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Eliminating Barriers to Physical Activity: Using Cultural Negotiation and Competence

By Brian Culp

Culture and education are profound influences on teaching and learning. These acts are transmitted by a group's core values, beliefs, attitudes, type of communication, and linguistic styles. Pai, Adler, and Shadiow (2005) note that educational processes impact the transmission of fundamental beliefs concerning the nature of the world, knowledge, and what are considered values. Persons who understand this process have power, leaving those who do not at a disadvantage in regards to learning. With advances in modern technologies such as the Internet, tablets, and smartphones, persons from all ages and ethnic and social groups have access to a host of different cultures. The context of present-day intercultural communication includes text messaging, chat rooms, e-mails, blogs, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social networking.



Despite the proliferation of these technologies, it is still necessary to incorporate other aspects of learning that could be of benefit. This age of change provides an opportunity to consider communication in relation to the context, the method of delivery, and how it can best be used to promote physical activity in a democratic and multicultural society. As curriculum and content choices are made, one question could be asked. Simply, is equal attention spent on bridging the gap between the worlds of diverse youth, their leaders, and messages sent regarding physical activity? If the answer is no, perhaps a shift toward *cultural negotiation* should be advocated.

The Characteristics of Cultural Negotiation

Cultural negotiation is a means of communication and instruction that strives toward a progressive, equitable, and thriving environment for participants. As a skill that is learned and cultivated over time, it holds application for instructing youth, whether physical activity is promoted in school, during out-of-class time, or in the course of sport programming. Current perspectives on instructional practices cite the importance of content knowledge and the construction of new information created from previous knowledge of students. Thus, cultural negotiation is not a simplistic, reactionary approach, but an action that assumes that differences are normal and should be expected. As a fulcrum for the realization of change, cultural negotiation regularly occurs in unpredictable circumstances where “teachable moments” may be used to promote a climate of respect and intellectual integrity. When done correctly, it is a strategy that encourages individuals to identify inconsistencies in their thinking and behaviors.

Mayes, Cutri, Rogers, and Montero (2007) define *cultural negotiators* as persons who help students explore their own and each other’s cultures in a variety of ways with the intent of enriching their education. These persons are holistic in their views of youth and understand that they have physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual characteristics within them. Such persons do not subscribe to one vision of how youth learn, and when faced with a lack of knowledge themselves, they take steps to eliminate their deficiencies. As cultural negotiators become more comfortable in their roles, they create meaningful connections with youth that are transformational.

Those who are cultural negotiators understand the contextual situations, previous content learned, and background experiences of youth with whom they work. In planning, they first conceptualize larger concepts before developing methodologies by which to instruct and introduce higher-order thinking skills. After this, they engage in reflection that examines issues that could affect their practices. In being active leaders who solve problems in an effective manner, they understand of the role of “outsider” and “insider” and how these designations could influence physical activity for multicultural youth. This latter characteristic has unique implications for learners participating in physical activity.

Insiders, Outsiders, and the Impact on Teaching and Learning

The role of insider and outsider can create barriers or channels that impact physical activity participation for multicultural

youth. A condensed description of the role of insider and outsider can be summarized from the work of sociologist Richard Merton (1910–2003). Insiders are members of a group with a shared interest, who adhere to an established set of norms, rules, values, behaviors, and language. Outsiders are persons who do not fit into the insider group. Outsiders typically are introduced to the insider group directly through invitation or indirectly after certain standards are met. Often, criteria for this standard are unknown or are ambiguous to those wishing to be part of the insider group (Merton, 1972).

Insider groups are composed of a dominant culture that is often, but not always, a majority group. They can include a host of established characteristics not limited to sport participation (i.e., athletes vs. nonathletes), gender, social class, and language (English-speaking vs. non-native English-speaking). However,

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as Grant and Sleeter (2011) note, historical perspectives in the United States typically refer to dominant culture as a majority group framed in terms of race. For instance, in respect to teaching diverse learners in many schools, the dominant culture overwhelmingly consists of teachers who are primarily white and middle class.

In contrast, increasingly multicultural school populations have youth who are not part of the dominant culture and shared heritage of many of their teachers. This creates an atmosphere in which the voice of the learner can be hampered and rendered inconsequential. The impact of this trend is noteworthy. The potential for critical ideas that could be “lost in translation” due to a *laissez-faire* approach to cultural communication is an issue of significance.

Teachers, coaches, and instructors often navigate choices in curricula, lessons, activities, instructional routines, and youth behavior management strategies that routinely separate culture from education. For multicultural youth who are not part of the dominant culture, this can impede the promotion of successful physical activity because these choices may not reflect their experience. Of equal concern is that multicultural youth do not see the long-term benefit of these programs, which could cause resentment, nonparticipation, or an increase in classroom disruptions due to the lack of familiarity.

