b>	
Physical educators make every effort to create testing situations that are private, nonthreatening, educational and encouraging (e.g., they explain what the test is designed to measure).	Testing is public (e.g., students observe others completing the test while they wait for their turn to take it), with no reason given for the test.
Test results are shared privately with students and their parents/guardians as a tool for developing personal goals and strategies for maintaining and increasing the respective fitness parameters.	Individual scores are posted publicly, where others can view and compare them.
<b>Professionalism</b>	
The teacher continually seeks new information to stay current (e.g., reads journals, attends conferences and inservices).	The teacher makes no effort to stay current.
The teacher helps create a school culture of physical activity.	The teacher doesn't promote the physical education program; therefore, it's not a visible part of the school community.

activity and exercise outside of the physical education setting for enjoyment, skill development and health reasons" (NASPE, 2009c p. 8).

Inappropriate Practice: "Teacher use activities/exercise (e.g., running laps, performing push-ups) to punish misbehavior" (NASPE, 2009c, p. 8).

Though using exercise as punishment may seem effective enough at deterring student misbehavior in the short term, in the long term it could lead to devastating unintended lifelong consequences (Barney, Prusak et al., 2016). Youth who learn to associate exercise with

punishment and humiliation may go on to become adults with negative attitudes toward physical activity and have little propensity to engage in it. They may therefore miss out on the many pleasures and health benefits, including social and emotional benefits, that physical activity has to offer. Research has found that exercise as punishment negatively affects the classroom environment. Barney, Pleban, and colleagues (2016) investigated former students' PE perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences with exercise as punishment during their time in school PE. One of the findings from this study was the effect that exercise as punishment had on the overall

**Table 2.**  
**Program Practice Sheet for Volleyball**

Program Practice Sheet: Volleyball

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: Your skill grade will result from the successful completion of the items on this program practice sheet (PPS). As you complete each item, have a partner or the instructor initial as a witness that you did indeed complete the item. Do not initial anyone's PPS unless you actually saw them do it. This type of skill evaluation gives you credit for the doing of the skills and not how well you perform on a skills test, so do the work during the unit and get the credit. Below are three levels of skills for each item. Choose which level you think suits you best for each item. If the level you choose is too easy or too difficult, you may make an adjustment.

Date Completed	Initial	Skill Level A	Skill Level B	Skill Level C
		Bumping: Complete 20 bump passes with a partner standing 15 ft apart. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Bumping: Complete 30 consecutive bumps with a partner standing 15 ft apart. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Bumping: Complete 30 consecutive bumps from the back of the court to the front of the net. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____
		Bumping: Bump the ball to yourself 30 times. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Bumping: Bump the ball to yourself 30 consecutive times. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Bumping: Bump the ball to yourself 40 consecutive times. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____
		Setting: Complete 20 sets with a partner standing 15 ft apart. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Setting: Complete 30 consecutive sets with a partner standing 15 ft apart. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Setting: Complete 15 successful sets to a partner that allows him/her to spike the ball. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____
		Setting: Complete 20 sets off the wall. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Setting: Complete 20 consecutive sets off the wall. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Setting: Complete 30 consecutive sets off the wall. Please complete this task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____
		Serving: Complete 15 successful serves. Please complete the task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Serving: Complete 15 successful consecutive serves. Please complete the task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____	Serving: Complete 15 successful serves to the back left corner of the court. Please complete the task twice. 1. _____ 2. _____
		Explain to your partner one cue to setting. Initial item when complete.	Explain to your partner two cues to setting. Initial item when complete.	Explain to your partner three cues to setting. Initial item when complete.

(Continued)





name, birth month, or shoe color. This instructional practice strongly lends itself to a student's SEL. When PE teachers properly handle this instructional practice, students will feel better about themselves among their peers, because they are not put in a situation that could be embarrassing.

**Appropriate Practice:** "The teacher allows students guided choices in matters such as equipment, rule modification or type of skill practice (e.g., completing individual task sheets or small-group instruction)" (NASPE, 2009b, p. 15).

**Inappropriate Practice:** "The teacher controls the curriculum tightly, and students rarely have input regarding rules, activities covered, or equipment used for practices" (NASPE, 2009b, p. 15).

Prior to becoming PE teachers, training in pedagogies to teach in the gymnasium and on the playing field is required. The training received in college will guide the PE teacher in their planning and delivery of the lessons and activities (Strand & Scantling, 1994). Though PE teachers should not let their students run the class, they do need to keep their students' needs and desires in mind if they want them to successfully learn the skills taught in PE. Whenever possible, the PE teacher should allow for student choice in matters such as what equipment to use or how to complete a task. As long as the equipment or practice conditions allow the student to work toward the learning objective (for instance, "to step in opposition when throwing a ball"), it should not matter that the ball used is not regulation-sized or that the student threw the ball to a partner instead of in a group setting.

