

IMPROVING PUPILS' INITIATIVE-TAKING CAPABILITIES THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION LESSONS

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Abstract. *This article addresses the theme of personal and social development through physical education and sport activities. The aim is to present a possible solution to the problem of improving pupils' ability of taking initiative in activity. We started from the assumption that taking initiative is a personal quality that is learned and could therefore be taught. The approach is based on Goldstein's (1981) method of social learning and is different from what has been proposed so far. It is, within certain limits, similar to the way concepts are taught in schools. It is mostly based on explaining, questioning, demonstrating, reasoning, and reflecting. It could be implemented as a group activity. Its implementation presupposes the completion of a series of stages: concept learning, discrimination learning, principle learning and problem solving.*

Key words: *antioxidants, non-nutrition, alpha-tocopherol.*

1. Improving Pupils' Social Skills

The development of qualities such as co-operation, honesty, communication, initiative, responsibility, self-control is part of the complex process of maturation. Taking initiative is regarded as important in the context of young people's social development. Taking initiative to accomplish different tasks is a quality that our society expects from its members. The emergence of the new informational society we are witnessing at the beginning of the third millennium shows that entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship is becoming vital to the new working environment. Taking initiative has become a personal quality

that can no longer be expected from leaders only but from ordinary people as well. Taking initiative in tackling problems in daily activity is crucial for the working places of the future. Initiative encompasses such qualities such as the readiness to start a first step in a process, willingness to be involved in improving things around you, confidentiality in your physical and psychological resources, capability of understanding what happens around you, willingness to achieve success, readiness to assume responsibility and take reasonable risks.

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The problem is that people still need to learn what taking initiative means, as there is a widespread lack of knowledge and practice. Young people are often incapable of initiating an activity, and many ignore the possibility of being involved in an activity that can improve things around them. Often, people are not aware of their own physical and psychological resources and are not confident in their strengths. Not few people lack the drive to understand what the field forces are in their domain and how forces act upon them. Many young people dream of reaching success without assuming responsibilities or working hard. Many young people do not know what taking reasonable risks means. Too few young people experience success as a result of taking initiative. In the new informational society, more and more individuals are expected to manifest initiative and entrepreneurial attitude. Initiative, responsibility and reliability are crucial qualities in the global economy we have just entered. In spite of the fact that many subjects, modules and courses taught in schools or universities emphasize the need to encourage and develop qualities such as team-work, co-operation, leadership, decision making, initiative, responsibility and others, little has been done and the results are far from being satisfactory. There seems to be no subject matter in the school curriculum aiming at systematically teaching the concept and working to create the specific associated skills.

There are, though, many outdoor activities providers throughout the world who do use specific activities to enhance initiative, but their impact is limited as the number of participants is still limited [7].

2. Improving Social Skills through Physical Education

Education in general is expected to encourage social skills, teach moral values, form character, shape personality and improve knowledge. The educational factors in society work in a corroborative manner; family, school, peers, television, youth organizations, church and others, all influence young people's social development. In my opinion, school should play a leading role in enhancing young peoples' social capabilities, as school represents for young people their local society. The mini-society which is school constitutes a somehow safe environment in which pupils can learn and test a wide range of social behaviors related to power relationships, roles, peer pressure, social rules, co-operation, conflict solving, decision making, leadership and so on.

Physical education is one of the subject areas within school that could substantially contribute towards pupils' personal and social development, as activity in the gym is inherently social and qualitatively different from what occurs in the classroom. Because movement is the focus, many classroom formalities are suspended. Within specified limits, behavior that is unacceptable elsewhere is here permitted, or even encouraged. For example, touching and other forms of body contact, loud and often chaotic vocalization and spontaneous encounters with others are all an integral part of many physical education activities.

A vast literature mirrors the increasing interest in and concern for using physical education as a setting for enhancing the socialization of young people. The trend to ground educational interventions in

physical education on theories from psychology, sociology or ethics has resulted in the employment of a wide range of concepts. Some of the most frequently used are: 'socio-moral education' [9], 'socio-moral development' [12], 'socio-moral growth' [11], 'social education' [13], 'social skills' [8], 'moral growth' [1], 'moral development' [4], 'value development' [6], 'character development' [10], 'character education' [3] and 'affective development' [2].

3. How is Initiative to Be Learned through Physical Education Lessons?

We start from the assumption that taking initiative is a social process that is learned and can therefore be taught. It is generally admitted that the extent to which young people are involved in co-operative activities strongly influences their future ability. Involving young people in initiative taking activities is certainly important, but equally important is that they perceive participation as useful and enjoyable. The way pupils perceive initiative-taking situations determines the likelihood of using initiative in a task-solving situation.

