Improving the affective domain in learning, through experience and change

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Learning is the greatest thing a person can accomplish and what is required to advance in the area they are working. Learning is a change in behaviour, it is always happening, and it is continuous throughout life. There is little that we can do as humans that we did not have to learn first, and many of these things are advancements upon something else we have previously learned, creating modified and more difficult solutions to problems that are presented to us in everyday life. Physical education is something that is undertaken as part as a curriculum and as one portion of an active and healthy lifestyle. Governments, health associations and national bodies have made recommendations for the maintenance of an active lifestyle, and these recommendations have created a system that is determined to provide enough opportunities for children to actively participate and get the number of minutes of exercise ‘required’ per day (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiologists, 2012). Even here, they are failing. However, what this recommendation does not dictate is the type of exercise that youth should be partaking in; what, exactly, they should be gaining from their bouts of exercise; and, how, if at all, this pre-planned exercise will count towards the development of a stimulated, well-rounded and competent teen that is willing to continue exercise beyond school.

I have experienced two different styles of physical education through high school curriculum, in two different areas of the Western world: Northwest England, and Western Canada. The differences between the school systems are understandable - governments and philosophies play a large part, and no two countries approach education in the same way. However, from personal experiences found in these two varied environments there is evidence of the effect that development of the affective domain, or emotional and motivational areas of the brain, specifically in physical education, can have on youth; and how, when this area is lacking, children can create conditions for themselves and others that both discourage and prevent the appropriate learning needed to enhance the whole child.

When I compare some of the experiences that I had in school life there are obvious differences in the way that students act within the setting of physical education, and how they react to other students, situations and authority figures. On one side, there are students who are forced to continue physical education despite their desire to be anywhere else, leading to disruption and a lack of motivation or co-operation, while on the other side, a continuation of physical education classes is optional, producing more engaged students, but there are less of them. There is the presence of physical and verbal bullying in the classroom on one side, versus strictly controlled classroom situations, where playful hassling is appropriately limited and where physical bullying is seldom seen. In one case, there is a noticeable abundance of extracurricular and in-class sport options, and an early focus on sports and conflicting schedule issues that prevent involvement in the other. Finally, there is limitation in same sex education that still provides a sense of security, as opposed to the co-ed education that causes tension but may, overall, allow more growth of the child. I believe that after exposure to these circumstances, and through descriptions of certain situations, it will be obvious that the affective domain is something that has been neglected in the development of these students, regardless of where they live; and that an increase in time spent on developing this area, creating an equality between the learning domains, would create more well-rounded, understanding, supportive and proficient students who may enjoy physical education more readily and may even be willing to continue activity across their lifespan.

The affective domain is one category of three that Bloom (1956) determined to be the integral part of maturation and learning. The key domains, as determined in Bloom’s taxonomy of learning are cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Cognitive is the knowledge that a person has, the concept of what they do with their brain; the psychomotor area is the physical actions of the body and the movement patterns that are developing through growth. The affective domain is less tangible because it is the area of development that deals with feelings, emotions, motivation, enthusiasm and what determines appropriate interaction with others, as well as the ability to co-operate and handle delicate situations. All of the domains progress through a series of maturation levels, and affective changes evolve from an ability to listen to the ability to respond to what is heard; then from the ability to respond to the ability to feel value in the state, then organize thoughts and feelings before finally being able to characterize the personal values that we realize we have internally developed. In school subjects like math, science and English, the major area of interest is the cognitive domain of learning; in physical education classes the more appropriate area of concern is psychomotor because that is the development of motor skills, learning to run, throw, catch and ultimately play games. The area that is most commonly neglected, then, is helping to create a sociable and confident individual who can interact with others without argument or issue. This area does not hold a major role in any one class, but is important for the child because it is the back bone of social interaction as an adult and throughout life.

