Lessons Learned
from the Field:
Teaching in High-risk
Physical Education Environments

Zachary Wahl-Alexander
Jennifer M. Jacobs
Timothy Mack

Looking to my right and left, all I see is a chain-link fence, barbed wire, and a massive concrete building. Guard dogs bark as I approach the prison and wait for security to clear my entry. I walk through several impenetrable doors, all of which are opened only after security clearance. Once inside, I spot my physical education students awaiting my arrival in their orange jumpsuits, feet and hands restrained in cuffs. Our entry into the "gymnasium" is different from most traditional physical education settings. As a group, accompanied by four heavily armed guards, my class of 13 females travels through a long hallway, which divides two sets of cells, separated only by a two-inch protective glass. Throughout this 10-minute process, the inmates incessantly bang on the glass and yell profanities, which raises the already-heightened tensions of my students. Upon arrival, the armed guards unshackle each individual child and complete an elaborate pat-down. Once this has been completed, class can officially begin.

Class hasn't started yet, and I've already had to intervene on a potential cross-gang feud. However, that is not unlike most days teaching with this population. A foundation for my classroom is to "check your colors at the door," or in other words, gang affiliations stay outside the gym walls. For the most part, this works, but I still see the subtleties of handshakes and signals being displayed between some students. Today is Monday, which is a particularly tough day after a weekend away from the predictable and contained school walls. Usually Mondays have tense and creeping feelings that echo whispers of what tragedies occurred in days prior. It is even worse when the weather is nice, because while for many that means participating in outdoor recreational activities with their family, in this neighborhood that means increased opportunities for gang activity in outside spaces. In my early teaching days, a 10-year-old told me, "'Suns out, guns out' means something different for us." In this area, weekend activities are plagued by shootings, run-ins with law enforcement, and unstable home settings. Today is particularly tough because I heard from our principal that one of our students lost their 15-year-old cousin to a gang-related shooting. On days like today, I have to be prepared to return to the teaching basics — choose a lighthearted game and give simple, clear instructions that can keep kids distracted from the harsh realities of their world. It can feel utterly trivial, but sometimes sports are the one thing that can help students escape.

The above vignettes are two real-life experiences the authors have had when teaching "at-risk" youth in a physical education setting. While unconventional, these environments place an inordinate amount of strain on students, leading to difficult teaching situations that are unfortunately not uncommon throughout the country. According to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), a child is considered "at risk" if they receive low academic achievement scores, are at

Zachary Wahl-Alexander (zwahlalexander@niu.edu) and Jennifer M. Jacobs are assistant professors, and Timothy Mack is a graduate student, in the Kinesiology Department at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.
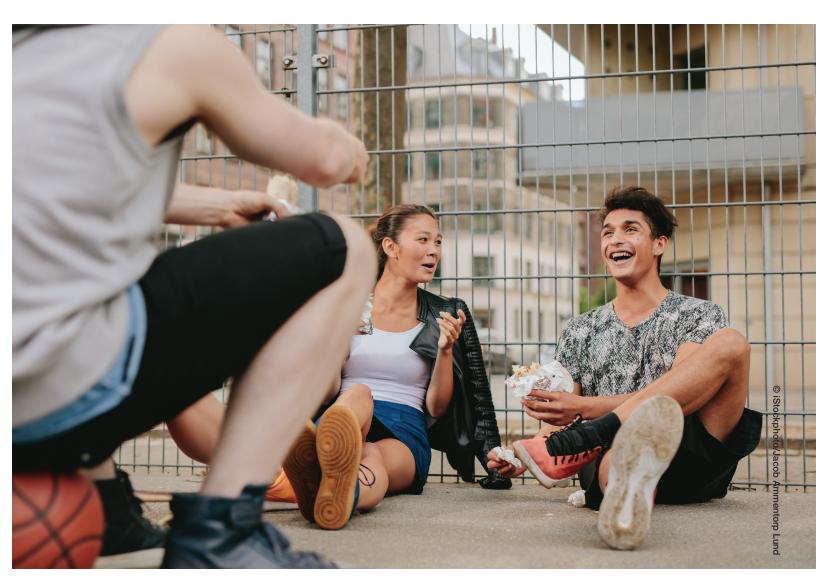
risk of dropping out of school, have little support from parents, or live in a low-socioeconomic neighborhood (USDE, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Currently in the United States, somewhere between 10% and 25% of all youth are considered at risk and attend a Title-1 funded public school (USDE, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of State Support, 2015). Further, at any given time, over 1.5% of youth are incarcerated in youth detention centers nationwide (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2014). While it would be unfair to judge these children based on preconceived qualities that in many cases are out of their control, it is reasonable to suggest that many children in these low-socioeconomic communities and juvenile detention centers are not receiving adequate opportunities to be physically active. This can be attributed to several factors including a lack of funding, space and equipment, or a dearth of quality physical education teachers who have the needed experience and confidence to teach in the most difficult of environments.