Thus, physical and sport educators serving in the role of cultural negotiators can help to eliminate barriers to physical activ-

Table 1. Examples of Barriers to Physical Activity and Possible Solutions

Barrier to Be Broken	Channel to Physical Activity
<p>Stereotypes of sport participation based on race/ethnicity:</p> <p><i>Kevin is teaching floor hockey to a fifth-grade class for the first time. As his class is watching his demonstration on how to properly hold the stick, they begin laughing. Kevin stops class for a moment to ask the group the reason for the outburst and finds that a student, Chauncy, blurted out to classmates that 'Black people didn't play hockey.'</i></p> <p><i>Kevin calms the class down, and after a brief uncomfortable silence, he finishes the introduction to the unit before starting with some basic skills with the group. After class, he thinks about what he could have done better in that situation.</i></p>	<p>Upon reflection, Kevin decides to devote the last five minutes of each of his lessons to talk about the contributions of Black players to the sport of hockey, citing historic and current persons such as Willie O'Ree, Grant Fuhr, Angela James, and Jarome Iginla.</p> <p>This exchange between Kevin and his students highlights the importance of why teachers should build upon and challenge the ideas that youth often bring to classes. Kevin's utilization of this type of "open talk" helps to serve as a type of cultural negotiation that helps to break down misconceptions and the formation of cultural barriers (Culp, 2011).</p> <p>Additionally, this attention to educating students can promote positive social capital that helps youth achieve in a competitive society where knowledge is essential for success (Noguera, 2004).</p>
<p>Encouraging physical activity for English-language learners (ELL):</p> <p><i>Lena is in her first week teaching in an afterschool physical education program where the majority of youth are ELLs (in this case, Spanish-speaking). As Lena gives instructions, she finds that many of the participants fail to pay attention. When in activities, they are rarely on task and often do not follow routine.</i></p> <p><i>A few weeks later, after another frustrating experience, Lena remarks to her supervisor that "the youth in the program are undisciplined and that she wishes more of them could speak English." Her supervisor challenges her position and encourages Lena to think about instructing youth in the program in a more positive and creative fashion.</i></p>	<p>Lena in this scenario has a false expectation that English-language learners (ELL) should be immediately acculturated into the routines of an afterschool program. These programs may not have the type of structure found in many schools for ELL students (Smith-Davis, 2004).</p> <p>Furthermore, Columna and Lieberman (2011) note that safe and positive environments should be created for all students, with acknowledgement, appreciation, and respect for diversity. Citing McCollum, Civalier, and Holt (2004), they also mention that strategies for Hispanic students should incorporate: 1) peer teaching and cooperative games, 2) a buddy system pairing Hispanic and non-Hispanic students, 3) visual demonstrations and verbal explanations of tasks, and 4) posted rules and directions in both languages. This type of cultural negotiation is respectful and places equal emphasis on creative instruction to meet the needs of the learner.</p>
<p>Environments for physical activity that promote values specific to a few dominant groups:</p> <p><i>Jay is setting up 'Champions Day,' an annual celebration of selected American sports for his upper-level elementary physical education classes in the gymnasium. He focuses on his childhood heroes as models for students because they are in his view "safer and more responsible than athletes in today's society."</i></p> <p><i>As part of the activity, Jay's classes are required to participate in physical education across several stations. After students finish each station, they are required to record clues about Jay's heroes on an assessment sheet and turn them in after class.</i></p> <p><i>Some of the questions he requires students to answer include counting the amount of banners and trophies on display and noting the athletes who participated in the sports football, baseball, and wrestling, with no mention of activities or events that take place in other countries. In his closure, he asks his classes who they identify with the most. The responses by his students are primarily from those who participate in the sports Jay presented. Most of the other students are tepid in their response.</i></p>	<p>Giroux (2006) notes that there is a "hidden curriculum" in every classroom and each school. This refers to the unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying educational structure. Teachers, through this hidden curriculum, often send powerful messages through the construction of their environments, lesson choices, and activities they present to youth.</p> <p>Further, perceived bias by youth can influence self-concept, self-efficacy, and ultimately attitudes. Thus, gymnasiums can unconsciously be turned into areas where values are in opposition. The group who has familiarity with the environment has privilege and power, while all other groups have a greater opportunity to be marginalized, with fewer rights and with less of a voice among the class.</p> <p>Youth observe often, with studies showing their ability to make generalizations based on their knowledge and experience at younger ages (Banks, 2006). Cultural negotiation for physical educators demands that teachers also pay attention to the subtle messages they are communicating to youth. Youth, to be full participants in physical activity must see themselves as full participants, regardless of their ability, gender, or origin (Clements & Rady, 2012).</p>

ity, as they promote congruency (Gauvain, 2001). In other words, those who teach multicultural youth should do so in a factual, substantial, and meaningful way that promotes respect for culture. Often, barriers to physical activity are promoted through stereotypes that are portrayed in media and society, miscommunication through language, and physical environments that promote values specific to the dominant groups in the classroom. Table 1 shows examples of how cultural negotiation can be accomplished to break down barriers and serve as a channel for physical activity. It should be noted that these are only a few examples to consider for similar situations that may arise in the course of planning or instruction.