In England, PE class was where I found the most enjoyment; however, it was where there were more people who did not want to be exercising than people who did. The level of motivation within the class was always low, and on the days where team games were being played, there were either individuals who carried the team, or there were entire teams that almost refused to pick up the ball, or move around the space. The inability of the students to engage in the psychomotor domain also appeared to shut them out of any advancement in the affective domain. To these people, any kind of participation or energy expenditure was unnecessary and worthy of ridicule.

I remember a class-wide beep test where the teacher set a minimum goal of stage 3; subsequently, out of a class of 30 or so students 10 or 12 reached stage 3 and dropped out, even if they were not at their maximum expenditure. Following this, students dropped out over the next 2 stages, creating an increasingly large group of girls congregated at one end of the gym. Eventually, with only 2 people remaining in the test (myself and one other girl, also called Charlotte) the rest of the class began to pay attention to the proceedings. Common decency would suggest that, if anything, these students may offer words of encouragement and cheering; however, instead they questioned, “why would you keep going?” “come on, get it over with,” “you are just showing off!” By level 7 or 8, when the other Charlotte stopped, I was wheezing but determined to keep going as long as I could. This is due to an intense competitive streak, and the characteristic that dictates that I cannot stop until I complete the task or can no longer remain standing. On the side lines now, the jeers became personal, “you are such a teacher’s pet,” “you’re stupid,” “you are killing yourself, idiot,” and “what are you trying to prove?” Suddenly, I was trying to prove that I wouldn’t stop because they were telling me I should, and I pushed harder. I was obviously reaching my maximum exertion level, and this was evident in my face, which became the next thing that other students’ were commenting on. The comments became inane, useless and raw. These girls, my peers, were not losing anything by my continuing, nor were they expected to complete any other task in the meantime. The teacher was standing on the sideline, watching and managing the tape recording, and did not respond to the comments or the jeering. When I eventually stopped running, somewhere around stage 9, I was met with clapping, not for doing well, but for “giving up,” and for stopping my “showing off;” as well, I was mocked for being so red in the face and for wheezing and coughing, which to these girls was a sign that I was an inferior athlete. Next came the jabs such as “if I’d tried, I could have beaten you,” and “don’t think you are all that because you got the highest.”

I knew that I did not have a lot of allies in this school, due to a series of arguments and fights that occurred between the ‘Queen Bee’ and I earlier in the year and this inferior social standing put me below most everyone. What is particularly obvious is that the social hierarchy and lack of cohesion among the group affected everyone, not just me, because even my friends were unable to offer support, reassurance or congratulation (Hastie, 1998). I was a social pariah because I put 100% effort in to something that was mandated as part of the curriculum. What this experience showed to me was that encouragement and positive interaction were outside of the abilities of most of my peers, because the situation was not about success and failure, it was about social standing, and the person, not the event. Had these students been developing their affective understanding of society and expectations, they may have realized that offering support as opposed to pressure is considered the social norm, and that in this case, they were going to be unsuccessful in changing the outcome. Instead they jumped on a bandwagon that would continue for years to come, until it was unrecognizable for anything other than a gang mentality, controlled by bitterness and a lack of individual thought. It manifested as pushing, taunting, tripping and verbal insults but was never dealt with by a teacher or adult because it was passed off as being the problems of individuals; ironically, at this stage, there was nothing individual about the thinking, because there was little that each person was determining for themselves. As Griffin may postulate, the participation style of girls places both ‘Queen Bee’, who was athletically talented, and I, at the top of the pyramid (1984), but I would argue that we fulfilled more of the boys styles of participation which has a second group of able athletes, more inclined to support others while maintaining their role in the game and thriving [me], sitting 3 levels below the loud, self-assured macho style player, more likely to control games for their own advantage [‘Queen Bee’] (Griffin, 1985).

Even now, six years out of high school, I am still bothered by comments made by ‘Queen Bee’ on a social networking site because of the types of interaction I experienced with her as a teenager. I haven’t communicated with her since I left England; likewise, she has not communicated with me, yet she felt the need to make an unnecessary comment about a photograph taken more than 4 years previous. This demonstrates that she still has not effectively progressed within the affective domain to care about the feelings or emotions of others besides her, and also indicates that she has hardly matured in to an adult style of communication, insinuating that her ability to participate in the adult world is limited and unlikely to provide her with many satisfying opportunities.

