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Teachers' enactment of contextualized instruction in primary physical education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Physical education is frequently criticized for limited transfer of learning beyond school and for experiences that do not sufficiently reflect students' lives and communities. Grounded in sociocultural learning theory, contextualized instruction has been proposed as a pedagogical framework that supports teachers in being intentional in how they draw on students' identities and local resources. Silseth and Erstad ([2018]. 'Connecting to the Outside: Cultural Resources Teachers Use When Contextualizing Instruction.' *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 17: 56–68). offer five orientations for contextualized instruction: local community, everyday practices, personal issues, concrete objects, and knowledge from abroad.

Purpose: This research examines how a sample of four primary physical education teachers enact contextualized instruction.

Methods: A generic qualitative design was used to examine how four primary school physical education teachers (ages 5–13) in Canada enacted contextualized instruction. Following a professional development initiative focused on contextualized instruction, in which teachers developed a unit of work, data were generated from 20 non-participant observations and 8 semi-structured interviews gathered over seven months. Data were analyzed deductively using Silseth and Erstad's (2018) five orientations of contextualized instruction and inductively through reflexive thematic analysis within each orientation.

Findings: Teachers most frequently enacted contextualized instruction by orienting their teaching practices toward students' local community resources, everyday movement practices, and personal issues related to students' interests and movement identities. Strategies included community mapping, photovoice tasks, partnerships with local organizations, and modifications to games using familiar or accessible equipment. Orientations involving concrete objects and knowledge from abroad were minimally evident.

Discussion and Conclusion: These findings suggest that contextualized instruction offers practical pedagogical pathways

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centred on and relevant to students' lived realities, particularly through making explicit connections to local communities, everyday practices, and personal interests. In doing so, contextualized instruction acted as a guide for teachers to create personally relevant learning experiences and conditions for transferable engagement with physical activity beyond school.

Impact statement

This research addresses the persistent disconnect between students' lives and curriculum content by providing practice-based evidence of contextualized instruction in primary physical education. By operationalizing Silseth and Erstad's (2018) suggestions for contextualization, the findings offer physical educators' practical pedagogical strategies for considering students' values, local communities, and everyday practices to make learning personally relevant. Ultimately, this research empowers teachers to centre students' movement identities and bridge the gap between school-based physical education and students' lived realities.

Introduction

A key aim of most physical education programs is for students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead physically active lives within and beyond the school context (UNESCO 2015). Thus, physical education should play an important role in helping students transfer and apply what they have learned from in-class activities and experiences to their everyday lives (and vice versa) (HosseiniKhezri et al. 2025). When students are provided with opportunities to transfer learning in and out of school, they may find physical education more meaningful because they can better recognize the value and relevance of what they are learning (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2022). For example, Enright and O'Sullivan (2010) introduced several community instructors, which helped legitimize the curriculum for teenage girls and transformed physical education content into an accessible and authentic experience. When physical education is structurally linked to community organizations, it can scaffold students' learning from school-based physical education to community-based participation (Schwamberger and Sinelnikov 2015).

Although there is some agreement about the value of learning transfer, research consistently indicates that physical education often fails to meet its intended purposes (Lawson 2018). Many students describe their experiences as disconnected from their everyday lives, lacking personal relevance, and failing to equip them with the necessary practical knowledge to engage in movement beyond the school (Ladwig, Vazou, and Ekkekakis 2018; Lodewyk and Pybus 2012). These disconnections contribute to persistent patterns where participation in physical education does not translate into the attitudes or competencies for students to want to choose physical education, nor to engage in physical activity (Fernández-Río, García, and Ferriz-Valero 2025). Without intentional efforts to help students connect their in-class learning to life beyond the gymnasium, physical education risks remaining confined to within school walls and failing to fulfill its potential to foster inclusive, educative, and transferable movement experiences (Kilborn, Lorusso, and Francis 2016).