Although teachers can face many challenges when teaching in these "at risk" contexts, the purpose of this article is to offer tangible practices that the authors have used in similar environments to deliver high-quality physical education. Given the authors' expertise and familiarity with models-based instruction, the following strategies were derived from a variety of pedagogical models rooted in positive youth development. Specifically, many of the subsequent strategies were drawn from the teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR; Hellison, 2011) and sport education models (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2011). The TPSR model is a values-based model originally developed for at-risk youth. The model's main aims are to impart life values such as leadership, respect and self-control through authentic lessons integrated with physical activity, as well as foster the transfer of these and other life skills to other important life domains (e.g., home, school). Sport education's primary aims are to create competent, literate and enthusiastic sportspeople by constructing an authentic learning experience. In this model classmates remain on consistent teams and participate in various roles that emphasize and facilitate positive social interactions and forge powerful relationships (Hastie & Wallhead, 2015).

Positive Rules, Consistent Routines, and High Expectations

Even for the most skilled and experienced educators, classroom management is a top concern. Having concrete classroom organizational skills is a necessary aspect of management that leads to effectiveness, and it is of the utmost importance in all physical

education contexts, not just in high-risk settings (O'Sullivan & Dyson, 1994). Rules, routines and expectations are the cornerstone of effective pedagogy (Oslin, 1996), and each is paramount to teacher success in difficult physical education settings.

Rules. Similar to teaching experiences in more traditional academic contexts, educators working in adverse environments should predetermine the rules and expectations they want to enforce. Choosing rules that are positive, simple and easy to recall is important to the long-term preservation of and student adherence to these rules. One strategy to elicit immediate student buy-in is to provide students with a voice in co-creating the classroom rules to avoid an authoritarian approach. As seen in Table 1, teachers can facilitate a discussion with their class, leading to rules that are similar to the ones they predetermined prior to the discussion. In alignment with the TPSR model (Hellison, 2011), allowing students to lead the rule-creation process provides an opportunity to foster student leadership and personal and social responsibility, while also increasing the likelihood of student adherence to these self-created rules. Once rules have been selected, posting them in a publicly visible space will make referencing them convenient, allowing for easier accessibility during introductions and conclusions (Schwamberger, Wahl-Alexander, & Ressler, 2017).

Routines. Routines provide a meaningful and predictable structure that guides behavior and promotes a strong emotional climate in any educational setting (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). When working with at-risk youth, routine consistency allows for optimal understanding of what will occur during each class. For at-risk youth, insecurity and inconsistency are hallmarks of their experiences, so consistent routines contribute to youth feeling more in control and autonomous (Ungar, 2004). Research has indicated that inconsistent routines are often linked to defiant, off-task behaviors, as students are unable to understand what is expected of them (Rogers, 2015). In high-risk teaching environments teachers should focus on creating simple routines that afford opportunities for daily emotional well-being check-ins. These emotional check-ins are significant, as many students in dangerous contexts struggle with high-level stressors that can negatively affect their behaviors during a given class period. For educators, providing a clear and predictable class structure can guide instruction delivery as well as offer youth a chance to understand daily expectations and further contribute to their sense of control.

Allowing time to gauge daily disposition is extremely important and can be simple to implement. For example, during an initial warm-up activity teachers can ask the class to provide a thumbs up, down or sideways based on how their day is going. This is one practical way to offer students the chance to individually reflect and exercise their voice (Hellison, 2011). Another option is to have each student choose a colored poly spot depending on mood and explain why they selected that color. If built into a daily routine, starting class with an emotional check-in can provide valuable insight into the disposition of the class, as well as foster a sense of trust, all while building consistency that is invaluable in this sort of educational setting.

Expectations. Now that positive rules and routines have been co-created, establishing high expectations of student behavior helps to maintain student accountability. Communicating high expectations and holding students accountable for such expectations helps demonstrate that the instructor is committed to directives and truly cares about their learning and growth. In even the most stable teaching environments, instructors are often willing to reduce standards of performance and instructional rigor in order to maintain managerial control (Wahl-Alexander & Curtner-Smith, 2015). However, in more challenging teaching environments these effects may be exacerbated as teachers feel great pressure to obtain some semblance of control and order. Often, this results in the collapsing of the instructional integrity they hoped to establish, which is quite common in the majority of educational contexts in marginalized areas (not just physical education). As students in these settings grow accustomed to teachers not expecting much from them instructionally or behaviorally, it becomes apparent in their attitudes and actions.

