



ISSN: 2456-4419

Impact Factor: (RJIF): 5.18

Yoga 2018; 3(2): 1077-1082

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www.theyogicjournal.com

Received: 11-07-2018

Accepted: 15-08-2018

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Positive reinforcement: The influence of positive reinforcement on students in physical education

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/yogic.2018.v3.i2p.1690>

Abstract

Positive reinforcement plays a crucial role in enhancing students' engagement, motivation, and performance in physical education (PE) classes. This study investigates the impact of positive reinforcement strategies, grounded in theories such as Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Self-Determination Theory, on students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, physical participation, and social-emotional development. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research involves surveys, observational studies, and performance assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of tailored reinforcement techniques, including verbal praise, tangible rewards, and special privileges. The findings highlight the positive correlation between reinforcement and increased interest, confidence, and perseverance in PE activities. Personalized reinforcement, timely feedback, and a constructive learning environment are identified as key strategies to maximize students' motivation and learning outcomes. The study also suggests that positive reinforcement in PE can lead to broader academic success and improved classroom behavior. Challenges in implementing reinforcement strategies, such as ensuring fairness, balancing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and providing adequate teacher training, are addressed. The research concludes that positive reinforcement is a powerful tool to promote lifelong physical activity and overall well-being, recommending further exploration of innovative approaches to sustain motivation and foster health-oriented habits among students.

Keywords: Positive reinforcement, motivation, engagement, intrinsic motivation, social-emotional development, cognitive evaluation theory

Introduction

PE as one of the most important components of a student's curriculum offers much more than simply highlighting opportunities for exercise. They have an important function in the development of physical well-being as well as personal, social and personality growth. Structured gross motor activities incorporated in PE session assist students to learn ensemble, order, and persistence that are crucial personal and social assets throughout their lives. In addition, physical education and sports provide students a special chance to study the ways of maintaining one's physical fitness and health in future. As a regular class subject of study, PE promotes students' discovery of their body talents and boosts their self-esteems, which are essential for learning and human character (Linda Rikard & Banville, 2006) ^[10].

Besides, the activity level in physical education class is one of the predictors of student learning achievement. Positive relationship exists between the level of engagement and physical skills, participation and perceived physical activity at higher level. This means that where students actively participate in PE, they will grasp and appreciate the exercises, differentiate and undertake effective personal/fitness goals and follow through on a lifetime physical activity program (Kohl & Cook, 2013) ^[8]. In addition, engaged student's exhibit motivation to other activities within school hence leading to better social Norms and welfare. It is therefore asserts that in demonstrating how engagement correlates with long-term success in PE, that it imperative to establish cheerful classroom environment to encourage the students. Another solution that has been applied to great successes in promoting student's participation, particularly in physical education is positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means that pleasant consequences are used to

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encourage a student to perform specific behaviors, put efforts, or achieve a specific result. This approach is as a result of the behaviourist theory that holds that behaviours that are followed by pleasant outcomes are likely to be repeated. In school context, positive reinforcement simply involves the use of words of encouragement, material incentives or privileges. According to previous work in this area, it has been ascertained that when the instructor employs positive feedback and comments in the physical education classroom, students will exhibit increased levels of motivation, effort, and enjoyment of the activities. Besides rising students' physical activity level, this engagement fosters the students' emotional and social development too. This action promotes the motivation of the students in physical education classes by rewarding the child's performance thus promoting the right attitude towards more class attendance and performances.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of positive reinforcement on students' engagement, motivation, and performance in physical education classes. Specifically, the research aims to understand how strategies rooted in reinforcement theories, such as Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Self-Determination Theory, contribute to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, enhance students' physical participation, and promote their social and emotional development.