In opposition, physical education class in Canada was more affectively developed because there were few instances where a gang mentality was able to prevail. There were more team events, which increased the interaction between players, regardless of gender or ability or social standing. If you were on the team, you were included in the game. This stretched as far as risking points being scored to ensure that all players had an opportunity to take part. This was not evident in every student but it was in a much greater abundance than was seen in England. One such example of this would be the interaction of my class mates with Paul. Paul was a mentally disabled student who was in our daily PE class for about 5 months. Paul was not very active, nor did he possess even average fine motor skills. However, Paul came to class and was always assigned a team with the rest of the class. During warm ups there was always someone who was partnered with Paul, and this person rarely showed apprehension or concern. When Paul stepped up to take his turn he was always cheered and encouraged; when he was talking, his peers listened to him; and, when there was the opportunity for Paul to be involved in the play he was passed to, cheered and helped towards the goal. As far as I can tell, Paul enjoyed his time in the PE class, and no single student was any worse off for having included him. This is a major difference from England, where it would be hard to imagine acceptance and support for Paul or anyone else who is not in the top tiers of social acceptability. Furthermore, encouragement in Canada was well spread, with high fives, congratulations and tolerance in abundance within the teams.

Even so, in Canada there were still instances where the acceptability and openness were tested. One firm example would be when playing handball. Our version of the game saw the player with the ball forced to turn the play over if they were successfully wrapped by an opponent for 3 seconds. I found that in this game I was hard pressed to find an opportunity to get the ball, but when I did I was unopposed because of the boys’ unwillingness to wrap me. This can be put down to the overwhelming prevalence of masculine ideas within sport (Hopper and Sanford, 2005), men restricting the role of women based on perceived ability (Griffin, 1985), and an observable masculine trait to not harass or harm a ‘delicate’ female. Similarly, if I was defending I had no problem playing the game as it was intended and taking part in wrapping or guarding. Often this caused confused boys to question whether it had really been me who wrapped them, and why? This is a definitive lack of affective development which sees masculine ideals show through, resulting in a stereotype of a non-involved girl, or, alternatively, the girl who participates must fulfil a butch stereotype to make it okay (Hopper and Sanford, 2005; Griffin, 1984).

Further events of my time in high school in England ask tough questions about where we are failing students in the system, and what we are doing to help them to become respectable and active members of the community. Again dealing with ‘Queen Bee’ and her followers, who have, at this stage, continued to torment we for close to 4 years, and enjoyed instigating situations designed to rile me up, reasoning was not to be found. In this one instance, a group of 3 girls (including ‘Queen Bee’), peers of mine in the GCSE PE class (the advanced class leading to practical and theory tests, aiming for certification at the high school level), spent half of the class throwing insults and jibes at me, followed by threats of violence and death; then, they proceeded to create a triangle around me as I was playing badminton. As I played with my partner across the net, they hit a shuttle cock between themselves, around me, occasionally firing the shuttle cock at me. This tedious game continued until the shuttle cock dropped at my feet and ‘Queen Bee’ came in to retrieve it. At this point I returned the shuttle cock being used in my game, and my racket followed through in the motion. The racket connected with ‘Queen Bee’, lightly, and on the shoulder. Instantly, the 3 surrounded me, squared up to me began shouting at me and pushing me. Soon after, they followed the comments with swinging their rackets at me, making contact with my shoulders and back. I had never experienced physical violence, even in a sports setting, yet my peers had chosen this setting because they were under less control than in a classroom, the teachers were out of hearing distance, and at this point out of the gym, and most people were otherwise engaged.