One thing that a PE teacher might do to better understand their students' needs is ask them directly. This can be done in person during a class discussion or on a slip of paper (anonymously, if the student prefers) or through a survey. Asking students which activities they hope to do at the beginning of a particular unit or what they feel will help them to learn certain skills may sound oversimplified, yet it does work (Strand & Scantling, 1994). The combination of reasonably allowing for student choice and gathering their input may give students a greater sense of control over their learning environment and boost PE class morale. It may even motivate students to persist in learning skills during PE class if they feel a sense of ownership over the material and the way it is presented.

## Curriculum

**Appropriate Practice:** "The physical educator extends experiences from in-class activity lessons to community and family activities, promoting a physically active lifestyle" (NASPE, 2009a, p. 18).

**Inappropriate Practice:** "The physical educator makes no effort to connect physical education instruction to community offerings, recreation opportunities or family involvement" (NASPE, 2009b, p.18).

Pangrazi (2003) has stated that physical education is committed to developing lifetime physical activity patterns. What students learn in PE can easily be transferred to their everyday lives. The PE teacher can explain to students how engaging in physical activity is beneficial to them, their families and their communities. Students in a variety of

situations can be assigned to participate in moderate to vigorous physical activity at home outside of class time. Athletic practices may meet the criteria for those students who participate in after school sports, but so can walking the dog with a family member, vacuuming or mowing the lawn for those who do not. Students can keep track of their physical activities on an activity calendar and report back to their PE teachers on what they did. PE teachers can then evaluate students' physical activity participation at home and reinforce their healthy decisions. With SEL in mind, PE teachers can focus their feedback on how students are positively self-managing themselves outside of class time and, in some cases, building positive relationships.

**Appropriate Practice:** "Physical educators design activities throughout the program that provide students with opportunities to work together, for the purpose of developing social skills (cooperative and competitive) and learning responsible behavior (e.g., 'good sport' skills are encouraged instead of trash talking). Situations are designed purposefully for teaching these skills, they're not left for 'teachable moments' only" (NASPE, 2009c, p. 19).

**Inappropriate Practice:** "Physical educators fail to systematically enhance students' affective development. They don't use activities and instructional strategies such as choice of equipment, peer teaching and class involvement in establishing rules that foster cooperation, social skills and personal responsibility" (NASPE, 2009c, p. 19).

This instructional practice touches upon many of the SEL behaviors to be taught in PE class. For this instructional practice, the PE teacher can lead a discussion of what a "good sport" looks like and have the class brainstorm some observable qualities: fist bumps, elbow taps, telling a teammate that they executed a nice play, and others. The PE teacher can also point out the opportunity to create friendships with teammates and even opponents. Research has highlighted the social bonding that can take place in a competitive situation with teammates (Barney et al., 2019). In this research study, PE students stated, "I met new friends and learned a new game and had fun" (Barney et al. 2019, p. 11) and "We did a tournament for volleyball and I bonded with my teammates" (Barney et al. 2019, p. 11). These types of experiences allow students to practice working with others while also managing their emotions and feelings.

## Assessment

**Appropriate Practice:** "Teachers make every effort to create testing situations that are private, nonthreatening, educational and encouraging (e.g., teachers explain what the test is designed to measure)." (NASPE, 2009a, p. 21)

**Inappropriate Practice:** "Testing is public, with no reason given for the test (e.g., students observe others completing the test while they wait for their turn to take it)." (NASPE, 2009a, p. 21)

Like any other content area, PE must have assessments of student learning. In the abovementioned instructional practices, they need to be carefully thought out so that students are not embarrassed. PE classes often have higher student enrollment than other subject areas, which makes assessment a logistical challenge for PE teachers (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2013). With little time or ability to conduct tests privately while supervising the rest of the class, PE teachers might resort to lining up students to attempt the skill(s) being assessed one by one. Having to perform in front of their peers can be stressful for the even highly skilled students and does not lend itself to an emotionally safe classroom environment.

Instead, PE teachers could get creative in their approach to testing; grading students as they participate in a game or activity so that no single student is on display, administering written tests to students, or sending take-home tests for parents to administer one-on-one with their children. Other methods of assessing students could be students keeping a journal (James, 2005) of their activity or using their personal phones to record their activities (Laughlin et al., 2019). No matter the method of testing, the PE teacher should make it a point to announce the assessment in advance and explain its intended purpose, including what it is (and is not) designed to measure. The PE teacher could encourage students to ask questions and express any concerns they have prior to beginning the assessment. For assessments that must take place during class time, the PE teacher can give standard phrases of encouragement ("Keep going, almost there!") and have students encourage one another unless doing so would compromise the results of the test. In this case, the PE teacher can praise students upon completion of the test. Even those students who performed poorly on a fitness or skill test might receive praise for their effort or persistence or even just for completing the test. The PE teacher can emphasize the importance of the process to the students.