Methodology

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of positive reinforcement on students' engagement, motivation, and performance in physical education classes. Participants include a diverse sample of students from various grade levels, selected to ensure representation across age, gender, and baseline physical abilities. Data collection involves surveys, such as the Physical Education Motivation Scale (PEMS), to measure students' attitudes, motivation, and perceived competence, both before and after the intervention. Observational studies will document students' behavioral responses, participation levels, and effort in physical education sessions. Additionally, teachers will assess students' progress in motor skills, fitness, and teamwork to gather performance metrics. Positive reinforcement strategies, including verbal praise, tangible rewards like certificates, and special privileges, will be tailored to individual preferences and systematically applied during physical education lessons. Quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical methods to identify trends, while qualitative insights from observations will provide context for understanding the dynamics of reinforcement strategies. Ethical guidelines will be strictly followed, ensuring informed consent, participant confidentiality, and unbiased data collection. This comprehensive methodology aims to explore how positive reinforcement influences both short-term engagement and long-term motivation in physical education.

Theoretical Framework

The current paper therefore proposes a theoretical framework that relate motivation and student engagement in physical education through positive reinforcement. Various psychological theories that have a long basis of understanding give light on the ways that reinforcement affects learners' behaviour and participation in physical activities. Cognitive Evaluation Theory of increased intrinsic motivation CET, Self-Determination Theory of intrinsic motivation SDT or the

idea of Growth mindset all contain importance elements of studying motivation in physical education and how positive reinforcement will help ensure shorter-term, and extend to longer-term success.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)

Pritchard and colleagues' Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), which is actually subsumed within Self-Determination Theory (SDT), also examines how external events - notably rewards and feedback - can affect intrinsic motivation. It also follows that if people feel capable and able to make decisions about their behaviours they will participate in a task for its own sake and not for the rewards it offers.

Regarding physical education, this kind of reinforcement directly fosters the above stated two core elements. When students get praised or rewarded for effort or learning progress in physical tasks, they perceive mastery because of the competence that comes along. Moreover, when reinforcement focuses on students' own gains rather than other's losses, it contributes to promoting their perceptions of choice, thus students realize their effort is autonomous. Positive reinforcement of mastery and self-directedness nurtures inheritance motivation because students tend to participate in physical tasks to achieve the satisfaction of intrinsic rewards, not extrinsic rewards (Vallerand & Reid, 2016)^[17].

That is why, if a teacher, for instance, congratulates a student for more effective moves, apart from the victory in the game, the child will have a more enduring desire to participate in other physical activities for fun and personal development.

Self-determination theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) expands upon the concepts in CET by identifying three fundamental psychological needs that are crucial for fostering motivation: needs, as identified by Ryan and Deci (2000)^[15], to be more precisely, competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000)^[15]. From SDT it is clear that when such needs are met, people are more likely to practice self-generated behavior that is both self-fulfilling and engrossing in the long-run.

- **Competence:** Rewarding the behavior increases students' perceived sense of competence, via their accomplishments or improvements, regardless of how incremental. In physical activities, enhancement reinforcement for advancement whether it is stamina, technique, or teamwork, assures students that their efforts deserve further invention.
- **Autonomy:** Decision latitude can be defined as the extent to which the individual has control over his or her work. Holding positive reinforcements that encourage individualism besides competing with fellow scholars also improves the students' freedom of choice. When students perceive the event to be a volitional action, they are likely to remain motivated to continue participating in remainder of the physical activities.
- **Relatedness:** Positive reinforcement can also satisfy the affiliation need which is the capacity that makes people want to feel supported in their undertakings. In physical education reinforcement can be done at group level or by other students and teachers since the subject creates a sense of togetherness. The feeling of belonging makes students better participants and attentive to physical education classes, as they feel welcomed in the classes.

It is aligned with SDT to see that through meeting three psychological needs for competence, autonomy and

relatedness students are encouraged by positive reinforcement to work harder and be more focused in physical education than to be motivated by offerings such as candies.

Growth Mindset and Resilience

Growth mindset, as presented by Carol Dweck in her work of 2006 is a view that ability and intelligence are not fixed; rather, they can be developed by hard work, learning and persistence. Compared to a fixed mindset, which is characterized by the non-trivial belief concerning the nature of abilities as non-changeable entities or entities that cannot be grown, challenged are viewed as opportunities for growth or as indicators to bypass and students with growth mindsets are more likely to persevere (Dweck, 2016) ^[2].

