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Review Article

The Role of Physical Education in Developing Students' Motivation and Lifelong Physical Activity: A Pedagogical Perspective

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Authors' Contribution: A – Study design; B – Data collection; C – Statistical analysis; D – Manuscript Preparation; E – Funds Collection

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Abstract

Objectives. This conceptual narrative review examines how motivation functions as a structural mechanism linking pedagogical approaches in physical education to lifelong physical activity.

Materials and Methods. Through a selective and interpretive synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and models-based practice, this review develops an integrative conceptual model.

Results. The synthesis demonstrates that specific features of pedagogical models (e.g., autonomy support in TGfU, affiliation in Sport Education, and peer support in Cooperative Learning) satisfy the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Simultaneous satisfaction of these needs facilitates the internalization of motivational regulation—from controlled to more autonomous forms (identified, integrated, and intrinsic regulation)—which, in turn, promotes sustained engagement in physical activity beyond the school context. Hybrid integrative models demonstrate greater potential because they create coherent learning environments that reinforce these processes, whereas traditional and single-model approaches often lead only to short-term compliance and limited behavioral transfer.

Conclusions. Transitioning toward system-oriented hybrid frameworks, with motivation positioned as a central organizing mechanism, is essential for physical education to promote autonomous motivation and lifelong physical activity habits. The review identifies the conditions under which this mechanism operates effectively or fails, thereby providing a conceptual foundation for curriculum reform and future research.

Keywords: physical education, student motivation, lifelong physical activity, Self-Determination Theory, models-based practice, hybrid pedagogical models, pedagogical integration, sport pedagogy.

Introduction

Physical inactivity remains a major global public health challenge, with evidence consistently showing that physical activity patterns established during school years exert a significant influence on lifelong habits. Physical education occupies a unique position within educational systems, offering not only opportunities for physical development but also a critical context for shaping students' motivation and long-term behavioral choices (Bailey, 2006; Kirk & Haerens, 2014).

Nevertheless, a persistent gap exists between the stated goals of physical education and actual long-term participation rates in physical activity (Telama, 2009; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). This discrepancy suggests that traditional instructional approaches often fall short in fostering the motivational foundations required for sustained engagement beyond the school environment. This gap indicates a need for a system-level reconceptualization rather than incremental pedagogical adjustments.

Contemporary sport pedagogy emphasizes that the quality of pedagogical interactions and learning environments, rather than the sheer volume of physical activity, determines the long-term impact of physical education (Quennerstedt et al., 2011; Casey & MacPhail, 2018). Research grounded in Self-Determination Theory highlights that educational

experiences supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness are associated with higher intrinsic motivation and greater likelihood of continued physical activity in adulthood (Chen, 2014; Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009). However, many school-based programs continue to rely on teacher-centered and performance-oriented models that prioritize short-term compliance over autonomous motivation (Kirk, 2013; Perlman, 2012).

A critical review of the literature reveals a fundamental fragmentation: motivational theories, pedagogical models, and long-term behavioral outcomes are frequently examined in isolation rather than as interconnected components of a unified system (Hastie & Wallhead, 2016; Harvey et al., 2020). This lack of systemic integration limits the capacity of physical education to translate positive school experiences into enduring physical activity habits.

The present conceptual narrative review addresses this gap by synthesizing contemporary pedagogical and motivational literature. Its primary aim is to explicate how specific pedagogical models, through targeted motivational processes rooted in Self-Determination Theory, influence student motivation and promote (or fail to promote) lifelong physical activity under defined conditions. Rather than treating motivation as a peripheral outcome, this synthesis repositions it as a structural mechanism that organizes the relationship between learning environments, behavioral internalization, and long-term engagement. Particular attention is given to the potential of hybrid integrative models that combine elements of Sport Education, Teaching Games for Understanding, and Cooperative Learning while embedding SDT principles. This review develops a mechanism-based conceptual model that explains the specific processes through which these pedagogical features lead to (or fail to produce) lifelong physical activity under defined conditions. Accordingly, this review explicitly develops a mechanism-based conceptual model that integrates pedagogical features, motivational processes, and behavioral outcomes within a unified analytical framework.

