The Role of Physical Education in Promoting the Mental Health and Well-Being of Adolescents: The Perception of Maltese Physical Education Teachers and Sports Lecturers

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Abstract: Statistics published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2020 state that an estimated one out of every seven adolescents worldwide suffers from a mental health condition. In an era which places mental health and well-being (MHWB) on top of international agendas and policies, it is important to now focus on how to implement preventive measures. Schools can be an effective setting but unfortunately interventions in schools still only target diagnosed cases. Physical activity (PA) has been proven as an effective tool in addressing MHWB and it is mostly during physical education (PE) lessons that adolescents in schools get exposed to PA. However there is a lack of programmes and innovations that target the MHWB of students through PE. This study aims at addressing this gap by initially identifying the perception of local PE teachers and sports lecturers about the role of PE in promoting MHWB. A constructive grounded theory approach was adopted for this study in which four PE teachers and sports lecturers co-constructed knowledge with the researcher. A conceptual model emerged from an initial analytical framework that analysed the PE scenario, the pedagogical practices implemented to address the current diverse scenario, and the resulting consequences and outcomes in relation to MHWB. The model revolves around the casual atmosphere which characterises the PE lesson and which leads to the development of a relationship of trust between the students and the teacher. If the practices implemented address the students’ specific needs and preferences as well as equip them with life, carry-over skills, then PE can be a catalyst in addressing the MHWB of adolescents.

Keywords: mental health and well-being (MHWB); physical education (PE); differentiated teaching; pedagogical practices; flourishing individual; grounded theory

Background to Study

In the context of rising concerns over adolescent mental health issues (Danese and Smith 2020; Ministry for Health 2019; Parkin and Long 2020) there has never been a more pertinent time for concerted efforts to transform the provision of physical education (PE). As part of the National Curriculum for primary and secondary school children internationally (EU 2016; MEDE 2018; UNESCO 2015a), PE is often advocated as an activity area that can make a significant contribution to the wider education and holistic development of adolescents (Bailey et al. 2009; Hardman and Green 2011; Harris 2018; OECD 2019). Beyond the unquestionable expectation to support pupils in developing their physical competencies, PE in recent years is also believed to play a key part in supporting pupils’ mental health and well-being (MHWB) (ibid.). Mental health is considered vital in the everyday functioning and well-being of the individual, as it is associated with work productivity, effectiveness of learning and development of social relationships, all of which are synonymous with quality PE (Huppert and So 2013). This discourse has caused further institutional challenges amongst PE teachers (Morgan and Hansen 2008) with
contemporary PE curricula encouraging pedagogies that focus on the students’ strengths, instead of attempting to present only preventative measures (Lynch 2019; Quennerstedt 2019). Such practices are needed in a way that not only statemented students benefit but the whole student population, who at different degrees is affected by a multitude of mental health issues experienced within their individual context (Garcia-Carrion et al. 2019; O’Toole 2016).

A growing line of inquiry proves that physical activity (PA) can have a positive effect on mental health (MH) in adolescents (Harris 2018; Stubbs et al. 2018). Mental skills training programmes have been used effectively in sports for several years (Abela et al. 2021; Diment 2014; Neff 2018). Yet, there is a dire lack of programmes and innovations that are designed specifically for addressing the MHWB of young people within PE curriculum provision (Røset et al. 2020), which is the channel through which schools expose adolescents to PA (Silva et al. 2018). Additionally, certain aspects of the content, the organization, and the delivery of the subject are considered as being discriminatory and as leaving a negative impact on the students’ mental health and well-being (Alfrey and Gard 2019; Cale et al. 2020; Smith 2020).

**Literature Review**

As shown in the literature map (Figure 1), this review explores the reframing of the definition of health with a particular emphasis on mental health and discusses the general purpose of PE as explained at policy level. To identify how and whether this purpose is being fulfilled, an analysis of the different discourses about PE within educational policies and of contemporary curricula will complete this initial review.