The challenges students face in making connections between their experiences inside and outside the classroom raise questions about teachers' abilities to draw on the necessary pedagogical strategies to make physical education meaningful in students' everyday lives. One promising example that can facilitate these types of connections is *contextualized instruction*. We position contextualized instruction as a pedagogical framework grounded in sociocultural learning theory that supports teachers in drawing on students' lived experiences and using these experiences as a resource to enhance engagement and promote transfer (Silseth and Erstad 2018). It provides a practical pedagogical framework for situating physical education within the multiple contexts that shape students' lives, emphasizing learning that is relevant, inclusive, and transferable. Although some examples of Silseth and Erstad's (2018) conceptualization of contextualized instruction exist in other subject areas, we were unable to locate any research in physical education. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to examine how a sample of four primary physical education teachers enact contextualized instruction.

Contextualized instruction

Like other school subjects, an aim of physical education is to help students connect what they learn in class to their lives beyond school. Dewey (1959) argued that school learning should 'grow gradually out of' (23) students' lived experiences; this idea represents a principle that continues to inform sociocultural understandings of learning. Research conducted using sociocultural learning across disciplines has shown how school learning is shaped by, and in turn shapes, students' everyday practices (Bronkhorst and Akkerman 2016; Rajala et al. 2016). Sociocultural learning theory positions learning as a socially mediated process that occurs through participation in shared cultural practices and interactions across overlapping 'activity systems' such as school, family, and community (Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Engeström 2001). When learners navigate and are able to bridge these systems, their understanding of situations, experiences, and phenomena can deepen and become transferable. In physical education, this perspective highlights how knowledge, dispositions, and practices can be exchanged between school and daily life (e.g. community sport, recreation and family life), ultimately reflecting a central goal of contemporary physical education programs (Kilborn, Lorusso, and Francis 2016).

Although the idea of contextualization appears broadly in the literature on teaching and learning (e.g. in situated learning), our discussion of contextualized instruction in this research focuses on Silseth and Erstad's (2018) specific ideas of contextualization and its theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings. Thus, it differs from other suggestions offered by, for example, Priniski, Hecht, and Harackiewicz (2018), who synthesize ideas around personal relevance for students from a motivational perspective, considering only the theoretical implications for researchers (and not necessarily pedagogical implications for teachers). Drawing on cultural historical activity theory (one 'branch' of sociocultural learning theory) (Engeström 2001), contextualized instruction is a specific pedagogical framework that positions students' everyday knowledge as cultural and cognitive resources that guide and enrich learning (Silseth and Erstad 2018). Thus, contextualized instruction can guide teachers' planning and task construction by deliberately drawing on students' cultural, social, and community resources. This aligns with Silseth and

Erstad's (2018) argument that contextualization is an ongoing relational process through which teachers and students co-construct the meaning and relevance of disciplinary knowledge.

Silseth (2018) outlines four key principles that teachers can draw from for effective contextualization: using meaningful resources, inviting students to contribute their everyday knowledge, connecting resources to curricular aims, and positioning students as active co-constructors of learning. In addition to these overarching principles, Silseth and Erstad (2018) also propose five orientations through which contextualized instruction can be anchored. Examples are provided to help illustrate their application in physical education:

1. **Local communities:** Involves connecting learning to students' immediate surroundings (e.g. neighbourhoods, parks, or recreation centres) to help students see opportunities to participate in physical activity within their local environment.
2. **Everyday practices:** Validates students' existing experiences and connects school learning tasks with the daily habits they already engage in, such as sports or fitness participation.
3. **Personal issues:** Focuses on students' identities, interests, emotions, and life circumstances. By considering diverse experiences, teachers create more inclusive and personally meaningful lessons.
4. **Concrete objects:** Teachers use tangible materials, equipment, or digital tools to support understanding and bridge abstract concepts with lived experience (e.g. using mobile phone apps to identify and access play or nature spaces).
5. **Experiences from Travelling Abroad:** Drawing from students' experiences in other countries can help to foster global awareness. Silseth and Erstad's (2018) orientations were originally conceived in a European context, where cross-border travel is arguably easier than in many other contexts. Beyond Europe, the spirit of this orientation could be reframed to include diverse, multicultural perspectives from students' families or local communities, promoting intercultural learning and challenging dominant norms of physical activity.