The approach we propose to teachers through this article is based on Goldstein's (1981) method of social learning and is different from what has been proposed so far. We have chosen to use this model for a number of reasons: first, this approach is, within certain limits, similar to the way concepts are taught in school. It is mostly based on explaining, questioning, demonstrating, reasoning, and reflecting. Second, it can be implemented as a group activity. In fact, the presence of the group is essential. Third, its implementation

presupposes the completion of a series of stages, which can be relatively easily identified by the teacher. Fourth, the results of its implementation can be quite accurately assessed and do not demand sophisticated psychological tests.

4. Some Suggestions on Teaching Initiative-Taking through Physical Education Lessons

1. *Concept learning* is the first step in learning initiative-taking. Teachers may ask pupils to express their opinions regarding "taking initiative", listen carefully and then complete. Initiative is the readiness to take the first step in a process. The opposite is being inert (a property by which matter does not change or move). Some cues useful in defining the concept are:

- i. To initiate means to be willing to be involved in improving things around you.
- ii. To initiate means to be confident in your physical and psychological resources.
- iii. Initiate means to understand clearly what happens around you.
- iv. To initiate means to be more willing to achieve success than being frightened by failure.
- v. To initiate means to assume responsibility and take reasonable risks.

The teacher must explain that initiative may lead the individual to achieve success in all kinds of activity. At the same time, a team whose members act expressing a high degree of initiative is most likely to achieve success in solving problems. The introductory part of lessons may be used to discuss and define the term. Teachers should encourage

pupils to think about the meanings and discuss initiative. The goal of this stage is to bring the concept to their attention and specify its meaning. The ability to talk about initiative and its meaning denotes a good level of concept learning. (a set of phrases such as “I’ll do that”, “I will take care of it”, “We have to improve this”, “This needs to be done”, etc.).

2. *Discrimination learning* of initiative-taking is the next step and should mostly focus on improving the perceptual functions of consciousness and attention. These functions should be developed to enable the pupil to become more sensitive and responsive to initiative-taking. This means helping pupils distinguish initiative-taking behaviors from inertial behaviors. The teachers’ activity could include:

a) Encourage pupils observe group activities and focus perception toward actions, gestures and words that have a certain significance for initiative-taking. Observing how some pupils try to understand problems around them, how some propose things to be done, how some assume tasks within a group, how some come up with suggestions to improve activity, how some assume certain risks to carry on tasks, how some dare to do something others do not, how some volunteer to do something without being asked, all these could enhance the perception of responsible related behaviors.

b) Direct pupils’ thoughts reveal the meaning of other pupils’ actions and discuss them in relation to initiative. The significance of behaviors during physical education lessons could remain undiscovered by pupils. In order to assist pupils make sense of their behavior, teachers could reveal the meaning of

certain activities. This could be done during the activity, by highlighting significant behaviors, or post-activity, when the teacher could ask pupils recall certain behaviors and discover their significance in relation to initiative-taking. Some questions will direct their thoughts: Have they been sensible and concerned about the team’s problems? Have they tried to understand the team’s problems? Have they tried to solve the problems? Did they do something to improve activity without being asked? Do they know what their strengths are? Do they have confidence in their strengths? Did they dare to start an activity? Did anyone become involved in the team’s problems more than in his/her assignments?

c) Encourage pupils to take initiatives within the group. Games, but individual events as well, are good opportunities in which pupils could be demanded to volunteer to accomplish different tasks, could be encouraged to take over roles such as team leader, advice provider, conflict solver, activity initiator and others. At the beginning of a series of lessons the teachers may announce that in addition to technical skills and performance, initiative taking will be evaluated. To encourage pupils to take initiatives over normal expectations, teachers should reward those who take initiatives. The reward could range from blinking an eye to tapping the pupil’s shoulder, praising him/her in front of the group and offering him/her decision power during a certain activity.

d) Analyze pupils’ activity and express feelings regarding the way in which those who took initiatives have accomplished their tasks. Focusing pupils’ attention and thoughts on relevant behaviors during a variety of physical activities enhances their capability of attention in discriminating

stimuli. Other people's behavior is a complex stimulus difficult to perceive and hard to attach correct significance to. By analyzing how pupils are aware of their strengths, how they try to solve problems, how they dare to start an activity, how they assume risks during games or play, how they suggest new answers to problems, how they seek to successfully accomplish their tasks, by analyzing all this, pupils could not only better understand what taking initiative means but they could become more capable of distinguishing relevant behaviors. By increasing their sensitivity to initiative-taking behaviors, pupils could end by better understanding what taking initiative means and by taking initiative more often themselves.