**Introduction to the Context**

The wider vision of the ‘Future of Education and Skills 2030’ (OECD 2019) includes physical and mental health, together with social, physical, and psychological skills as core foundations within educational systems. Within such a vision, it is crucial that the potential of PE in playing a full role in future holistic curricula is understood since previous studies have shown that PE is held accountable for all aspects of human development in a way that matches no other curricular subject (Bailey et al. 2009). Providing students with life carry-over skills which can be utilized throughout the experience at school and beyond will fulfil the concept of quality education as described in contemporary policies (UNESCO 2015b). Even the link between health and educational systems is being constantly favoured but still schools have not yet established whether their role is that of being a site for prevention or a site for intervention (O’Toole 2016). This can be mostly attributed to mental health promotion in schools that can act as crucial settings in relation to MHWB but are still receiving insufficient attention due to confused ideas regarding what defines mental health.

**Redefining and Reframing MHWB**

This new emphasis on well-being gave rise to different interpretations on how to exactly define it. The previous hedonic approach (Kahneman et al. 1999) describes well-being as an experience of happiness and pain avoidance, while critics of this approach maintain that well-being is multi-dimensional and should not be only linked to happiness. The eudaemonic approach (Ryff and Singer 2008; Waterman et al. 2010) sees well-being as the experience of self-realization, self-fulfillment and meaning during actual life experiences. To avoid the misunderstanding brought forward with these two approaches, Huppert and So (2009)
came up with the concept of the flourishing individual to define well-being; an individual whose life is a combination of both happiness and effective functioning. To achieve this, it is important to Dodge et al. (2012) to set the right contexts to help the individual create an equilibrium between one’s own physical, social, and psychological internal resources and the physical, social, and psychological challenges one faces in life (Dodge et al. 2012). This equilibrium will lead to an increase in well-being, subsequently resulting in positive mental health.

The relationship between mental health and well-being is now stronger since it is evident that mental health is not just a pathological state to be cured by medicines. A review of international studies confirms that mental health plays a vital role in the everyday functioning and well-being of the individual as it is associated with work productivity, effectiveness of learning, and development of social relationships (Huppert and So 2009). Nowadays, it is crucial to understand both the role of mental health in relation to the development of the sole individual and its contribution towards social and contextual issues (Mills 2018). This way of viewing mental health, which until recently had been described as an invisible problem (Chambers 2010), is now included with prominence in the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals after continuous criticism of it being omitted from the Millennium Development Goals (Miranda and Patel 2005). Apart from policy discourse, mental health interventions must now be situated within community development and within different contexts and realities experienced throughout the whole life course (Mills 2018), including within educational settings.

![Preliminary Literature Map](image-url)

**Figure 1:** Preliminary Literature Map
When discussing students’ well-being, the World Education Forum (UNESCO 2015b) listed health as a prerequisite for development and suggests that both the physical and psychosocial pressures experienced by students need to be addressed within the educational context. Contemporary discussions evolve around the importance of introducing mental health literacy within educational institutions. In the past years, mental health support was given mainly to students who suffered from mental disorders or who demonstrated unacceptable behaviours (Atkins et al. 2010; Garcia-Carrion et al. 2019). An analysis of mental health provision in schools (Atkins et al. 2010) confirms that the services offered are tangential and not at the core of the educational process. This reinforces the misconception about what mental health is and the wrong attitude in tackling problems, with the system focusing more on symptom reduction within targeted students than on the improved functioning of the whole school population (Atkins et al. 2010; Garcia-Carrion et al. 2019; O’Toole 2016). Such interventions only benefit targeted students even though statistics confirm that there are a multitude of mental health issues affecting students within the interactions experienced within a school context (Garcia-Carrion et al. 2019; O’Toole 2016).

Mental health problems amongst the wider school’s population are mostly associated with tension and anxiety caused by examinations and assessments (Van Loon et al. 2019). On the other hand, social stressors must also be taken into consideration, such as peer, parental, and media pressures, with teachers assuming the role of natural bridges to reach out to students (Atkins and Rodger 2016). The lack of specialized mental health personnel in many schools (Sharp et al. 2016) naturally leads to the next possible solution: that of having competent and trained teachers who implement effective pedagogical approaches to help address these issues. What is required is that within the school context, there is a redesigning of the pedagogical approach around the wider definition of mental health. Teachers must be given the opportunity to implement a pedagogy that supports interactions and leads to social-emotional learning skills amongst all students which can be transferred to outside the school context (Atkins et al. 2010; Garcia-Carrion et al. 2019).