On the other hand, holding students in these atmospheres to a high standard of achievement demonstrates teachers' belief that

Table 1.
Teacher-facilitated Establishment of Rules

Teacher Facilitation Guide		
Steps	*Sample Questions/Phrases*	*Sample Student-created Rules*
Introduce why rules are important	• Why do you think it is important to have rules in a physical education class? • Do you think it is necessary to have guidelines in the gymnasium?	• Always be respectful • Give your best effort • Demonstrate good sportsmanship • Encourage others • Always smile and have fun
Discuss when rules may be important	• Are there any specific times during a physical education class for which we may need to create some rules? (i.e., changing, attendance, transitions)	
Discuss what types of rules are needed	• Can you think of any instances during a physical education class where it would be important to have some rules in place?	
Clarify any rules	• Does someone want to recap the rules? • Are there any questions specific to any of the rules we created today?	

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their students can succeed. In turn, the confidence and conviction this shows fosters a positive sense of self-belief in students. Unfortunately, this is truly rare within the settings where students need it the most. In these challenging settings, high expectations can be as simple as ensuring tasks are followed as the teacher intended, students adhering consistently to all rules, or pushing students to achieve objectives others feel they cannot accomplish.

Building Relationships

Strong relationships between a child and an adult can lead to numerous life-altering changes. In any educational setting, but especially with at-risk youth, forging relationships takes time, effort, persistence and patience. However, there are several tactics that physical education teachers can use to help cultivate such relationships. Bonding, providing gentle interventions, and not using punitive measures are three main strategies that, if used consistently, will foster positive relationships with any youth.

Bonding can be defined as the process of developing a close and lasting personal relationship (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Within physical education this process happens rather quickly due to its student-centered nature and the sporting

context's ability to provide ample opportunities to connect. For teachers to achieve this, they must demonstrate that they value the students and genuinely care for them as an individual. During class time it is important for teachers to interact with each student, listen to their individual needs, and provide them a voice. The TPSR model describes this practice as "relational time" and views it as essential for gaining student trust, fostering mutual respect, and providing opportunities for encouraging the transfer of life skills learned in the program to outside the program.

Teachers should attempt to find opportunities to positively interact with students outside of class as well. Besides the obvious ways of conversing during down time (i.e., in between periods, while students change, while taking attendance, during lunch), teachers can make it a priority to attend events that students deem important. For example, appearing at a sporting event, drama production, or pep rally establishes that the teacher is attentive to students' outside-of-class interests. This act of getting to know students outside of class is essential to creating initial buy-in, which is necessary in the toughest of environments. With at-risk youth, once an initial bond is formed, teachers should continue to cultivate this relationship by continuing to connect, and by providing gentle interventions if issues do arise during class time.

Positive Behavior-management Interventions

Regardless of the type of learning environment and the quality of the relationships forged, teachers working in dangerous environments are going to be placed in situations where students engage in behaviors that threaten the health, property, routine, safety and basic rights of themselves or others (Hall, 1989). In these instances, which occur more frequently in tougher contexts, how an instructor responds to these behaviors can have significant ramifications for the teacher-student relationship. All too often, people recite examples of a teacher exploding, chastising or shaming a student publicly in response to a harmless joke or a subtle misbehavior. These interactions often lead to an escalation that results in a verbal confrontation, negative consequences, or a trip to the principal's office, which leaves the student with feelings of resentment and mistrust. Instead of "picking up the rope" when a student acts in an undesirable way, provide a gentle intervention. For example, if a student is chatting with a friend and is not participating correctly because they missed the instructions, approach the student, reiterate the directions, and finish the interaction with a simple, "Thank you for participating correctly." Once the student modifies their behavior, a simple nod of approval or thumbs up will positively reinforce this on-task behavior.

The gentle intervention technique not only reduces the number of behaviors that require a correction, but also allows the teacher to ignore behaviors that do not warrant immediate attention. This approach defuses rather than intensifies a situation, allowing students to maintain a sense of dignity. Not only is the gentle intervention effective at interrupting an undesirable behavior, but it simultaneously strengthens the relationship, as students will appreciate not being openly discredited while being held accountable for their actions.