Although we did not locate any research in physical education that drew from Silseth and Erstad's (2018) framework, it has been studied in other subjects. For example, in research by Gebre and Polman (2020), students investigated local water quality and reported on science-related community issues to actively shape the relevance of what they were learning. Such approaches can deepen conceptual understanding and motivation by positioning students as co-creators of context rather than as passive recipients of content that represents situations beyond their lived experiences (Rivet and Krajcik 2008). Similarly, in Loh, Sun, and Weninger (2023), literacy teachers drew on students' cultural and linguistic resources to help make connections between classroom learning and their lived experiences. Teachers asked students to use at least one print and one digital text they have access to (e.g. a mobile device or a book) to optimize opportunities for reading for pleasure. In practice, this functioned by utilizing students' everyday digital habits (e.g. smartphones) as instructional tools. This proved effective in bridging the disconnect between formal school-based education and students' daily lives, thereby enhancing their engagement in the classroom. When teachers use students' everyday

communication practices as instructional tools, learning can become more inclusive and personally relevant (Silseth and Erstad 2018).

Explicit use of contextualized instruction has received little attention in physical education research. However, related scholarship demonstrates its potential to support movement participation across settings. For instance, studies have highlighted the value of students recognizing opportunities for activity in their local contexts through partnerships between schools and community sport organizations designed to expand access and strengthen participation pathways (Casey et al. 2014). The notion of everyday practices can be conceived as connecting physical education content with structured recess settings, which creates additional opportunities for students to explore and engage with lesson activities during their daily play (Cheng et al. 2022). Attending to personal issues related to gender and belonging can further support relevance for students from diverse backgrounds as they relate to meaningful experiences in physical education (Walseth, Engebretsen, and Elvebakk 2018). In addition, recognizing immigrant students' cultural backgrounds as pedagogical resources can cultivate inclusive spaces where students are empowered to interpret and negotiate their participation through relational teaching practices (Thorjussen and Sisjord 2018).

There is, however, a need for teachers to be explicit about how the skills, knowledge, and attitudes learned in physical education can be applied to their free time outside the classroom (Parker et al. 2018). Applying the notion of contextualized instruction as a pedagogical framework has the potential to provide teachers with practical guidance for making learning more explicit, relevant, and transferable beyond the school setting. This framework can help students strengthen connections between their experiences in physical education and their daily lives (e.g. school, family, community). We ask: How can contextualized instruction help teachers become more intentional in connecting students' lived experiences with their learning in physical education?

Methodology and methods

A generic qualitative inquiry provides a pragmatic focus on describing and interpreting how teachers translated the theoretical concept of contextualized instruction into practice, while simultaneously capturing their subjective reasoning for these pedagogical decisions (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The research made use of small sample sizes, where depth of understanding and practical insights take precedence over abstraction or generalization, aligning with the interpretivist assumptions underpinning this qualitative inquiry (Kahlke 2014).

Context

Research ethics boards from Brock University and two school boards approved the research, which included protocols for informed consent from teachers and parents, and assent from students. The research was conducted over seven months as part of a larger project examining teachers' enactment of Meaningful PE. Meaningful PE is a pedagogical approach grounded in teachers' enactment of democratic and reflective pedagogies used to prioritize the meaningfulness of physical education experiences (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2022). Contextualized instruction contains characteristics of democratic

pedagogies, as it actively involves students in decisions about their learning, designs tasks that build on students' interests, identities, and local resources, prioritizes student voice and choice, and extends learning across school and community contexts (Dewey 1959; Sant 2019). By actively grounding instruction in students' lived realities and shared environments, contextualized instruction represents a way for teachers to enact democratic pedagogies (much like they might choose to enact student voice pedagogy) to help students have personally relevant learning experiences. Importantly, students often describe physical education as meaningful when learning experiences are made personally relevant. Thus, contextualized instruction may contribute to how teachers can prioritize the meaningfulness of student experiences in physical education.