It is within this new scenario of an education that prepares for the outside-school context and a wider concept of what policies state about the knowledge, skills, and competences that must be transmitted to learners, that the purpose and place of PE within curricula should be analyzed and evaluated. With quality education considered a potent way to improve an individual’s health (UNESCO 2015b) and physical and mental well-being considered as preconditions for successful learning (European Commission 2016), it is a necessity to analyze the current thinking and the purpose of PE, the subject which addresses all domains related to human development.

The Purpose of PE: The Different Discourses

When designing a PE curriculum, influential factors are taken in consideration, including social, political, and economic contexts, together with the motivations of society (Mitchell 2016). The rise in sedentary lifestyle statistics together with increases in conditions linked to a lack of physical activity, such as obesity, have pushed further the health discourse within PE. This led to models being developed from a public health viewpoint, such as the SPARK model (McKenzie et al. 2009) which addressed both health and fitness, and motor and sport skills development. Aligning PE so closely to a public health agenda dangerously affects the role of the PE teachers, making them more accountable and placing them in the public eye (Gard 2014) especially in the fight against childhood obesity. Fingers started to be pointed at teachers as statistics related to obesity kept soaring, with PE programmes in schools being described as ineffective (ibid.). PE teachers’ needs need a more educational
approach (Ennis 2011), focusing mostly on learning which is relevant to the students’ contexts, needs, and preferences. The goals of a PE curriculum must address the whole child perspective and a variety of goals (Ennis 2011; NASPE 2004), with physical activity definitely occupying a central role but not the ultimate one. This salutogenic approach (Kirk 2018: 72) presents a positive focus on factors that support health and well-being through regular PA, in contrast with previous pathogenic views that focused on the risks that a sedentary life could bring. Through such positive approaches, PE can be the tool that helps students learn the importance of and prioritize participation in PA, and not focus solely on reducing obesity rates (Bowler 2019).

This positioning of health within the PE curriculum has led to various interpretations due to the wider definition of health, that of including the physical, mental, and social well-being of the individual. When comparing contemporary curricula to past ones, it is evident that there is now a broader and deeper idea of what aspects of health can be tackled through the PE curriculum. The 2019 Canadian curriculum, for example, has moved from content related to life skills mentioned in the previous one (published 2018), to social-emotional learning skills grouped in a single strand aimed at being integrated with other components of health and PE (physical fitness, movement skills, concepts, strategies, and safety). In the Australian curriculum there is an interrelation between personal, social, community health, knowledge of movement, and PA (ACARA 2015). These curricula aim to help students develop their full potential, not only in the traditional physical aspects, but also in relation to mental health which touches all components of development (Ontario Public Service 2019).

This study aims at providing initial solutions to the criticism towards current PE implementation through a discussion with local PE teachers about areas that are still not fully explored. It would be interesting to explore the teachers’ own perceptions about mental health, which mental skills could be developed through PE and what interventions are needed to identify a pedagogical approach which promotes MHWB through PE, on the same level of effectiveness as PA. Based on this, the objectives of this study aim at filling an important gap related to the role of PE in schools’ contexts vis-à-vis MHWB, assessing the need for the development of a novel and effective pedagogy that addresses the MHWB of students and evaluating both enablers and barriers that might influence the embedding of such novel practice within PE. The research question asked was: What is the perception of PE teachers and sports lecturers about the role of PE in the enhancement of MHWB amongst adolescents? A qualitative investigation was carried out through four semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring the perception of teachers about what defines MHWB, which pedagogical practices are the most effective at addressing it, and to which extent PE can contribute towards its promotion. An inductive, comparative, and interactive approach (Charmaz 2008) throughout the whole research process led to the development of a conceptual model depicting the teachers’ perception about how PE can be used effectively to promote MHWB amongst adolescents.

**Research Methodology**

Educational research needs to take in consideration both the phenomenon under study (Morrison 2007) (MHWB through PE) and how this can be explored through the empowerment of actors (Poni 2014) (PE teachers and sports lecturers). An interpretivist worldview, as explained by Hammersley (2013), is appropriate to understand and explore the multiple perceptions of PE teachers and sports lecturers about MHWB and the role of PE in its development. There is no one specific reality (Lincoln and Guba 1989) waiting to be discovered and subsequently implemented by teachers. This constructivist ontology elevates the role of the researcher to that of an evaluator (Guba and Lincoln 2005).
Epistemologically, not only means that the researcher interacts, engages, and reflects with the participants to create knowledge (ibid.) but the appropriate research methods and tools must be applied to facilitate the participants’ participation and subsequently lead to the creation of new, applicable knowledge (Mertens 2017).