‘Queen Bees’ followers were not, nor had they ever been my friends, which would assume that I should not have done anything to antagonise them; regardless, they were incited by another person to perform physical violence instead of thinking for themselves, drawing their own conclusions, and thinking about the effect that the event may have on me; instead, they started with hostile attitudes then proceeded to value self-preservation over truth and moral obligations once the teacher became involved. Although the only link to physical education class is the location of the incident, the lack of consideration for others, something that falls squarely in the affective domain, is quite evidently an important part of what led to the attack. Had any of the three girls been concerned with the actual wellbeing of another, even someone they were not friends with, the situation should never have occurred. This implies that there needs to be an increase in the number of opportunities provided to improve the interactions within this domain and to create young adults who are able to take responsibility for themselves and their actions, otherwise the bullying and physical violence will continue, as it did for four years when I was in high school.

In Canada, in stark contrast to England, I never witnessed physical violence, either within a PE class, or at any other time within the school grounds. In class, words were often traded in regards to skill, a mistake made, or in regards to physical features or something equally as unrelated to the game situation. This kind of jesting was closely monitored by the teacher, and nothing progressed beyond good natured banter. This kind of action was almost exclusively between the boys in the class, which is almost expected, based on assumptions made about their level of competitiveness and their participation styles (Griffin, 1985). Griffin argued that there are 5 categories of participation in a PE class, and that this determines the boys’ interactions, attitudes and actions. I would argue that this was observable in my PE class, and that, as Griffin described, the three styles most often associated with disruption and conflict were the ‘machos’, the ‘junior machos’ and the ‘wimps.’ Regardless of their behaviour groupings, no interaction between students reached a level of continuous torment such as I experienced in England, nor did any of the conflicts result in violence. This alone demonstrates a difference between students in England and Canada because violence was also a staple of the playground in England, often resulting in small mobs descending on the fist fight in the school yard, with chants of “fight, fight, fight” being heard across the grounds. Although I don’t doubt that small fist fights and physical altercations occurred in my school in Canada, it would be impossible to not compare my own personal experiences and determine that there was never any such possibility in Canada as that which I experienced in England.

Having described exchanges in my English school years that came out of difficult personal relationships with certain students, and trying to place the role of emotions, feelings and the affective domain within these situations, I am able to reason that my experience is not entirely unique, and that it could not have been prevented simply by the students involved having been counselled in the appropriate ways of dealing with conflict or argument. Nor am I able to determine the role of physical education in the process of learning and dealing with affective development because it is a notion that can only grow through involvement in all aspects of life. However, within the realm of physical education, development of the affective domain is something that is beneficial to sports teams, aiding in mutual co-operation and understanding, tactics development and team affiliation (Siedentop, 2004). Therefore, it would make sense that somewhere along the road from elementary school to graduation the education system would see fit to develop this small yet integral part of a child, setting them up for the best possible opportunities. These previous stories recall what are to me, harrowing experiences related to school bullying, primarily within the realm of physical education, and they are a part of what was one of the most difficult periods of my life. This is possibly related to my own poorly developed affective domain resulting in an inability to deal with the stress and pressures of adolescent angst; however, the experience has identified to me the absence of adequate development within children, and the need for an improvement in this area.

Even in Canada, where acceptance in physical education is more prevalent, there is a noticeable lack of acceptance and openness in other forms of activity, most notably extra-curricular sports teams. Firstly, Canada restricts access to sports outside of school because of scheduling conflicts and a lack of communication, between coaches, about training and game schedules. Furthermore, there is a strong belief that athletes should narrow their athletic focus early on, concentrating on one or two sports in order to increase competence enough to be selected for higher levels of competition. This means that those who play on the school team are usually put through a selection process, restricting access for those below the top tier in the area. Beyond this there are few opportunities for those who are cut to find a team that they are able to join, resulting in the athlete quitting the sport entirely. It is also important to note that a lot of the players who make the cut are also playing for local house or select teams, meaning that they do not have time to think about other sports, and this sometimes results in time conflicts between teams.