There are several steps for a gentle intervention that can optimize its functionality:

- unobtrusively interrupt the unwanted behavior while preserving the student's dignity at all costs
- direct the student toward a more positive, desirable behavior
- praise the student once they comply with the new behavior
- circle back and commend the student for conforming to and following the redirection.

Teachers who can successfully modify behavior while following these guidelines are less likely to risk severing the relationships built with students or having reoccurring misbehaviors within their class. In situations with vulnerable or at-risk youth, this serves the purpose of validating their worth and holding them to a high standard, all while taking into account the sensitive nature of the evaluative context.

Another key to fostering a positive relationship with youth is to never punish a student, regardless of circumstance. A punishment is any action or behavior that is meant to make a student feel angry, guilty, humiliated or remorseful so that they will never behave in that way again (Peters, 2015). Using a punishment to redirect behavior can place a strain or ultimately shatter the relationship between the student and teacher. While a punishment may temporarily adjust a behavior, it does not teach the student why an appropriate response is required and often instills a desire for revenge. This is especially true for youth from vulnerable backgrounds who may mistrust adults in authoritative positions. Instead of punishing in response to behaviors, use the gentle intervention method, have a one-on-one conversation, or take time to strengthen the relationship with that individual student.

> When working with such at-risk populations, developing a safe classroom environment and promoting positive relationships among classmates is essential for success. One method of achieving these goals is through adventure education activities, as research has indicated that team building through physical challenge enhances student intrapersonal relationships, social skills, and social regard.

Curricular Strategies

Although specific curricular decisions are dependent on an assortment of variables including space, equipment, teacher/student interest, weather, and diversity, among others, the purpose of this section is to provide holistic guidance that the authors have found to be effective while teaching both incarcerated and at-risk youth. Physical educators in such contexts should attempt to promote intra-student relationships through team-building activities, incorporate opportunities to provide students with responsibility, and emphasize content that the students value, while ensuring that each task promotes success.

Team-building. Students who show signs of emotional and behavioral problems or who lack the support to navigate developmental tasks efficaciously often struggle to build relationships or trust in others (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). When working with such at-risk populations, developing a safe classroom environment and promoting positive relationships among classmates is essential for success. One method of achieving these goals is through adventure education activities, as research has indicated that team building through physical challenge enhances student intrapersonal relationships, social skills, and social regard (Fernández-Rio & Suarez, 2016; Sutherland & Legge, 2016). Not only can team-building activities be fun and enjoyable, but if facilitated effectively, they can encourage comfortability in a setting where students typically are uncomfortable or insecure. It may be beneficial to begin each teaching experience with several weeks of team building to establish positive interactions. Addition-

Table 2.
Jedi Counting Instructions

General Tasks	Verbal Teacher Script
Introduce Jedi Counting	"Jedi Counting is a team-building activity that requires patience and non-verbal communication."
Explain the Directions	"In this activity, all students will have their eyes closed. While all eyes are closed, one student will say the number one. Anyone else can say the next number two, except for the person directly to the right and left of the person who said number one."
	"If two people say a number at the same time, or people next to each other say consecutive numbers, the pattern restarts."
Objective of Jedi Counting	"The main goal of Jedi Counting is to have students recite a number without talking over any other student and avoid having the person next to you recite the next number."
Transition into Activity	"When I say go, in 15 seconds or less, the whole class needs to form one circle, making sure that each student is standing shoulder to shoulder with the person next to them."

ally, others may choose to start each class with an activity like Jedi Counting (see Table 2) to refocus and reiterate the interrelation expectation upon entering the gymnasium.

Leadership Opportunities. It is well established that physical education teachers can offer opportunities to lead by giving individual students responsibilities. Various pedagogical models, but specifically sport education, provide a student-centered approach that allows students to take ownership of their learning. While many have been successful at implementing sport education in difficult environments (Fowler & Wahl-Alexander, 2015), initially implementing a full version of this curriculum may be problematic. Nevertheless, slowly assimilating certain features into daily instruction can prove extremely fruitful, leading to full application in the future.

Specifically, one of the main features of sport education is to provide an authentic sporting experience (Siedentop, 1994) by having students participate in various team roles outside of playing (e.g., coach, newspaper reporter, photojournalist). Teachers can incorporate roles into daily instruction by allocating responsibilities among classmates. Having students take attendance (secretary), create and facilitate a warm-up (warm-up leader), motivate others during activities (head motivator), or set up/break down the physical space before/after class (equipment manager) are all examples of opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and exercise personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 2011).