Opting for a qualitative methodology fit in with the interpretivist paradigm adopted, in that it presents complex views collected through interactions with participants (Creswell and Creswell 2018), and through which the researcher would make sense of the phenomenon under study (Punch 2009). Since the theme of MHWB within PE is still widely under-theorized (Andermo et al. 2020), this study required a strategy that led to the construction of conceptual understanding. Grounded theory (GT) is the most appropriate strategy to construct theory from the data collected (Birks and Mills 2015) through a continuous constructive journey between the participants and the researcher (Chun Tie et al. 2019). An analysis of the philosophical continuum onto which different grounded theorists positioned themselves (ibid.) led the theoretical sensitive researcher to opt for a constructivist grounded theory approach (CGT). Within a CGT approach, in contrast to a classical GT approach, it is recommended to start the study with an initial research question which can then be changed and developed once data starts unfolding (O’Connor et al. 2018). This research question served as a guideline to the research process and as a direction towards the choice of data collection methods, in this case semi-structured interviews. Keeping in mind the researcher’s role as a co-constructor of knowledge, a set of initial open-ended questions related to the perception of PE teachers about MHWB were asked to the participants before eventually narrowing towards this same concept within a school setting and this eventually led the discussion towards effective PE pedagogical practices through follow-up questions (Rubin and Rubin 2012).

The subjective nature of the study allowed for purposive sampling in the choice of participants (Campbell et al. 2020; Robinson 2014). The researcher’s involvement within the local PE teachers’ community of practice helped identify proficient and well-informed participants (Bernard 2002) willing, available, and ready to embark on this reflective journey (Palinkas et al. 2015). The four chosen participants were a PE teacher in a State secondary school (1S), a PE teacher in a Church secondary school (1C), a PE teacher in an independent secondary school (1I), and a sports lecturer in a post-secondary institution (1P). All aspects of the study were explained to the participants and an informed consent form was voluntary signed prior to the interviews. Due to the adoption of a GT approach, the participants’ participation did not end once the interview recording was over. Participants were aware that they could be called for subsequent interviews, not only for clarity purposes but also for the sake of clearly connecting analytical findings to the sources of data (Mills et al. 2006). CGT researchers must remain as faithful as possible to the experiences shared by the participants (Munhall 2001) throughout the whole data analysis process.

MAXQDA® software was used to analyze interviews and to elicit codes from the verbatim transcriptions. Throughout this coding process, analytic questions were asked to understand and define the main issues (Charmaz 2006). Following the CGT coding guidelines, initial coding, (line by line analysis while remaining open for all possible emerging data) preceded focused coding, with codes grouped according to similarities, leading to emerging salient categories (ibid.). Relationships between the different categories were specified and led to a conceptual model which will be discussed later in the analysis section. To ensure quality and rigour, the researcher ensured that the findings presented were credible, original, and useful (Charmaz 2014). Using memos throughout the whole data collection and analysis process, the researcher asked and answered questions while keeping in mind these evaluative criteria. According to Charmaz (2014) such questions make sure that the findings presented strong arguments (credibility), provided new insights (originality), made sense to all those interested in the area (resonance), and could be implemented (usefulness).
In a grounded theory study, ethical standards must be maintained throughout the whole research process. Participants provide information feeling reassured that the researcher will make good use of it (Corbin and Strauss, 2015), so it is the absolute responsibility of the researcher to behave in an ethical way towards the participants who agree to take part in a study (Rubin and Rubin 2012) from the very first meeting. The researcher followed the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) Research Ethics Policy and Procedure and ensured that the anonymity of the participants and their teaching context were respected throughout. A participant information letter including the main aims of the study, the methodology to be used and a request for consent was emailed to each participant. Identities and place of work of participants were known only to the researcher. Identification codes were given to the participants—1S, 1C, 1I, and 1P. This reassurance about maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of participants helped increase the reciprocal trust between the researcher and the participants (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