Thus, positive reinforcement appears to be the central facilitator of the process of developing a growth mindset within physical education. When students are encouraged to work harder, learn better and try harder they tend to realize that like abilities and fitness can be achieved through practice and perseverance. These understanding builds coping capacity to manage or 'deal with' setbacks, the capacity to adapt after transitions. For example, all students who are in the same class, and one of them gets, let says, good comments for the improvement of basketball dribble even though they know this student is not a great player, such student will continue practicing, therefore they are perfecting their skills and confidence.

Positive reinforcement encourages hard work and holds the results of such efforts as linked to effort, challenging that students perceive physical difficulties as part and parcel of maturation. This, therefore, results in long-term practice in physical activities since the students will practice in pursuit of mastery not merely because of the current level of competency, but due to the belief that the competency can be enhanced in the future.

Importance about teaching positivity in physical education: Motivational Impact: The findings highlighted that, positive reinforcement used in Physical Education lessons would enhance both self- and external motivation. Currently, the theory of motivation can be understood as intrinsic motivation - performing the task not because of what can be obtained for it, but because of the satisfaction received from the work. Intrinsic motivation on the other hand is where one does a certain task in order to achieve a certain outside benefit, be it in form of praise, recognition or incentives. This paper argues that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is relevant for sustaining student interest in physical education.

- **Intrinsic Motivation:** The main idea of the incentive perspective is that positive reinforcement can further promote intrinsic motivation by confirming students' feelings of competence. When the students feel that their effort is valued, overall improvement is acknowledged, students will remain active in the choice and arrangement of exercise for the pleasure of it (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022) ^[3]. For instance, when a student is rewarded because they have improved in a fitness test a student will effectively own the fitness process and relish in making new strides.
- **Extrinsic Motivation:** When it comes to the performers, extrinsic motivation is invaluable, and though the long-term aim is the intrinsic motivation, people may have to be motivated through extrinsic incentives during the learning process of skill acquisition. Such aspects like issuing of certificates or acknowledging the student in

front of friends can act as a positive lure to compel students into physical activity and even in the fighting spirit as they practice physical education. As time goes on, though, if students have gotten into the positive feeling states (e.g. self-satisfaction) from achievement, it becomes easier to move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Vallerand & Reid, 2016) ^[17].

- **Positive reinforcement:** The positive reinforcement to the students in combination of the internal and external rewards mean that the students will always be on course in their physical learning and physical education classes so that they can engage in physical activities for life (Larson & Rusk, 2011) ^[9].

Importance of Positive Reinforcement in Physical Education: Building up general efficacy and confidence

The term self-efficacy according to Albert Bandura (1997) is a person's estimated capacity or number to overcome certain tasks or demands. In the case of physical education experience, student self-efficacy is at the very heart of motivation to participate in and persevere with physical activities. The strategy of positive reinforcement also enhances the students' expectation toward their corresponding capabilities and the general physical competency of the learners (McAuley, 2016) ^[11].

1. **Improving Belief in Abilities:** Positive reinforcement practice relates directly to self-efficacy since it involves reacting positively towards such students mainly in affirmation for the efforts and achievements it gives students the perception that they can perform future tasks (*Handbook of Positive Psychology Assessment - Google Books*, n.d.). For example, if a child is complimented on the fact that s/he has acquired new knowledge or skill, such as running faster or performing some new hesitation in gymnastics, it seems reasonable to assume that a child will feel like 'I can do more and be even better,' that is, become competent. This gives them the morale of going for more tasks and more prepared to face difficulties in regard to physical tasks.
2. **Raise self-esteem and personal effectiveness:** Positive reinforcement plays not only the decisive role in the development of the self- efficacy but also a significant role in raising self-esteem and competence feelings among the students. When students are rewarded for the effort, they have placed, whether in terms of words or something tangible they feel they are capable and worthy to succeed. For example, consider a teacher who in response to a child's effort in team game showers him/her with compliments, or a teacher who congratulates a child who struggles to complete a fitness drill, over fostering the culture of mastery (*Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Motivate Students | Insights to Behavior*, n.d.). It also means that more students will go to physical education classes expecting an advancement in the skills and attitudes they need to succeed in the sport because they can be changed for the better through hard work and determination.