Four teachers were recruited through purposive sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 2016): Teachers Q, N, S, and R [pseudonyms]. The schools are located in diverse contexts in Canada. Teacher Q has taught physical education for more than 10 years and works at a rural private school in the province of Alberta. Students in Teacher Q's school came from both rural and urban communities. Teachers N (a novice teacher with <5 years of experience) and S (an experienced teacher with >20 years of experience) teach in suburban public schools in the province of Ontario. Within these contexts, there is a variety of recreational resources (e.g. parks, sports clubs, nature areas), but socioeconomic and cultural diversity create varied entry points and barriers for contextualization. For example, some students participate in organized sports outside school, while others do not. Teacher R (an experienced teacher with >20 years of experience) also taught in Ontario; however, her public school is in an urban setting rich in community facilities but challenged by socioeconomic barriers. While not a comparative study, these contexts illustrate the range of affordances and challenges teachers encounter.

Professional development

The focus on contextualized instruction was embedded in participants' ongoing involvement in the larger project on Meaningful PE. Teacher Q and R had been involved in the project for more than two years, while S and N had been involved in the project for approximately 18 months. They were invited to participate in this research to explore how contextualizing instruction could support the enactment of democratic pedagogies within Meaningful PE. Early in the research, Spencer introduced a presentation on contextualized instruction as part of a professional development (PD) initiative. Following the introduction of the principles and orientations of contextualized instruction and examples of its potential application, the three teachers in Ontario engaged in a collaborative discussion to design a unit of work based on the five orientations of contextualized instruction: local communities, everyday practices, personal issues, concrete objects, and knowledge from abroad/diverse cultures (Silseth and Erstad 2018). Teacher Q did not participate in the collaborative discussion because he was in a different city; however, he was involved in a PD initiative individually. Teacher Q applied concepts of contextualized instruction to an existing unit of work named 'Active in my Community' that suited his context. Teachers shared planning ideas with Spencer, which were iteratively refined via email and the use of a shared digital folder. The unit plans that teachers developed and enacted served as the basis for the data collection. Given the timing of the research in the late spring (leading into summer holidays), teachers designed units

of work that typically spanned 2–3 weeks of instruction. Teacher Q designed a unit that incorporated cycling, soccer, and backyard games. Teacher R designed a unit that involved backyard games. Teachers S and N designed a unit that combined traditional sports and backyard games. The thought behind these units of work was that students could participate in similar experiences during their summer holidays and in their local communities.

Data collection

Two main data sources were used: non-participant observations and individual interviews. Between the Fall of 2024 and the Spring of 2025, 20 non-participant observations were conducted: seven with Teacher N, six with Teacher S, five with Teacher R, and two with Teacher Q. The discrepancy in the number of observations for each teacher was due to their locations and schedules. Field notes written during the observations captured teacher-student interactions, classroom environments, and reflexive comments. A structured observation included prompts that referenced the class environment, the teachers' lesson structure, moments of contextualization related to the orientations outlined by Silseth and Erstad (2018), and the use of pedagogy (i.e. model-based practices, teaching strategies, reflective and democratic pedagogies).

Each teacher also participated in two semi-structured interviews: one conducted before and one after implementing their units of work. Initial interviews explored their personal vision for physical education and possibilities for contextualizing instruction, while follow-up interviews focused on enactment, perceived successes, and challenges related to contextualized instruction. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

There were two stages of analysis. First, deductive analysis (Fife and Gossner 2024) involved drawing on Silseth and Erstad's (2018) five orientations of contextualized instruction: local community, everyday practices, personal issues, concrete objects, and knowledge from abroad/diverse cultures. These orientations provided the initial coding categories and offered a framework for identifying moments when teachers sought to contextualize instruction to students' contexts. For example, an interview excerpt, 'When the cricket people were here, we discussed where can they play? And then in the end, I think what came out of that is that it was very well enjoyed' (S2_008) was coded as local community because it highlighted the teacher's role in connecting students with physical activity opportunities in their local community. The interview excerpt 'So we have them take pictures of what they're doing in their community and bring those in to brainstorm some ideas of what activities they could do' (Q2-002) was also coded as local community; however, it differed from the previous excerpt as it made clear reference to a pedagogical strategy used to help students identify areas in their local communities where they could be physically active.