As a result of these restrictive factors it is tough to commit to more than one team, or to experience more than one sport in any given season. There was a girl on my AAA soccer team who played soccer, rugby and did track and field during the same season. For this to happen she had permission to miss alternate soccer and rugby practices, go to the meets for track and field only, and choose fairly between rugby and soccer if games or tournaments ever overlapped. The stress of this schedule alone is enough to make me wonder where the fun remains, but it clearly was the draw to the different sports that kept her engaged. Physically, she was being taxed, cognitively she was forced to allot time, energy, and brain power to the understanding of each sport, and she was being affectively challenged in order to internally cope with the stress, establish values that allowed her to consciously expend so much time on physical activity, as well as challenge stereotypes (this was the same girl who played for the boys’ football team the previous season).

In the same system, teams were built based on ability, placing athletes as many as 4 years apart on the same team, and sometimes placing students who were still only in the middle school on the high school team, at the expense of many above average high school players. It took until my grade 12 year for the school to offer more than one soccer team, which gave more students the opportunity to play for the high school team. This AA team played different opponents than the AAA team, trained at different times and had a different coach, but the fact that they had the opportunity, after once being cut, is an improvement in the schools attempt to further establish affective development, increasing the feeling of acceptance and competence, leading to encouragement and motivation and further participation.

In England, there were few instances that required cuts in order to field a team. In fact, it was generally a case of whoever wanted to play got the chance, and we were still required to pull athletes up from lower levels in order to make numbers. I believe this was a case of students being discouraged from playing early on in their school lives, when in elementary schools teams were co-ed and girls ultimately got cut (aside from the ‘required’ 2 girls on the team). In my experience it was the same students who played every sport, and this was because they were highly motivated and also had access to multiple sports. Sports teams at my high school were run solely by the physical education teachers, meaning that they had strict control of when things were offered, so that they never overlapped. Training sessions were held at lunch and after school, and the teachers had to ensure that all year groups were given time to train, as well as play games, but they managed it season after season. One advantage of having access to a full and open schedule without conflicts was the opportunity to be almost continuously active. Monday could be netball at lunch, soccer practice after school; Tuesday was cricket at lunch and a netball game after school; Wednesday was rounders at lunch and afterschool; Thursday was netball at lunch and a soccer game after school; and Friday offered badminton or table tennis at both opportunities. This was a typical schedule which could keep you busy 5 days a week and it continued throughout the school year with different sports. The only conflict that appeared would be if you were chosen to play up a year group and your peers were unhappy, or if your team had to play with an unnatural number of lower year players because you were short players. The co-operation that existed between the players, across all of the year groups (there were 5 year groups) demonstrated good development of the affective domain as more often than not motivation was offered among team mates; an ability to develop tactics and understand the game was boosted by cognitive development, and good physical performance heightened the team’s feelings of contentment and mutual enthusiasm. This is also a perfect example of creating students who are well developed in all domains and are likely to continue playing sports across the lifespan.

The only negative connotations associated with this are the obvious deficiency in the number of engaged participants out of 800+ students, and the corresponding number of people who will be able to take their experiences from high school and continue to develop their skills once school is over. I know that once I left high school in England, I never again have played so many sports with so much enthusiasm, nor have I had anywhere near as many opportunities to participate in one or any sports after moving to Canada. This makes me think that the sports education system in England is tailored to motivated athletes, but still lacks in motivation for those not self-motivated. Where, after all, are they supposed to gain motivation if not at school? If the physical education system is lacking in confidence building, tactical understanding or skill developing opportunities, and outside exposure is limited to those who are engaged enough to seek the chances and engage in the activity, where then do new players begin to learn?