Materials and Methods

This study is designed as a conceptual narrative review aimed at developing a theoretical understanding and an integrative conceptual model of the relationship between pedagogical approaches, motivational processes, and lifelong physical activity. It does not claim to be a systematic review; therefore, no formal PRISMA protocol, flow diagram, or quality appraisal of studies was applied. Instead, the review is based on a selective and interpretive synthesis of key theoretical and empirical literature grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and models-based practice in physical education.

Results

Theoretical Background and Comparative Synthesis of Pedagogical Approaches

Physical education has evolved from a performance-oriented discipline toward a pedagogically driven field that emphasizes motivational and behavioral outcomes. Early frameworks primarily focused on skill acquisition and physical performance, whereas contemporary research highlights the role of pedagogical processes in shaping long-term engagement in physical activity (Bailey, 2006; Kirk & Haerens, 2014).

Analysis of motivation-related studies demonstrates that student engagement is strongly associated with intrinsic motivational factors rather than external performance pressures. Environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness lead to higher levels of participation and persistence (Chen, 2014; Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009). However, traditional teaching models continue to dominate practice, often prioritizing control and standardized outcomes, which negatively affect students' motivational responses (Perlman, 2012; Kirk, 2013).

Further analysis of pedagogical models shows that student-centered teaching and model-based practice significantly enhance engagement and learning outcomes by promoting active participation, decision-making, and personal relevance (Hastie & Wallhead, 2016; Casey & MacPhail, 2018). Nevertheless, these models are frequently applied in isolation, resulting in context-dependent and inconsistent effectiveness. This fragmentation results in limited scalability and reduced transferability across educational contexts.

Longitudinal studies confirm that positive experiences in physical education are associated with higher levels of physical activity in adulthood, although such outcomes depend heavily on pedagogical quality rather than mere participation (Telama, 2009; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008).

Although individual pedagogical models demonstrate positive effects on student motivation and engagement, their isolated application results in only partial satisfaction of basic psychological needs, leading to inconsistent long-term outcomes. This fragmentation highlights the need for a system-level synthesis that integrates specific pedagogical features with motivational processes to explain not only what works, but why and under which conditions it leads to lifelong physical activity.

A synthesis of existing studies reveals a fundamental fragmentation within the field: motivational theories, pedagogical models, and long-term behavioral outcomes are often examined separately rather than as interconnected elements of a unified system. This lack of integration limits the transformative potential of physical education. The present analytical synthesis, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining the structural role of motivation and the advantages of hybrid integrative models in bridging theory and practice.

The categorization presented in Table 1 is derived from recurring patterns identified across the reviewed studies and reflects a comparative analytical synthesis rather than isolated evaluation.

Conceptual Mechanism of Pedagogical Influence

The present review conceptualizes motivation as a structural mechanism that links pedagogical approaches in physical education to lifelong physical activity through three specific processes: (1) specific pedagogical features of the models shape the learning climate; (2) these features satisfy or frustrate the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as defined by Self-Determination

Table 1. Comparative Evaluation of Pedagogical Models Based on Motivational and Behavioral Outcomes

Approach	Strengths	Limitations	Impact on Student Motivation	Impact on Lifelong Physical Activity
Traditional Approach	Structured lessons, easy management, skill focus	Low engagement, passive learning, performance pressure	Low (mainly extrinsic)	Low (weak transfer)
Student-Centered Approach	High engagement, autonomy, and personal relevance	Requires advanced teacher training	High (autonomy & competence)	Moderate to High
Sport Education (SE)	Team affiliation, responsibility, and holistic development	Time-consuming, may favor competitive students	Very High (relatedness & belonging)	High (sport culture)
Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU)	Tactical learning, problem-solving, decision-making	Needs basic game knowledge	Very High (cognitive autonomy + competence)	High (enjoyment & transfer)
Cooperative Learning (CL)	Social skills, inclusivity, peer support	Grouping and monitoring challenges	High (strongly relatedness)	Moderate to High
Hybrid Integrative Models (SE + TGfU + CL with explicit SDT principles)	Coherent outcomes address all SDT needs	Complex planning, high teacher demand	Very High (simultaneous need satisfaction)	Highest potential