The analysis began with a distinct deductive categorization; the subsequent inductive phase, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, was not a linear progression. Instead, these two phases were highly iterative and recursive. As new patterns were interpreted inductively, it necessitated a return to the raw data and the

initial deductive categorization for re-evaluation. During the analysis, the first step in the inductive process involved re-familiarization with the dataset following the deductive analysis, where reflexive analytic notes were made. The second and third steps involved generating initial codes to identify broad themes within each orientation. The fourth step involved reviewing and refining the codes to identify similarities and differences within each orientation. Inductive analysis within orientations captured the variety of ways teachers applied contextualized instruction in practice. For example, everyday practices such as recess play, active commuting, or backyard games. Step five involved defining and naming themes within each orientation. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources, member checking, a transparent audit trail of analytical decisions, and attention to disconfirming evidence. Throughout this iterative process, inductive insights prompted a return to the data and the initial codes for deeper understandings of the existing interpretations.

Findings

All four teachers demonstrated the use of contextualized instruction in their teaching. Silseth and Erstad's (2018) five orientations of contextualized instruction are used to frame the findings and illustrate how teachers applied these orientations in their classrooms.

Local community

All teachers provided evidence of consistently connecting with local communities, however, they enacted this orientation in different ways. Within this orientation, there were two sub-themes: (a) teachers acting as 'brokers' between students and local stakeholders, and (b) teachers intentionally connecting physical education to movement opportunities in local natural and built environments. Together, these highlighted how teachers used the local community as a key anchor to contextualize instruction and make physical activity opportunities visible, relevant, and transferable.

Teachers as 'Brokers' between students and local stakeholders

Teachers were frequently observed making specific references to community stakeholders. References to these stakeholders also appeared in the interview data, in terms of both new and existing partnerships with community organizations (such as sports clubs) and to informal connections teachers had with students' families. These relationships helped teachers bridge what students were learning in physical education with opportunities beyond school. For example, Teachers S and N described collaborating with several local sports clubs and the reasons for doing so. Teacher N said, 'We partnered with the Cricket Academy in our area here. We also had the City Centre Rugby. That helped the kids think about what might be offered to them in their community and what that might look like' (N2-018).

Teacher R emphasized informal interactions that connected students and families with opportunities for physical activity in their local communities and aligned with what they were learning in physical education. She explained: 'We're very lucky that many of our younger kids have parents in the (school) yard. So in the morning before

school, I can chat with them but also with our parents (R2-005). These exchanges positioned the teacher as an activity ‘broker’, helping students navigate available community resources.

In addition to drawing on community relationships, teachers also posted information about community organizations on bulletin boards outside the gym or communicated with families about these organizations via email. For example, Teacher R said: Our parents that we don’t see [often] have become quite good at emailing. So, I’ll email them and say, ‘Hey, I noticed [...] your child really liked this during PE, here are a couple of things that we discussed that students might like to do outside of class’ (R2_005). These small but consistent practices expanded students’ and parents’ awareness of accessible opportunities for physical activity, demonstrating how physical education could extend into everyday life.

Teachers intentionally connected physical education to opportunities for movement in local natural and built environments

Teachers made intentional efforts to connect classroom content to students’ local geographical contexts. For example, Teacher Q designed a unit called ‘Active in my Community’, which focused on students’ personal descriptions of physical activity spaces. In a photovoice activity, students photographed their favourite locations for physical activity: ‘So we have them take pictures of what they’re doing in their community and bring those in to brainstorm some ideas of what activities they could do’ (Q2-002). These images not only informed his planning for the unit but also served as visual anchors for students, reinforcing which community spaces could be used for physical activity outside of class time.

Beyond specific lesson tasks, Teacher Q also displayed this information outside the gymnasium. One of his bulletin boards included a map with highlighted trails and pins marking local skate parks. In a reflexive note, I observed:

One of the boards showed a map with green lines highlighting a multi-use trail network for cycling, walking, running, rollerblading, etc. Teacher Q also placed pins where there are skate parks in each of the neighbourhoods to show the students where they could go if that’s what they like doing (Q_Observation_27May25).