For instance, a student is struggling in basketball dribbling but shows gradual learning progress, consistent positive feedback about the value of efforts, the focus on what the child is currently capable of mastering will positively reinforce the child's sense of self-efficacy. Such sort of reinforcement assists learners overcome feelings of inferiority and create a positive-self-image, which is authoritative in encouraging learners to engage actively in physical education activities.

Effects of Positive Reinforcement on Student Engagement

Using positive reinforcement in physical education: The effectiveness of positive reinforcement in enhancing students' enjoyment and attitude towards physical activity during physical education classes. Here it found that students who receive and perceive that they are recognized and rewarded tend to have a positive attitude towards physical education and also higher level of perceived satisfaction with activities.

1. Exercise, Participation and Self-Evaluation for Physical Education: Two aspects of the interviews are especially important in examining students' perception of physical education; rewards and the power of encouragement. This way students find that physical education class is enjoyable and the more praise they get for participation the better they get. This also brings in their desire to take part in physical activity and also the way they see physical education as a fun an important segment of school day. For instance, whenever a teacher on a fitness challenge recognizes a particular student, the student will have a realization that physical education is a place that they can excel and enjoy, rather the get a perception that it is all about competitions or skill level. Since students are positively reinforced with success and acknowledgment, they begin to personalize such optimistic experiences which have a long-term impact on the mentalities towards exercise and physical inactivity. In the long run, this positive reinforcement results to a wider perspective definition of physical fitness hence, most students are inclined to practice physical activities out of classroom and as they grow into adulthood.
2. Better Satisfaction and Interest: Positive reinforcement increases student satisfaction and motivation concerning physical activities. Thus, when student's effort is valued, the instance encourages the student to partake with increased enjoyment. For instance, a learner who receives positive remarks during group exercise, such as team sporting activities, or during an intense fitness taster program will develop positive attitude towards those tasks, making them eager to perform such duties in future. Such a positive feedback system thus exacerbates student involvement in physical activities hence enhancing enjoyment and motivation that are well fostered in physical education classes.

Third, when students make some effort and effort to develop the skills required fit based, they feel mastery of the tasks undertaken. Mastery experiences are necessary for building and enhancing children's intrinsic motivation to learn as contrary to extrinsic rewards, the students learn to appreciate their accomplishments as much as they improve. For example, in such manner if for example a student at the initial session in swimming lessons finds it difficult to easily perform the activity then it will be disheartening for her/ him to find that nobody is even noticing the effort that he/ she is putting in. However, when the child is timely rewarded for small achievements such as being able to swim a new lap or changing the stroke, bad behavior, the child feels proud to undertake the activity thereby keeping him or her engaged.

Overall, the positive reinforcement approach used in the physical education class improves student's self-efficacy and confidence as well as students' attitudes toward physical activity making it an effective one-use tool for the short-term fun physical activity and long-term activity attitude. When they feel that their efforts have been valued, they are likely to have a positive attitude towards the physical education lessons, as well as have a positive attitude towards the lessons

in future and this makes them have a positive experience towards active experience throughout their lives.

Increased Participation and Effort

Positive reinforcement is especially important in encouraging student-teacher interaction in physical education lessons, increasing activity during classroom work, lesson proficiency, and social and emotional growth. The subsequent sections herein explain how positive reinforcements help in the achievement of these over areas (Kobus *et al.*, 2008) ^[7].