Note: Synthesized by the authors based on Casey & MacPhail (2018), Hastie & Wallhead (2016), and Harvey et al. (2020)

Theory; and (3) the degree of need satisfaction determines the internalization of motivational regulations along the SDT continuum (from external and controlled regulation toward identified, integrated, and intrinsic regulation). This internalization process, in turn, promotes behavioral internalization, whereby physical activity becomes personally endorsed and is maintained voluntarily beyond the school context. More specifically, the mechanism operates through distinct and model-dependent pathways:

- autonomy-supportive instructional strategies (e.g., choice provision, student leadership in Sport Education) primarily facilitate autonomy satisfaction;
- tactical problem-solving tasks (as in TGfU) enhance perceived competence through cognitive engagement;
- and structured peer interaction (as in Cooperative Learning) strengthens relatedness via social interdependence.

These differentiated pathways jointly regulate the depth and quality of motivational internalization, thereby determining whether behavioral engagement is transient or sustained beyond the school context.

Specific pedagogical models contribute differently to this mechanism. Sport Education primarily supports relatedness through team affiliation, persisting roles, and seasonal structures, while also offering autonomy via student leadership opportunities. Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) mainly enhances competence and cognitive autonomy by emphasizing tactical problem-solving and decision-making rather than rote skill drills. Cooperative Learning strengthens relatedness and social competence through structured group interdependence and peer accountability.

When these models are implemented in isolation, need satisfaction remains partial, often resulting in only moderate internalization (e.g., identified regulation) and limited transfer to out-of-school physical activity. In contrast, hybrid integrative models (combining elements of SE, TGfU, and CL with explicit SDT principles) enable simultaneous satisfaction of all three needs within a coherent learning climate. This simultaneous satisfaction creates synergistic effects and mutual reinforcement, leading to deeper motivational internalization and a higher likelihood of lifelong physical activity.

The mechanism fails or produces only short-term compliance when need frustration occurs (for example, under controlling teaching styles, excessive performance pressure, or lack of student choice) or when only one or two needs are addressed. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual mechanism linking pedagogical design, motivational processes, and long-term behavioral outcomes.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the mechanism operates through sequential and interdependent processes:

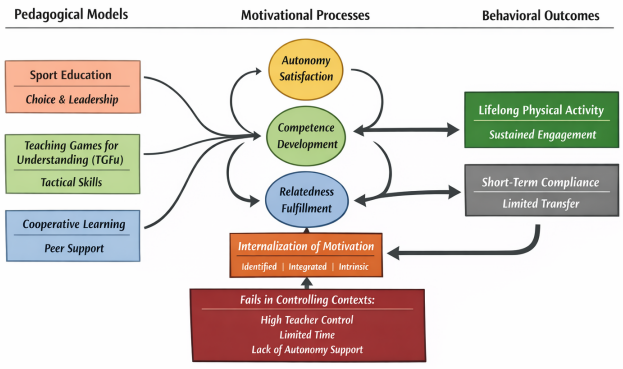

Fig. 1. Conceptual mechanism linking pedagogical models, motivational processes, and lifelong physical activity

pedagogical features influence the satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs, which subsequently affects the internalization of motivational regulation and the development of autonomous motivation. These processes determine whether students demonstrate sustained engagement in physical activity or only temporary compliance within instructional settings. In the long term, stable autonomous regulation increases the likelihood of lifelong physical activity participation.

Pedagogical Features → Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction/Frustration → Internalization of Motivational Regulation and Autonomous Motivation → Sustained Engagement in Physical Activity → Lifelong Physical Activity (or short-term compliance).