This public display transformed local community resources into a visible, everyday part of the school environment that was explicitly linked to content that students were engaging with in physical education. Teacher R used similar visual tools. For instance, at the end of one class, she projected a map of the local neighbourhood for students. I noted:

This was the first time I saw a teacher bring out a map and a projector and show the students their neighbourhoods and the parks and paths in it. It was really interesting to see what the students knew about their neighbourhoods when it came to the green spaces around them and make explicit connections between the games they were doing in class and how they could modify them to play them in their own lives (Researcher Reflection, June 13).

In a follow-up interview, Teacher R emphasized the reason for doing this: ‘I think the main goal was just to see what they know about their neighbourhoods ... and getting them interacting and playing, hopefully in their neighbourhood’ (R2-001).

Teacher N also used mapping strategies, but for summative assessment. She incorporated photovoice projects at the end of the unit, asking students to take photographs that

connected what they learned in physical education with what they could do in their own communities. These summative tasks provided insights into students' knowledge and awareness of their local geographical contexts.

All four teachers emphasized the importance of being intentional in linking their instruction to students' local communities. For Teachers N, S, and R, this involved acting as a broker by forming partnerships and relationships that facilitated connections between physical education and local community resources. Teachers Q, R and N used reflective tasks and visual tools to highlight nearby, accessible spaces. Whether through external partnerships or mapping strategies, the local community served as a pedagogical anchor helping teachers expand students' awareness of accessible opportunities and reinforce the personal relevance of physical education experiences beyond the classroom.

Everyday practices

The orientation of everyday practice illustrates how teachers can align their planning to students' habitual movement patterns (Silseth and Erstad 2018). Unlike orientations based in students' local communities that may require extra coordination, everyday practices are immediate and routine (such as recess games, active commuting routes, or seasonal family activities), helping teachers make physical education familiar, accessible, and personally relevant.

Everyday movement

Teachers were observed intentionally aligning content with physical activities that they knew were already familiar to students. For example, Teacher N used Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), which encouraged students to sample various games within the same game category in the unit (in this case, Net/Wall games). By structuring her unit this way, she encouraged students to reflect on the formal and informal sports they enjoyed outside of physical education and expand on them during the unit by offering similar, yet different, games. She explained:

I had sent out the student activity form at the beginning of the unit, and it gave me a better sense of when students are being active ... some of them are in a league of some sort or a structured sport or activity, and then half of them always are active at recess [...] So it seemed like [...] half of them gravitated more towards non-traditional games ... more low-intensity, low-organizational games (N2-031).

For Teacher N, the idea of playing low-organizational games at school or in their communities resonated with many students who were not interested in, nor may have had opportunities to participate in, formal organized sports. She noted: 'We really wanted to just get outside, and we were like, 'What else can we do outside?', and that made a connection to what can I play at recess' (N1-012). Teacher N's knowledge of and goals for her students led her to offer different game categories, allowing students to see opportunities for accessible participation in their daily routines.

Teacher Q offered similar descriptions of explicitly aligning content with students' everyday practices. For example, he sought to incorporate students' modes of commuting within the city into his planning. The unit was planned in the spring, which was more conducive to active commuting for many students than at other times of the year

when there may be large accumulations of snow. While not all students chose cycling as their preferred mode of travel, the deliberate inclusion of local pathways in class discussions enabled them to envision opportunities for physical activity in their daily lives. Teacher Q spoke of this in his final interview:

Some would say I started biking because of this unit, but other kids would say, ‘Well, you mentioned the bike spots that are around me. I don’t bike on them, but I realize that there’s a walking path that gets me from here to there, and I don’t have to wait for my parents to pick me up after school’ (Q2-013).