- More Learning and Engagement-The fundamental analysis of the methods of reward power has indicated that this concept has a direct relation to the students' involvement and enthusiasm in physical education classes. As a result of incentives that are given to the students for participation, the student gets motivated and is more persistent when undertaking activities. As a result of this the association between positive reinforcement and participation shall be linked. The rewards encourage the students to keep interacting because it rewards the majority of them for their efforts. When students are abounding for participating, whether they were able to get the highest score or the outcome of their task, then the chances are high that they would participate and contribute effort (Pokhrel, 2024) ^[12]. For example, if a teacher can use encouraging words to a student who has done an exercise in class, he/she will encourage him/her to do it better even if not correct next time, in subsequent lessons. This type of reinforcement enhances confidence, and thus enhances student's participation in a variety of other physical practices and exercises.
- Reducing Dropout Rates- It also helps to decrease the dropout rates throughout the physical education classes. Most students especially those who have some difficulties with some kinds of motor tasks cease to attend PE classes when they think they are failing. However, emphasising accomplishment and work in progress instead of concentrating on result, can promote sense of competence and relatedness even in children with weak performance at the beginning of a learning process. According to research, on the tenacious improvement rather than the accomplished grades, the students should not feel frustrated, to lessen the drop-out rate (Hamjah *et al.*, 2011) ^[4].

Enhanced learners' performance

Apart from this, incentives are also most helpful not just in boosting attendance, but also in facilities that augment the students' capability to excel in their physical activities. Students need to be made aware of progress that has been made in regard to performance, so that they can strive to fine-tune their accomplishment in the long run.

Positive reinforcement and performance relationship

A study done shows that where students are provided with timely, specific and positive feedback in relation to their skills, then there is a marked improvement of physical skills. If students know that they are being praised for mastering a technique, for increasing their endurance or for achieving certain fitness goals, they are more likely to move up the ladder of the learning process and replicate that kind of behaviour (Rumfola, 2017) ^[14]. For example, if a teacher compliments a particular student for a correct alignment in a yoga pose, the message being conveyed is correct alignment is appropriate, therefore the student becomes more inclined to

stick to an upright posture in the next sessions. Such recognition of small gradual changes not only improves the performance of the learner but also helps to build up confidence in ability in the student.

Promotion of Goal Orientation, Attainment

Promotion is a valuable method in increasing students' compliance to have one's personal goals established and met. When the teachers provide the audience to the successes that individual students have made in an endeavor for example in the running activity where students ran some laps or when mastering some objectives, then student feels motivated to achieve other goals. Positive reinforcement helps the students understand direction of how to succeed in their efforts including pushing for higher levels of performance. It also creates conditions in which the idea of success as a gradual process is promoted, while the effectiveness of learning as a result of effort and practice is maintained.

Personal Social and Emotional Growth

Positive reinforcement is not limited to the change of physical actions and deeply affects students' social-emotional aspect. Socializing proper behaviours, attentiveness, teamwork, collaboration, and regulation of emotions, makes students more polite. Such positive reinforcement is helpful in group assignments, helps student to foster teamwork, and provides moral support to other team members. By being positive towards cooperation, sharing of ideas and encouragement, students are encouraged to work as a group towards the set Goals (Kobik, 2000) [6]. For instance, in the course of a team sport, commending a set of students for effort brings togetherness as well as cooperation among student hence encouraging the students to be supportive of their colleagues in other exercises in future. Rewarding for effective behavior also contributes a lot to students' emotional growth and development. In physical education, regarding the feelings concerning success or failure, students often are emotionally less controlled, the use of positive reinforcement prompts personal responsible students to self-control their emotions, and successful students to keep being positive, and interact with other students constructively (Schultz *et al.*, 2020) [16]. What if the students are encouraged to have positive attitudes throughout the failure processes in the learning process, then the students will accept failure in the right growth mindset processes. It is these facets of self-regulation that assist in producing more positive social encounters hence resulting in healthy classroom interactions.

Strategies for Implementing Positive Reinforcement in Physical Education: In order to give the best results of positive reinforcement, physical education teachers have to put into practice those strategies. Here are main strategies of positive reinforcement that can be used to promote students' interest and successful outcomes.

Personalizing Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement requires that a person is changed in a positive way because of the behaviors of another person. There are many facets to every student and thus they are motivated differently and have different leaning habits. The reinforcement should be a formal and teachers should assess their students to determine needs for special reinforcement should be met.