**Appropriate Practice:** "Test results are shared privately with students and their parents/guardians as a tool for developing personal goals and strategies for maintaining and increasing the respective fitness parameters" (NASPE, 2009b, p. 21).

**Inappropriate Practice:** "Individual scores and posted publicly, where others can view and compare them" (NASPE, 2009b, p. 21)

One method for privately sharing results is to write them down and distribute them to students (face down, folded or in a sealed envelope) as a classroom teacher would give back a graded test. Alternatively, the PE teacher may opt to deliver test results to students in brief one-on-one meetings. In this case it would be in the PE teacher's best interest to remain professional in stating and interpreting the results (Ernst et al., 2006). If the results are unfavorable, the PE teacher should be encouraging and supportive of the student. This is also a good time for the PE teacher and student to set realistic goals that are tailored to the student's current skill or fitness level. The student should leave feeling confident in the goals they have set. Either way, the PE teacher is building positive relationships with students and assisting them with those skills that are characteristic of SEL: self-management, self-awareness and making decisions that have the possibility of positively impacting their lives.

## Professionalism

**Appropriate Practice:** "The teacher continually seeks new information to stay current (e.g., reads journals, attends conferences and in-services)" (NASPE, 2009c, p. 22)

**Inappropriate Practice:** "The teacher makes no effort to stay current" (NASPE, 2009b, p.22).

All of the suggestions given to help PE teachers stay current are all very valuable. There are journals for researchers and practitioners alike that can positively influence a PE teacher's instruction. Research articles can be beneficial for supporting AIP in PE, helping the PE teacher to better understand the scientific proof underlying certain instructional practices. Practitioner journals may be more suitable for PE teachers seeking practical tips that can be readily applied in their PE programs. Practitioner journals usually have



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greater immediate impact on the teaching of PE games and activities. Attending conferences, inservices and other professional development opportunities can also improve PE teachers' instruction and ensure that it reflects AIP. When attending conferences, PE teachers are introduced to cutting edge ideas that others are successfully using in their own PE program. The new games and activities PE teachers are introduced to can be taken back to their class and implemented in the next day's lesson. Another positive aspect of attending conferences and inservices is that PE teachers can network with others in the profession. These relationships can serve as an ongoing source of learning and sharing of ideas for teaching (Griffin & Maina, 2005).

Appropriate Practice: "The teacher helps create a school culture of physical activity" (NASPE, 2009a, p. 22).

Inappropriate Practice: "The teacher doesn't promote the physical education program; therefore, it's not a visible part of the school community" (NASPE, 2009a, p. 22).

Here the PE teacher can affect the whole school population, by inviting the teachers, staff and administration (Beddoes et al., 2019). The PE teacher can invite the school by posting signs/invitations to participate in physical activity during lunch time, before school and after school. The school community can have designated times to access to the gymnasium, pool, fields, track, weight rooms, tennis courts and other facilities for recreational use. PE teachers can participate in "walk to school" days, "Jump

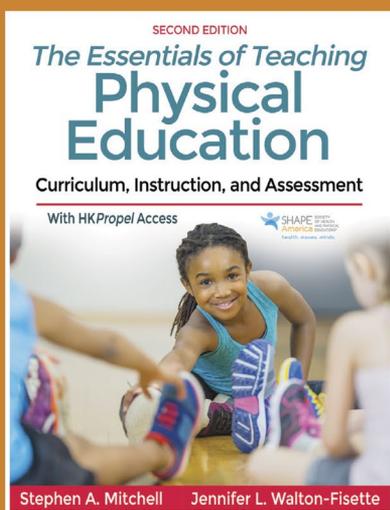
Rope for Heart," and other activities. The main point here for PE teachers is to extend their program beyond the scheduled PE class times. Self-promotion will be required for this to happen. PE teachers can encourage their students to bring their family members and friends to participate, thus having opportunities to strengthen their SEL.

## Conclusion

Social-emotional learning is closely linked to the affective domain of learning, a frequently neglected domain. This article discussed 10 instructional practices from the elementary, middle and high school AIP documents (NASPE, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c) in terms of their potential to impact students' SEL. For this article only two instructional practices were discussed for each category of the AIP documents and their impact on a students' SEL. The AIP documents are intended to aid PE teachers in exposing students to AIP in PE, to enable students to be successful in activity throughout their lives (Barney et al., 2013). The PE teacher is out on the court or playing field, managing students, the lessons they teach, and the equipment being used in lessons, along with many other variables on a daily basis. And during these lessons the PE teacher has students with doubts, concerns and other needs that they need to take into consideration so that these students can be successful and learn what is taught in class. The AIP documents strongly impress upon the fact that the PE teacher is the one to initiate these instructional practices for the benefit of the students.

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