**Figure 2**: Co-construction of meaning through semi-structured interviews

**The Paradigm**

The knowledge obtained from the four interviews was grouped in three main categories which together give a clear snapshot of the current situation. Corbin and Strauss’ (2015) paradigm was used, with the researcher looking out for events and happenings (context and conditions), exploring how the participants gave meaning to these happenings (action-interaction) and identifying together with the participants the consequences. Related to the objectives of this study, consequences could be described as actual, wishful, or related to possible future interventions addressing the MHWB of students. Context and conditions, actions-interactions and consequences are not singular concepts, but reality confirms that contextual conditions can be from within the individual (the teacher) and influenced by the surrounding community (the educational community and system) while actions-interactions can be complex, especially when there are multiple actors involved (e.g. teachers, students, school administrations, policy makers). Figure 3 gives a detailed explanation of the initial analytical framework which led to the main categories and sub-categories, followed by Figure 4 which shows the paradigm of the concepts emerging from the four interviews explained in detail.
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**Figure 3:** Initial Analytical Framework

**Figure 4:** Paradigm of emerging concepts related to the perception of PE teachers about the link between PE and the MHWB of students
Discussion - Contextual Conditions

The Characteristics and Purpose of PE

As shown in Figure 3 and 4, both the purpose and the characteristics of PE directly affect the pedagogical practices implemented by PE teachers and sports lecturers. According to how the purpose of PE is depicted in international research and policies, these practices should aim at equipping students with knowledge and skills towards lifelong PA (the consequence) (Michael et al. 2018; McNamara et al. 2011; UNESCO 2015a). The participants of this study state that the purpose of PE should go beyond just lifelong PA. PE has the potential of developing the whole student—their physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being. For this to occur, PE teachers’ and sports lecturers’ philosophy must be that of addressing the holistic development of the student and to detach themselves from treating PE as an extension of competitive sport. The PE and sport debate is inevitable amongst teachers, lecturers, and other stakeholders (Ekberg 2021) with many PE teachers and sports lecturers being involved in sports after school hours. Teacher 1 said that certain aspects of sport, such as discipline, working in a team and focusing to reach a target, fit nicely within PE, but 1P added that despite this similarity, teachers and lecturers must continuously evaluate their practice so that the educational aspect of PE is maintained. 1S, who constantly advocates PE as the subject that prepares students for life, compares the outcomes of PE presented in the Learning Outcomes Framework in the form of progressive tasks (Ministry for Education and Employment 2018) to the daily challenges students will eventually face in life and that will make them grow.

These educational characteristics of PE must be experienced by students in a fun and casual atmosphere, described by the participants as the main ingredient for an effective learning experience. This conforms to studies which, over the years, explored the views of students in relation to the main purpose of PE. Enjoyment, fun, and leisure education are mentioned with prominence by adolescent students (Cothran and Ennis 1998; Smith and Parr 2007). In a very recent strong statement, students explained how the typical casual, fun atmosphere experienced during PE leads to a meaningful, relevant, and positively challenging experience (Lynch and Sargent 2020). The similarity of the teachers’ and the students’ views contrasts with that of policy and decision makers who, according to the participants, follow a pathogenic PE philosophy based only on the idea of preventing medical conditions, rather than a salutogenic one based on the whole well-being (Keyes 2014). This leads to extrinsic barriers which teachers face while attempting to fulfil the purpose of PE, and which eventually lead to intrinsic barriers and a confusion that ultimately affects teachers’ practices. The barriers mentioned by the participants are listed in Figure 5.