- Preference for rewards: It is just that some students will be encouraged they get a word of encouragement, while

others will be motivated by the issues such as certificates and or privileges. Depending on how students respond to different types of reinforcement, teachers, therefore, get hints on how to motivate specific students. Another aspect of personalising reinforcement is to understand from the difficulty faced and the objectives of the learners so that reinforcement can be given effectively (Kobik, 2000) [6].

- Tailoring Strategies to Motivation: To begin with, students are driven by various incentives in various capacities. Some may have an internal drive as they are passionate with the activity that they are performing, while others have the external drive. In this way, it is possible for the teachers to elaborate on the said differences, and adapt to a more effective approach. For instance, the students who are greatly encouraged by competition may be encouraged most by the reward after they score high marks while others will be encouraged more by improvement or more so effort.

Challenges in Implementing Positive Reinforcement

As it is now evident, the pros of positive reinforcement cannot be motivated since it also has various cons that require considering.

- To Ensure Fairness and Equity: Positivity needs to be consistent and fair so that it can generate the needed effects to help people change their behavior. Teachers have to avoid school or group bias while applying reinforcement techniques as they should reflect the ability and hard work of the child in school.
- Balancing Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation: Ext. rewards have negative effects on intrinsic motivation as has been clearly illustrated above. Workers should work hard to make enthusiasm and pleasure the key motivators of the effectiveness of the exercise and not make possible additional incentives the goals of the exercise.
- Teacher Training and Consistency: Positive reinforcement means ensuring that the right behavior is repeated by praising or rewarding a learner in a way that he/she comprehends fully. Based on the findings it was concluded that teachers require professional development in order to use the reinforcement strategies appropriately and fairly for all students.
- Classroom Management and Reinforcement: Using reinforcement together with classroom management can be problematic, particularly where there are numerous students or where students display problem behaviors (Dweck, 2013) [1]. The challenge lies in the fact that in order to achieve discipline and concentration in the class, the teacher has to learn how to keep the friendly spirit of the class while putting characters into order.

Thus, introduction of the positive reinforcement concept in the physical education is a powerful mechanism to improve students, motivation and the long-term compliance with sporting activities. Teachers can ensure students get specific ways, regular feedback and favourable learning climate to make learners effective.

Measuring the Impact of Positive Reinforcement on Student Engagement: To evaluate the impact of positive reinforcement on students' participation in physical activities, various assessment tools are essential. Surveys and questionnaires, such as the Physical Education Motivation Scale (PEMS), are used to capture students' subjective attitudes toward motivation, competence, and enjoyment,

providing insights into how reinforcement influences their willingness to participate. These tools allow comparisons of attitudes toward physical education before and after reinforcement strategies are applied. Observational studies offer objective data on students' behaviors, participation levels, and responses to reinforcement. Teachers can analyze how reinforcement affects effort, focus, and attitude by monitoring engagement and reactions during activities. These observations reveal a positive correlation between reinforcement and increased interest, confidence, and perseverance, helping educators identify strategies to maximize students' motivation and learning outcomes.

Academic and Behavioural Outcomes

Positive reinforcement in physical education has the potential to positively influence students' academic and behavioral outcomes beyond PE classes. Studies indicate that using positive reinforcement, such as encouraging words, can enhance students' concentration, work ethic, and overall learning attitudes in other subjects. Motivated students often exhibit better classroom behavior, including cooperation, self-control, and reduced disruptiveness. These improvements suggest that reinforcement strategies in physical education can lead to broader academic success and constructive behavior across various contexts, demonstrating their long-term value.

Conclusion

Positive reinforcement is a key factor in boosting students' interest, motivation, and confidence in physical education, promoting enhanced participation, performance, and social-emotional growth. It not only improves psychomotor skills but also positively influences students' attitudes toward physical activity, decision-making, and learning behaviors. Effective strategies include personalized reinforcement, timely feedback, and fostering a constructive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers are encouraged to emphasize engagement, effort recognition, and diligence, helping students value their efforts regardless of talent. Positive reinforcement supports lifelong physical activity and overall well-being. Further research is recommended to refine strategies and explore innovative approaches to sustain motivation and promote health-oriented habits among students.

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