Developing Competence in Becoming a Cultural Negotiator

Cultural negotiation requires a high amount of *cultural competence*, or the ability to understand attitudes, beliefs, and values that differ across cultures (Pedersen, 1988). Cultural competence has roots in the field of health care and is utilized as one means of reducing disparities among underrepresented groups. Although this article discusses cultural competency in terms of race and ethnicity, it is common to find cultural competency used in reference to groups such as women and girls, the elderly, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and religious minorities (Brach & Fraserirector, 2000).

Of late, there has been a distinction between the personal and organizational aspects of cultural competence. In a personal sense, cultural competence refers to the ability of one to interact comfortably and communicate effectively with a wide range of persons from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. From the organizational perspective, cultural competence creates and maintains policies and systems that foster individuals as they strive to be literate on issues relative to difference.

As alluded to at the outset, society has changed in a significant fashion. Friedman (2000) notes advances in electronic communication, new means of transportation, and groups of people

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being displaced as part of political conflict and economic distress as other reasons for many of the current changes in the cultural landscape of America. Changes of this nature provide other potential disconnections between instruction and learning that go beyond traditional discussions of race, gender, class, and ability. For instance, there are subtopics that cultural negotiators must navigate and comprehend that impact the success of many immigrants and students of color. These topics could include low literacy skills, poor class attendance, school dropout, migrant issues, housing needs, social capital, economic mobility, educational inequality, and knowing the politics and histories of local communities (see Table 2 for examples). When considering current disparities in health and access to physical activity found among ethnic, racial, and minority groups, a strong case could be made for cultural competency being an issue of social justice.

Persons who have the competence needed for cultural negotiation know how to: (a) gain awareness of their own cultural assumptions, beliefs, and biases; (b) cultivate knowledge of the world views of culturally different others; and (c) develop strategies and techniques for promoting intercultural awareness and cooperation in others (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). In possessing this cultural knowledge and respect for others, persons who practice cultural negotiation know how to use these skills effectively in cross-cultural situations and they are committed to its practice (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Some methods for improving cultural negotiation skills are listed in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Physical and sport educators who incorporate cultural negotiation acknowledge that their teaching, routines, and plans for learning encompass a cultural act. In today’s society, culture-free teaching or learning is nonexistent. Education is woven into the fabric of nearly every group; therefore, recognizing the impact of cultural norms on the process of teaching and learning is vital to the promotion of lifelong physical activity.

It is important to highlight some recent statistics to underscore this point. Places of play and areas for activity are in the midst of a transformational shift that has been impacted by immigration, ethnicity, and culture. For example, according to recent U.S. Census Bureau data (2012), the total foreign-born population is approximately 40 million persons, or roughly 13% of the total U.S. population. This total is more than 3 million persons higher than in 2000 and more than triple the figure of 10 million in 1970 (Capps et al., 2005). In this statistic, children of immigrants represented 1 in 5 of all school-aged children under age 18 and were represented primarily by Latin America, Mexico, and Asia.

Additionally, students of color (primarily African American, Latino, and Asian) will comprise more than 50% of the U.S. population by the year 2050. Despite the amount of representation this group has in school settings, members of this group are still vastly underserved. As mentioned previously, among this population are higher rates of poverty, gaps in resources for educational achievement, and significant resource deficits that contribute to disparities in health and access to physical activity.