1P, who trains potential future PE teachers, explained how the systemic barriers have been influencing teachers for years and must be addressed, especially to avoid dampening the NQTs’ motivation. The attitude of the PE teacher directly affects the personal experience of students during PE and teachers must be creative to present a meaningful experience personal to each student (Beni et al. 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsupportive School Culture</th>
<th><strong>Extrinsic Barriers</strong></th>
<th>Intrinsic Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of PE knowledge by SMTs</td>
<td>Unclear syllabus</td>
<td>Unmotivated teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timetabling, facilities, and equipment issues</td>
<td>Repetitive choice of content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5: Barriers for PE purpose fulfilment**
When discussing the actual contexts and conditions in which students are experiencing PE, all participants described the current PE classrooms as being very diverse and inclusive. Whereas in other subjects mixed ability is nowadays the norm, in a PE class it is very important to understand first and foremost what diversity and ability imply. In international educational policies, inclusion and diversity issues are triggered by discussions about immigration (IOM 2019), gender equality (UN 2015), and special educational needs (UN 2006). Regarding the former, all participants mentioned the different nationalities (and languages) that have become a reality in local schools. 1I said that even though the PE content and PE pedagogical practices are quite similar worldwide, it is still difficult to integrate students coming from a different cultural background, with language being the main barrier. On the other hand, gender equality is not an issue amongst local PE teachers and students who according to 1S have both adapted very well to a co-educational setting. Regarding special educational needs, the way each individual teacher defines what is a special educational need led to different comments from the different participants. 1P said that diverse needs and abilities are much more evident in PE than in other subjects where the main needs are mostly related to learning difficulties or behaviour problems. PE teachers are in favour of an inclusive approach but there is a consensus that addressing different needs and abilities in PE is very challenging (Jarvis et al. 2017). Students with weight problems, students suffering from conditions, and students with mobility problems might encounter problems when developing their physical well-being through PE. 1C mentioned the contrast between students who are skillful and those who lack basic fitness ability. Students who are not skillful tend to give up easily, while students who are afraid of challenges tend to back off when something new is introduced. In such situations, not only physical well-being will suffer, but even emotional, psychological, and social well-being. 1I and 1S also mentioned the lack of motivation and apathy shown by certain students due to the casual atmosphere synonymous to PE. All three teachers said that this diversity constantly influences the content they choose for their lessons and reflects itself in the number of syllabus outcomes reached by the end of the year.

Together with the content and the achievement of skills related to PE, the various developmental issues common to adolescence must be taken into consideration by teachers when the focus is the MHWB of students. These issues continue to augment diversity amongst students and give rise to a new debate of whether teachers are equipped with knowledge on how to intervene. The following section explains which contextual and intrinsic issues and situations teachers believe affect the MHWB of adolescent students. Subsequently, the participants highlight practices which they deem are effective in addressing the different aspects which make up the diverse PE class.

Pedagogical Interventions to Address Diversity

All this diversity within one PE classroom stresses the importance of having creative teachers who differentiate their practice. Jarvis (2015) identifies three pillars leading to effective differentiation in PE: an inclusive philosophy, an understanding of differences, and flexible practices. 1P, the sports lecturer, said that teachers need to be trained how to question their own philosophy regarding the equal treatment of students. This must be ongoing throughout teachers’ careers as research proves that implementing a one-size fits all approach in PE limits the role and performance of students (Metzler 2011). Figure 6 shows the main aspects identified by the four participants as crucial to catering for the individual needs and preferences of students.
Division of groups: 1C said that grouping students for the various activities presents a dilemma for teachers who in turn should take time in a new scholastic year analyzing students’ potential and readiness (Jarvis et al. 2017). 1S said that through experience, a teacher learns when the groups should be chosen by the teacher and when students should be allowed to take decisions amongst themselves. Using group work in PE is a good build-up which addresses the social domain but the questions to be asked must concern whether students are ready to work in mixed-ability or same-ability groups (ibid.). 1C also added that using the appropriate language will help give a clear explanation of the teacher’s decision to the students. All this depends on the content and the learning outcomes planned to be addressed during the lesson.

Choice of content: Choosing activities according to the preferences and needs of students will help achieve the purpose of creating a fun, enjoyable PE experience. Fun in PE is central to a meaningful experience (Smith and Parr 2007) and studies confirm that, for students, having fun is much more crucial than participating for health’s sake (Hemming 2007). Participants said that the flexibility of the syllabus allows this choice, though certain areas which students like are still omitted from it. 1S, who receives lots of support from the respective school’s SMT, commented that together with the rest of the PE teachers, they decided to introduce innovative areas to their students through the adaptation of the learning outcomes listed in the syllabus.

Designing of activities: Once the content is selected, the next important consideration is the type of activities to be included. All participants agree that presenting challenging activities in a progressive way is effective not only in targeting physical and skill outcomes, but also the psychological and emotional well-being of the students. Using a variety of equipment and resources to carry out activities encourages participation and stimulates interest. 1S explained how setting reachable targets and giving students equipment to use and assess their own performance with is a meaningful practice. 1S added that explaining to the students that diversity is a quality to learn from and not a barrier to learning helps increase the motivation to try out challenge after challenge until the full potential is reached. Goal setting and dealing with challenges are major mental skills that can be developed through PE, both of which have a direct effect on the MHWB of students.