Another central tenet of sport education that aids in creating an authentic environment is the training and utilization of student-officiated competitions. In this model instructors are charged with ensuring that each student has a full understanding of rules, tactics, officiating signals, and gameplay protocols. Training referees who can effectively officiate can be arduous; however, it ensures that students have a more thorough comprehension of the sport and provides ancillary opportunities to lead. Additionally, students have described this responsibility as extremely valuable, enjoyable, and their favorite part of gameplay (Sinelnikov & Hastie, 2010; Wahl-Alexander, Sinelnikov, & Curtner-Smith, 2017). Teachers can start out gradually, by having students co-officiate with the instructor, but they can work toward handing over full responsibility over gameplay. It is also beneficial for content to stay consistent (e.g., multiple invasion games in a row) to ensure that officiating duties are similar, to better equip students for what

is expected of them in this role. Even if not using sport education in its entirety, giving students an opportunity to officiate gameplay can be a worthwhile endeavor.

Student Voice. One of the major barriers of teaching physical education in an at-risk environment is the lack of student buy-in and interest in the content. To circumvent this, teachers can offer students a voice in deciding what content is delivered in class. Depending on the comfort level of the instructor, integrating student voice can be done in a variety of ways. For example, for teachers unfamiliar with this process, creating a survey dedicated to evaluating the physical activity, sport, recreation and general interests of their students is a good starting place (Figure 1). Once information is collected, teachers can make decisions based on the interest levels of each class. Surveys can be delivered frequently, with content choices dictated by different variables (i.e., gym space, equipment, weather). As with any population, the nature of working with youth from underserved areas means that special attention should be given to devising a survey that aligns with students' comprehension levels, as these may be different from the prescribed reading levels based on age.

Teachers who want to provide students with more autonomy can incorporate a discussion-based approach, taking shape as a large-class dialogue, or several smaller focus-group conversations. Similar to the survey approach, teachers can obtain information regarding what students deem valuable; however, this approach allows for open discussions and opportunities for each student to feel heard (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010). This approach, which can be facilitated by the instructor, does not have to focus exclusively on content. Questions aimed at gaining insight into student opinions regarding types of activities, whether music is played, grading procedures, rules, and dress code allow students to further highlight what is valuable to them. It also demonstrates that the teacher cares about student opinions and interests. Clearly, each instructor will determine how the information is used; however, this informational session provides students with an opportunity to be heard, which is rarely afforded to them in such environments. As research has indicated, using participatory approaches such as these promotes enjoyment, engagement and student learning (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006). Thus, incorporating these strategies in at-risk environments is an effective approach.

Figure 1.
Student-interest survey example

Welcome to Project FLEX!

Please answer the questions below so we can get to know you before we start.

Name: _____

Age: _____

1. **What is your favorite sport to play?**
   _____
   _____

2. **What is your favorite sport to watch on TV?**
   _____
   _____

3. **Circle any and all sports or activities you would like to participate in:**

   Baseball   Football   Basketball   Golf   Tennis   Soccer   Volleyball   Badminton
   Weight Lifting   Running   Ultimate Frisbee   Handball   Yoga

4. **Do you enjoy exercising?**
   _____
   _____

5. **What do you do to stay fit?**
   _____
   _____

6. **What do you like to do for fun?**
   _____
   _____

7. **What is your favorite musical artist/band?**
   _____
   _____

8. **What is your favorite movie/TV show?**
   _____
   _____

9. **What do you want to be when you grow up?**
   _____
   _____

10. **Who do you care most about in your life, and why?**
    _____
    _____

11. **What is one word you could use to describe yourself?**
    _____
    _____

12. **Do you have any regrets?**
    _____
    _____

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the number of children in the United States who are considered at-risk or who attend a Title 1 school is rapidly increasing. As the prevalence of these environments becomes more common, it is more challenging to offer quality physical education instruction within these contexts. Numerous factors contribute to the inequitable experiences that at-risk children receive in physical education; however, action must be taken to provide a more fruitful experience. As research has indicated, children living in low-income neighborhoods are at a higher risk for obesity, heart disease and other health risks, both in childhood and later in life. Thus, improving their experiences within physical education is warranted. This article provides tangible practices that physical educators can use to deliver high-quality physical education in the most challenging settings.

> Questions aimed at gaining insight into student opinions regarding types of activities, whether music is played, grading procedures, rules, and dress code allow students to further highlight what is valuable to them. It also demonstrates that the teacher cares about student opinions and interests. Clearly, each instructor will determine how the information is used; however, this informational session provides students with an opportunity to be heard, which is rarely afforded to them in such environments.

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