Discussion

The analytical synthesis challenges the dominant activity-based paradigm in physical education by demonstrating that sustained participation is less a direct outcome of lesson volume and more a consequence of how pedagogical structures systematically support student motivation (Bailey, 2006; Kirk & Haerens, 2014; Chen, 2014). This interpretation shifts the focus toward the qualitative design of learning environments, where motivation serves as a structural mechanism that facilitates or constrains long-term behavioral continuity.

The proposed structural mechanism is visually summarized in Figure 1 (see Conceptual Mechanism of Pedagogical Influence section).

A deeper examination reveals that the relationship between pedagogical approaches and lifelong physical activity is inherently non-linear and mediated by the degree of internalization of motivational regulations. When Self-Determination Theory principles are deliberately integrated with model-based approaches, they promote not only immediate engagement but also the development of motivational competence — a critical precursor to lifelong participation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Chen, 2014).

Hybrid or integrative models emerge as particularly promising because they allow simultaneous addressing of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within a coherent system (Hastie & Wallhead, 2016; Casey & MacPhail, 2018). This synergistic integration creates mutual reinforcement between motivational processes and instructional strategies, producing more robust and transferable outcomes than additive combinations of single models. Importantly, this effect is not additive but systemic: the simultaneous satisfaction of psychological needs generates nonlinear amplification of motivational internalization, which cannot be achieved through isolated pedagogical interventions (Gil-Arias et al., 2017; Correia et al., 2019; Renshaw & Chow, 2019).

From a practical standpoint, these findings imply that curriculum designers should prioritize hybrid frameworks embedding motivational support mechanisms. Teacher education programs must develop teachers' capacity to scaffold autonomy, design meaningful tasks, and foster positive peer relationships (Iserbyt et al., 2016). For instance, teachers may begin by implementing Sport Education's seasonal structure, integrate tactical problem-solving tasks from TGfU within lessons, and incorporate Cooperative Learning for group goal-setting and reflection to ensure consistent satisfaction of all three basic psychological needs. School policies should reconceptualize physical education as a strategic context for building lifelong motivational foundations rather than short-term physical activity participation (Ennis, 2017; Whitehead, 2010).

Theoretically, this analysis advances a system-oriented perspective that positions motivation as an organizing structural element rather than a peripheral variable. By explicating the specific processes through which pedagogical features influence motivational regulation and behavioral internalization, this review offers a conceptual bridge between motivational theories and pedagogical practice (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Casey & MacPhail, 2018). It opens avenues for future intervention studies testing different hybrid configurations across diverse educational contexts and age groups.

Conditions of Effectiveness and Limitations

The effectiveness of this mechanism is not universal and depends on several contextual conditions. Beyond these general conditions, the applicability of the proposed mechanism is bounded by specific structural and contextual factors. At the educational level, the mechanism is most effective in secondary school settings where students possess sufficient cognitive and social maturity to engage in cooperative, tactical, and autonomy-supportive learning environments. In contrast, in early primary education, where structured guidance and basic skill acquisition dominate, the mechanism may operate only partially (Durden-Myers et al., 2018; Whitehead, 2010).

At the institutional level, its effectiveness depends on curriculum flexibility, class size, and resource availability. Highly standardized curricula, limited lesson time, and large class sizes constrain the implementation of hybrid pedagogical models and reduce opportunities for meaningful autonomy and interaction. Similarly, in contexts with limited teacher professional development, the capacity to apply need-supportive strategies remains restricted (Iserbyt et al., 2016; Casey & MacPhail, 2018).

At the socio-cultural level, the mechanism may be weakened in environments where hierarchical teacher–student relationships, performance pressure, or externally driven achievement norms dominate. In such contexts, autonomy-supportive practices may be constrained, leading to controlled forms of motivation and reduced long-term transfer (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Perlman, 2012).