Adolescence Issues and Teachers’ Interventions

The MAXQDA® code matrix browser (Figure 7) depicts the issues associated with adolescents which PE teachers believe increase diversity within the PE class, affect students’ performance during the lesson, and their overall well-being. During the focused coding process (Charmaz 2014), the issues mentioned by the teachers fitted in three main categories: extrinsic issues, intrinsic issues, and issues related to the actual PE lesson. All the issues shown above are common to the adolescence phase where the individual is in...
the process of establishing an identity, forming opinions, and taking decisions (Ward et al. 2017). The constant pressure and expectations from parents, the educational system, friends, and social media might result in students who feel lonely, lack self-confidence, as well as being anxious and confused. 1C mentioned how PE can also be the cause of certain MHWB issues especially for introverted students who are constantly left out by their peers, those who lack skills, and those who are passive and show no interest in the subject. Participant teachers commented that even though these issues are on the increase, PE teachers lack awareness and appropriate training on how to intervene both through effective pedagogical practices and MHWB interventions.

![Code Matrix Browser – MHWB issues affecting adolescents (participants’ perceptions)](image)

**Figure 7: Code Matrix Browser – MHWB issues affecting adolescents (participants’ perceptions)**

**Teachers’ Interventions to Address MHWB Through PE**

Identifying the different needs of students brings teachers to the next step: intervention. Even though the participants all agree that awareness regarding MHWB has increased during the past years, still they lack training on how to address it. 1P blamed this lack of training on the current working conditions for teachers, which allow little to nearly no time for continuous professional development. Even though the participating teachers believe that the role of the teacher in addressing the MHWB of the student is critical, interventions in schools are mainly dealt with by those considered as experts or specialists. These mainly include guidance teachers, counsellors and, in the case of the independent school, a pastoral team. This pathogenic attitude which schools use to intervene through these specialists clashes with how PE teachers define MHWB. Participating teachers define MHWB as being a collage of concepts, where the individual feels good, functions well, and is happy (Agenor et al. 2017), a definition that matches the teachers’ idea of the purpose of PE. Teachers must be the agents who help all students flourish and feel good about life and this can be achieved through a relationship of reciprocal trust between the teacher and the student and the teaching of life skills that aid the MHWB of students.
When asked to point out effective practices they make use of, 1I and 1P both confirmed that discussing critically with adolescents, helping them set goals and allowing them to come up with solutions themselves, is possible. 1S, who within the school context notices students who are sad and anxious, believes in building trust and developing self-confidence by making the students feel safe. 1P said that the PE teacher must make use of teachable moments and focus on giving continuous encouraging feedback, applying modifications, and making good use of questioning techniques to stimulate interest. All participants agree that these teachable moments, paired with effective pedagogical practices, will equip students with skills for life including resilience, decision-making, goal-setting, and emotional control (Quinton et al. 2021), apart from the feel-good, fun factor associated both with PE and with well-being.

Actions and Reactions: Perception Into Practice

Through a grounded theory approach, a conceptual model (Figure 8) was developed based on the participants’ perceptions. This model emerged mainly from the Actions and Reactions domain of the paradigm where participants shared pedagogical practices and personal interventions which they deem effective within their educational setting. The constant reflection, comparison, and sorting of the analytical memos collected throughout data collection and data analysis led the participants and the researcher to identify the potential of the PE lesson in promoting MHWB. Through the data generated and collected, a core category—Casual Atmosphere during PE—was identified. Together with this core category, a set of concepts emerging from it (Birks and Mills 2015) and from the perception of the four participants gives scope for further potential exploration. The casual atmosphere surrounding the PE lesson is ideal for teachers or lecturers to build a relationship of trust with students. The atmosphere also facilitates the identification of students’ individual characters and their needs and desires. Teachers or lecturers can adapt their pedagogy and intervention in a way that, apart from the learning of content, students get exposed to life skills which can be carried over to other contexts outside school.

![Figure 8: Conceptual Model - Teachers’ perception on how PE can positively affect the MHWB of students](image)

Studies confirm that regular PA has a positive effect on the MHWB of adolescents (Biddle and Asare 2011; Bize et al, 2007; Janssen and LeBlanc 2010) and, taking in consideration that research is now exploring what contexts are the most effective in promoting MHWB through PA, the PE lesson can truly be a catalyst in this promotion if the right context is presented. The PE teachers and sports lecturer confirm that a constant positive PA
experience in a context familiar to adolescents (in this case, the PE lesson) is directly related to mental health benefits (Biddle et al. 2019; White et al. 2017).