Many of the examples that have been provided are also unintentionally comparing the difference between same sex classes and co-ed classes. Griffin (1985) argued that boy to boy interaction in a same sex class would be structured much the same as would be expected in a co-ed class, with a tier forming whereby the lower ability are pushed to the side of game play and the higher ability group take on the roles of greatest importance within the game. This is most definitely what was witnessed in my PE class in England; however, there are obvious differences, such as the fact that the conflict occurred between people within what would be considered the same tier in terms of ability, with a significant difference being in the social tier instead. This develops the concept that the affective domain is distinct, separate from psychomotor, and plays just as important a role as either the psychomotor or cognitive domains. Once PE is no longer a required class there are a limited number of people who continue on in to grade 11 and 12 in Canada. These students are predominantly male, leaving maybe 4 or 5 girls in the cohort. In my experience, some of these girls are there for what they determine to be an easy grade, and others regularly skip the class, leaving just 2 or 3 who are engaged and ready to challenge their opponents regardless of gender. With so few females, it is difficult to imagine their presence causing many changes but it is certainly enough to cause questions and defeat common perceptions. This is what is most important because without challenge there is no opportunity for learning and change. In this sense, the co-ed atmosphere is most accepting of change within the affective domain, despite its challenges; but, it is the same sex classes that need the most obvious improvements, preferably from an early age, to create the most developed, effective, and well-rounded athletes and human beings.

After taking EPHE 452 through the University, and learning about some of the most influential learning models accessible by schools, I wonder what methods teachers will employ to encourage effective development of their students. First of all, I think it is important to consider that not all teachers are able to see the problems that are prevalent in today’s society regarding learning domains and the full development of a person, especially if, as Hopper and Sanford (2005) speculate, most PE teachers are those who enjoyed PE and playing sports, hence their immersion in PE teaching or coaching. These students are unlikely to have experienced, or at least realise that they witnessed challenges to the affective domain of one or more students within their classes. Few, if any of them, will have experienced the utter defeat of being jested or insulted, ignored or pushed over, and so will continue to imagine that it never happens in PE. These teachers are the ones who will need to be enlightened, as ugly as that may be, and then the work can begin to test the teacher.

I believe that one of the most powerful tools, one that creates a fair and open environment, is one developed by Siedentop, and published in 1994. This model, titled the Sports Education Model uses team affiliation and competition as a tool to establish motivated and co-operative student groups. The model works on a season approach, where the game is played for more than a few weeks at a time, with a final competitive event being the culminating task of the season. The Sports Education model emphasises individual roles that work together to create a functioning team, and encourages pomp and celebration at all stages of the process. What is most noticeable about this model is the fact that it spends a large portion of the time focused on team interaction, a purely affective area of learning, as well as realizing cognitive development in tactics, rules and decision making, and ultimately psychomotor improvement throughout the season, resulting in close individual and team games to conclude. The Sports Education model is a nearly flawless model to improve affective development in students and can be used for almost all ages in a wide range of different sports. Conveniently, Sports Education also can be used in co-ed settings and helps to diminish the gradient between boys and girls. In observed settings girls enjoy their roles intertwined within the team, and feel that they are better appreciated by the whole team in this setting (Hastie, 1998).

Having used personal reflections of events and models employed in the current school systems in both England and Canada, I hope to have demonstrated some of the deficiencies that are sustained still, and that have resulted or may result in the creation of a population of adults that are unmotivated about physical activity and that are unable to express themselves in a manner that is either appropriate or acceptable. I know from experience that some of the people that I spent my entire school education with (in England) are unlikely to progress to further education, to a meaningful or accomplishing job, and part of the reason is their inability to process and deal with situations requiring co-operation, positive attitudes, or customary values. Instead, they have become bitter, unenthusiastic and inactive adults who continue to struggle in group situations and with others who may seem threatening to them, or who they cannot command or control. They will continue to be short of a fully matured and developed adult, despite education, opportunity and accessibility. Finally, I believe, one method that could be used as a tool for increasing the affective domain in school aged children involved in physical education is the implementation of a Sports Education model in classes from a young age. I think that the earlier this is started, the more comfortable students will be when interacting with each other, the better able they will be to provide constructive, and not hurtful, criticism and the more able they will be to work with their peers in a positive way. There is also hope that if the environment is more inviting for all, then physical education can become an accepted part of all students lives again, and daily physical activity guidelines will be met with no concern and the growing population will continue to flourish in good health and with the necessary skills to cohabitate peacefully with the rest of the world.

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