Taken together, these boundaries indicate that the mechanism is not universally transferable but contingent upon alignment between pedagogical design, institutional conditions, and socio-cultural context.

However, the proposed mechanism may fail under certain conditions. Controlling teaching styles, excessive performance pressure, lack of student autonomy, large class sizes with limited resources, low teacher training, or unsupportive socio-cultural environments can prevent the transition from controlled to autonomous motivation. In such cases, motivation remains mostly externally regulated, resulting in short-term compliance rather than sustained lifelong physical activity habits (Kirk, 2013; Chen, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Conclusions

Traditional performance-oriented models prove insufficient because they rarely foster the autonomous motivation required for sustained participation beyond school years.

The central insight is that motivation should be understood and designed as a structural mechanism within pedagogical systems. Aligning Self-Determination Theory principles with hybrid integrative models offers a coherent pathway to simultaneously satisfy students' psychological needs while creating meaningful and transferable learning experiences.

By advocating a shift from fragmented implementations toward system-oriented hybrid frameworks, this synthesis provides a conceptual foundation for curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and policy-making. Future research should empirically test different hybrid configurations across diverse educational contexts.

Ultimately, strengthening the connection between pedagogy and motivation is a practical necessity if physical education is to contribute meaningfully to combating global physical inactivity and supporting lifelong healthy behaviors. This reconceptualization positions physical education as a strategic domain for long-term public health intervention. The proposed mechanism should be interpreted as a conceptually grounded theoretical model rather than an empirically verified mechanism. It provides an integrative framework that requires further empirical validation across diverse educational contexts.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Transparency Statement

AI-assisted tools were used for language refinement and editing purposes only. The intellectual content and scientific interpretations are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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Роль фізичного виховання у формуванні мотивації учнів та звички до довічної фізичної активності: педагогічний аспект

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Авторський вклад: A – дизайн дослідження; B – збір даних; C – статаналіз; D – підготовка рукопису; E – збір коштів

Реферат. Стаття: 6 с., 1 табл., 1 рис., 20 джерел.

Мета. У цьому концептуальному наративному огляді розглядається, яким чином мотивація функціонує як структурний механізм, що пов'язує педагогічні підходи у фізичному вихованні з довічною фізичною активністю.

Матеріали і методи. На основі вибіркового та інтерпретативного синтезу теоретичної й емпіричної літератури, що ґрунтується на Теорії самодетермінації (Self-Determination Theory, SDT) та model-based practice, у роботі розроблено інтегративну концептуальну модель.

Результати. Синтез показав, що окремі характеристики педагогічних моделей (наприклад, підтримка автономії у TGfU, формування належності у Sport Education та підтримка однолітків у Cooperative Learning) забезпечують задоволення базових психологічних потреб в автономії, компетентності та пов'язаності. Одночасне задоволення цих потреб сприяє інтеріоризації мотиваційної регуляції — від контрольованих до більш автономних форм (ідентифікована, інтегрована та внутрішня регуляція), що, своєю чергою, підтримує стійке залучення до фізичної активності за межами шкільного контексту. Гібридні інтегративні моделі демонструють вищий потенціал, оскільки створюють цілісне освітнє середовище, яке підсилює зазначені процеси, тоді як традиційні та одномодельні підходи часто забезпечують лише короткочасну підпорядкованість вимогам і обмежене перенесення поведінкових ефектів.

Висновки. Перехід до системно орієнтованих гібридних моделей, у яких мотивація розглядається як центральний організуючий механізм, є необхідною умовою для того, щоб фізичне виховання сприяло формуванню автономної мотивації та звички до довічної фізичної активності. В огляді визначено умови, за яких цей механізм функціонує ефективно або зазнає порушення, що створює концептуальне підґрунтя для реформування навчальних програм і подальших досліджень.

Ключові слова: фізичне виховання, мотивація учнів, довічна фізична активність, Теорія самодетермінації, models-based practice, гібридні педагогічні моделі, педагогічна інтеграція, спортивна педагогіка.

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