**Consequences and Outcomes: The Way Forward – Making PE the Catalyst?**

With PE being a compulsory subject for adolescents in secondary schools and being the only subject that uses sport and physical activity as the main learning tools, it consequently provides the right context through which the MHWB of students can be addressed. During the analysis process, the suggestions have been grouped in logistical, pedagogical, and personal interventions. **Logistical suggestions** include more weekly PE lessons and more investment in facilities and equipment. Regarding the **pedagogical aspect**, teachers suggest that the syllabus should only be there as a guideline for the teacher to be able to choose and adapt activities according to what is relevant to the students. **When it comes to personal interventions** by the PE teacher, 1P questions the extent to which a PE teacher should assume responsibility; a doubt that can be erased if teachers are given appropriate, continuous training, especially in how to deal with issues that are now on the increase such as identity confusion, body image issues, self-harm, and loneliness. Professional collaboration should also be encouraged to ensure the setting up of a whole-school approach and policy which support what is being done and hopefully achieved through PE.

**Conclusion**

The findings show that a casual atmosphere in which the students’ individual needs and preferences are addressed, where the feel-good factor is experienced and a pedagogy that encourages the development of life skills is implemented by teachers, sets the ideal setting for meaningful learning to occur. Continuous training for PE teachers on novel ways of teaching PE implementing life skills is the way forward to ensure that the whole adolescent population benefits from such interventions.

**Limitations**

Being an initial research study with four participants, it would be hasty for the researcher to confirm that theoretical saturation has been truly achieved (Birks and Mills 2015). The conceptual model that emerged can be refined and elaborated (Charmaz 2006) by applying theoretical sampling to gather more data related to current practices and interventions which have a positive influence on the MHWB of students. It would have been interesting to interview a PE Head of Department, whose role, apart from teaching PE, also includes that of curriculum developer, professional collaborator with other teachers, and mentor of NQTs. Another limitation was related to the timing of the interviews. The Covid-19 pandemic brought multiple changes in the way PE was being taught and how people view MHWB. At instances, the responses of the participants might have been influenced by their experience during these last two scholastic years.

**Implications for Stakeholders**

This study has various implications for both directly involved stakeholders (PE teachers, heads of department, students) and indirectly involved stakeholders (policy makers and future employers). The characteristics of PE and the pedagogical practices implemented by teachers form the ideal context to promote the MHWB of adolescents. Table 1 depicts the actions and interventions which stakeholders need to work on:
PE teachers and sports lecturers | Continuous assessment of their pedagogical practices and continuously ensuring that the needs and preferences of students are being addressed.
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PE educational officers and heads of department | The provision of continuous professional development for PE teachers to ensure that all teachers are familiar with novel approaches to teaching PE.
The encouragement of further research regarding the possibility of implementing MST within PE, in the same way as it is being implemented effectively in competitive sport.
---|---
Secondary students and post-secondary sports students | Receiving a meaningful PE experience that equips them with life, carry-over skills applicable to different contexts.
---|---
Education policy makers | Promote quality education which is now a stand-alone UN goal for sustainable development and which aims at equipping students with life skills (UN 2015).
---|---
Future employers | Having employees equipped with job-related, life, and mental skills ensures productivity, workplace satisfaction, and reduction of stress-related conditions (LaMontagne et al. 2014).

**Table 1: Implications for Stakeholders**

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Having established that PE can be a catalyst in addressing the MHWB of students, the next step should be the development of a novel instructional model. Instructional models in PE aim at addressing learning outcomes which match not only what content the students should learn and how, but also in what ways these outcomes can be applied in other contexts (Gurvitch and Metzler 2013). For this teaching approach to be relevant for teachers and students, it should be developed in collaboration with PE teachers. Ongoing evaluation, modifications, and discussions on what is the most effective way to implement it must be carried out based on the different contexts and the diversity of PE classes. Furthermore, research could focus on what relevant continuous professional training is needed by PE teachers to help them address the needs and preferences of their students while presenting them with content relevant for life and for their well-being.

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