Table 2. Current Issues Facing Students That Could Hinder Physical Activity

Obesity/health concerns	As physical and sport educators, we are well aware that we are in an obesity crisis. Approximately 19% of U.S. children aged 6 to 11 years old and 17% of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years old are overweight. Although there is no one single cause for obesity, recent studies contribute the issue to a combination of poor nutrition, sedentary lifestyle, depression, body image and the media, appetite signals, genetics, family and economic issues, and various psychological, social, and demographic factors (Trout & Kahan, 2008).
Poverty	Poverty is a growing concern among school-aged youth (approximately 40%) and is a catalyst for inadequate health and lower educational achievement. Prior to birth, poor children experience more health problems due to lack of nutrition and other factors such as increased blood lead levels due to environmental factors. Poverty also creates unique emotional and social challenges, such as stress, depression, low self-esteem, and social instability, and has been linked to cognitive lags in learning.
Bullying	According to the American Psychological Association, 40% to 80% of school-age children experience bullying at some point during their school careers (Graham, 2011). This statistic is encompassing of grade level, socioeconomic environment, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Recent studies have reported that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more bullied than are those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Bullying can be physical, emotional, verbal, and implemented through the use of technology such as computers, phones, and social networking sites.
Inequitable opportunities and resources	Discrimination from various levels of society has created a social issue of unequal educational opportunities, primarily for individuals from low-income minority backgrounds. Recent perspectives note that students who are members of this demographic fail to receive the same quality of education as their counterparts from upper-class nonminority backgrounds. There has been a rise in educational systems during the past 20 years that disproportionately offer opportunities based on cultural affiliation and income level.
Dropout rate	Current estimates are that 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the United States annually. Reasons vary and include: the need to find work, bullying, family crisis/emergencies, poor grades, depression, unintended pregnancy, poor environmental factors, lack of freedom, and boredom from the routines of school. Dire consequences are associated with dropping out of school. Students who drop out of school in America are more likely to be unemployed, homeless, incarcerated, receive public assistance, and be the victim of violent crime. Nationally, it is reported that only 71% of students graduate from high school and only about half of Black and Latino students graduate. Young women who drop out of school are more likely to have children at younger ages and be single mothers compared with their counterparts who graduate.
Violence	The topic of school violence affects all aspects of society. Such violence can include emotional and physical ridicule or bullying, assaults, threats, and sexual offenses (dating violence, harassment), as well as the less apparent but equally important components of graffiti and vandalism, trespassing, and gangs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) reported that an average of 16 young people were murdered a day. Thirty-one percent of youth in Grades 9 through 12 reported being in a physical fight in the last year, 17.5% of these students reported carrying a weapon, and 5% reported that they did not attend school on at least one or more days during the school year because they felt unsafe.
Classroom racism	Despite the civil rights movements of the 20th century, classroom racism has paralleled what is found in society. Discriminatory remarks, name calling, and prejudice behaviors are often made by classmates and can create language wars in school. This, coupled with guardians who create a household of intolerance for students to learn racist beliefs and stereotypes, causes a unique issue that we as physical and sport educators must actively work to combat.
Economic pressures	It has been found that economic pressures play a significant role in social problems that affect students in schools. As children, youth may be insulated from many of these issues. As they get older, they begin to observe the pressures brought on by the lack of finances. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) recently found that many adolescents drop out of school to help their families make ends meet, particularly when they are in single-parent households. Studies have also shown that children from low-income families are six times more likely to drop out than are children from high-income families.
Mobility	Student mobility is best described as actions that result in students changing schools for reasons other than grade promotion. One group that has been particularly impacted by mobility is students with migrant families. In addition to navigating language, cultural, and linguistic barriers, they often suffer from a disproportionate number of health issues with their families at times being uninsured. Of recent focus are children of military personnel, who make an average of six to nine school changes between kindergarten and high school graduation. For both groups, current research suggests that students who transfer frequently between schools during the school year demonstrate academic and behavior problems. These include lower achievement levels due to changes in curriculum between schools and difficulty in developing peer relationships.
Sexual abuse	Schools are institutions in which students interact constantly. It is estimated that one in four girls and one in six boys will experience sexual abuse before the age of 18. Much of this abuse comes at the hands of professionals entrusted to care for youth. Effects of child sexual abuse for the victim include anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, psychological trauma, and a likelihood of further victimization as students become adults.

Note: Adapted from Spradlin (2011) and the U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov>)

Figure 1. Eight Tips to Improve Skills in Cultural Negotiation

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| Personally reflect on the psychodynamic issues, images, biases, and assumptions that can affect instructional practices and how you relate to students. |
| Be proactive about your lack of knowledge, and find resources (i.e., community members/parents/books) that can broaden your horizons. |
| Strive to communicate better by listening carefully in a conversation and asking questions to clarify things that are not understood. |
| Pay attention to the environment for physical activity. If possible, have a peer observe and give impressions of what they think your learning environment feels like to them. |
| Consider a different way of delivering the same routine. This could be through the use of music, a word or phrase of the week, or exhibition of student work in a common area in the school. |
| Seek role models who are reflective of the experiences of multicultural youth groups to empower, educate, and transform the physical activity experience. |
| Strive to exhibit “instruction of consequence,” or teaching that actively seeks to prepare youth to be successful adults. |
| Understand that cultural negotiation is an ongoing process that requires consistent attention to societal trends. Also understand that there are differences in culture, even among groups who appear similar on the surface. |

With these perspectives in mind, this article suggests that cultural negotiation has validity as it allows for physical and sport educators, regardless of background, to be knowledgeable about the students with whom they work as they create inclusive environments for physical activity. Although it can be highly personal, this means of enhanced teaching brings fuller meaning to content. In turn, youth are empowered to make choices that have meaning while respecting differences that they will encounter in their lives.

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