3. *Principle learning* is the integration of competent knowledge, values and conduct. The aim of principle learning is to help pupils create harmony and reciprocity between what they know, what they value and how they act. Principle learning should be an exercise in value clarification and validation in the process of personal development. The teachers' activity could consist in:

a) Asking pupils to answer questions such as: Is it good to acknowledge your strengths? Is it good to use your strengths? Is it good to start an activity? Is it important to assume tasks within the group? Is it good to try to understand what is going on around you? Is it good to create something new? Is it good to risk solving a problem in a new way? In this way pupils could be determined to understand and define their values related to initiative-taking.

b) Encouraging debate on topics such as endeavor, risk-taking, starting something new, assuming difficult tasks, willingness

and others. The debate should be grounded on examples from the groups' own activity and refer to real situations and real people.

c) Encouraging pupils to clarify their views and define their position regarding initiative-taking. This could be done by demanding pupils to recall their own actions and the actions of peers that illustrate desirable and undesirable behaviors connected with specific aspects of initiative-taking.

d) Organizing activities such as games, contests, relay races, outdoor pursuits, in which pupils are assessed against their involvement in the group's problems, willingness to take over tasks and assignments, capability of organizing the group, desire to achieve success, interest in performing, drive to take the lead in the activity, and other elements that define initiative-taking behaviors. Peer assessment is important to be done under the teacher's supervision, as pupils could learn how to formulate opinions in a constructive manner.

c) Asking pupils to formulate a set of principles that they want to follow.

Teachers could not talk to each individual pupil and pay attention to every significant behavior, but frequently bringing the above-mentioned issues to the pupils' attention and initiating debate is very likely to produce significant effects on pupils.

4. *Problem solving* could be the next step in teaching pupils to take initiatives. It does not mean the achievement of correct solutions to conventional problems, but rather the development of behaviors which are useful in a world that presents problems demanding creative as well as conventional solutions. In generic terms, the teacher's helping role involves

management of the learning experience to take place in a rewarding and effective manner that takes account of the pupils' motives, values, energies and capabilities. In specific terms, the teacher could help pupils to develop a strategy to solve their personal problems caused by a lack of awareness, misunderstanding, by lack of skills or by lack of experience regarding initiative-taking.

a) Teachers could firstly help pupils identify whether the problems they encounter while interacting with peers or teachers have a certain connection with initiative-taking. Pupils might have problems related to their integration within a group, gaining the group's confidence, losing the group's support, feeling ignored by the group, losing group sympathy, being often blamed by peers, and others. If the teachers see that the cause of such problems resides in the area of initiative taking, they should point out the specific problem and help the individual define it.

b) Once the problem has been identified, the teachers could assist pupils in evaluating the situation and formulating possible solutions. This could include formulating principles for future behavior that might help the individual face the problem. Pupils could be encouraged to formulate specific actions in specific situations. For example, one could propose being more actively involved in initiating meetings, discussions, activities within the group as a way to avoid being ignored by the group.

c) In order to help pupils follow principles, the teachers could discuss possible consequences of specific behaviors. By considering the consequences, pupils could choose the actions they think are more appropriate to their purposes.

d) Further, in helping pupils solve problems, teachers could encourage pupils to test solutions in reality. For example, a pupil encountering problems deriving from 'low status' within the group could try to assume difficult tasks that the group has to achieve. By assuming difficult tasks within a group, one could gain support and sympathy and reach the desired status.

e) Equally important to testing solutions is evaluating consequences. We do not learn by doing, we learn by doing and realizing what has come out of what we did. Teachers could direct pupils' thoughts, but they should encourage pupils to evaluate the outcomes of their own actions. Taking initiative should be seen by pupils as an effective way of solving problems.

5. Issues Related to Program Implementation

The method outlined here is an example of a larger strategy aiming at enhancing pupils' socialization. The effects of this program were assessed. Five groups of between fourteen and seventeen year old boys attended lessons in which the method was introduced through physical education lessons during one school year. There were also five control, matching groups. In order to assess the results of the program implementation, direct observation, questionnaires and socio-metric techniques were used as part of a triangulation procedure. The results show that the intervention can successfully be used to improve pupils' initiative-taking abilities.

The aim of this article is to encourage teachers to use this program. By choosing to implement it, teachers might add value to their work, pupils might gain knowledge and skills that can help them improve their

lives. PE teachers will be teaching pupils something that may not be taught elsewhere in school, and the pupils' interest in physical activity might be increased; last but not least, teachers might benefit by teaching initiative-taking.

The method can be implemented within the existing PE curriculum. Co-operation learning activities could be part of each lesson during a period of six months. At the beginning, planning is crucial and includes proposing educational objectives in close relation to PE's specific activities.

Working out the plan needs commitment. Experience shows that you might not succeed at the beginning, but you will learn as you work. In early stages you will do what you have planned, after a while you will do what a specific situation requires. The work becomes more and more interesting and more and more rewarding. Teaching initiative-taking during your lessons will become routine: you will plan, act, observe, listen, judge and react.

Assessing behaviors is an important part of the intervention. Taking initiative should be judged as effective or ineffective rather than good or bad. Offering feedback to the group or to the individual is also important and should be done in the most constructive way.

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