Conversely, Teacher S’s knowledge of her students also helped her engage with content that could be applicable in students’ lives. For example, Teacher S was aware that students might want to remain physically active during the summer months, so finding ways to keep them engaged through accessible backyard or park games was an important part of her planning and decision-making. She said:

So that’s kind of how they were connecting what we did to what they’ve been doing before. [...] Mølkey was new to many of them, but they had other games, such as ladder ball game, and other things that they could think of, which were similar to the types of games they played at their cottage or in the summertime (S2-028).

By anchoring lessons in everyday practices such as recess play, active commuting, and seasonal activities, teachers created experiences that were potentially relevant and transferable for students, and reinforced the idea that physical activity is a natural part of daily life. These connections not only fostered engagement *in* physical education by drawing on familiar routines but also provided a foundation for promoting further participation *beyond* physical education. At the same time, teachers demonstrated an awareness that physical activity can also be shaped by students’ identities, values, and interests.

Personal issues

This theme explores how teachers oriented their instruction toward the personal dimensions of students’ lives, including who they are (identities), and what they value, enjoy, and experience both inside and outside of school. Teachers invited students to voice their preferences and ideas in the planning process and gave them choices about how they engaged with each activity, allowing for moments of game modification and creativity. These strategies created an environment that helped students be autonomous, make sense of the content in ways that are personally relevant, and express who they were as movers.

Valuing student voice and choice

Teachers oriented their instruction around students’ individual and collective preferences. They gave students choice in different ways, ranging from involving them in co-constructing parts of the unit to allowing them to select preferred activities, while also creating opportunities to advocate for themselves and their peers. Thus, being intentional about providing students with opportunities to share preferences in their learning resonated as a prominent aspect of contextualized instruction for the teachers. For example, after the unit, Teacher Q discussed his interpretation of contextualized instruction as a starting point for getting to know his students, saying: ‘The process of getting to

know your students. So, what are their personal interests? The big ones for me that I personally see as the most valuable are going to be what the students are interested in. So, the “Who” (Q2-039). Teacher Q demonstrates a mindset that prioritizes students’ backgrounds, identities, and interests as a launching point for planning. Teacher N echoed this notion after a group PD session, describing her conceptualization of contextualized instruction: ‘I think it’s very student-driven, student voice-centred, starting with the students in mind at the beginning’ (FG1-024).

Teacher N put this approach into practice by starting her planning with students’ identities in mind, offering a range of activity categories (based on TGfU) that allowed her students to select options that reflected their identities and interests. She noted:

I presented students with games that I have played outdoors with other classes in the past, and I said, ‘If there’s an activity or game not on this list that you’re interested in, feel free to let me know’. And then that brought up the whole discussion of students might have told me about a game or a sport that they’re interested in. And then we had to try to think about, oh, what category would this fall under? (N2-013).

As described in a previous section, Teacher Q adopted a different approach, beginning by understanding his students’ preferences through a photovoice activity. He described how students’ photos were used:

And then they wrote those on a Google slide (Q2-002) ... There were some that were obvious overlaps, like where the kids liked soccer as a possibility. So [the students and I] included that in the unit. Biking was another one that came through ... But we saw as many games as possible, target games, backyard games, stuff like that. And so our goal was really just to connect kids with those (Q2-003).

Teacher Q and N’s strategies for contextualized instruction and for orienting their teaching practices around students’ personal issues began with developing an understanding of their students’ interests, which helped determine students’ backgrounds and how they engaged with physical education content at the outset of the unit.

Fostering student agency through game modification

Teachers were frequently observed helping students modify activities to find success; however, this did not always mean encouraging students to adjust the level of challenge. Often, teachers prompted students to develop the ability to adapt games so they could be played beyond the gymnasium. For instance, Teacher R helped her students learn how to modify games by explicitly teaching them to use household items, promoting transfer into their own lives: ‘Taking a typical game that we would play and saying: “OK, you may not have this equipment at home. How can we play this without having to go to the store to buy the equipment?”’ (R2-002).

Based on Teacher R’s knowledge of her teaching context, she was aware that the cost of equipment might be a barrier to students enjoying similar games in their own lives. This also prompted her to contextualize her instruction so that students involved in sports could find value in learning game-based activities that could be applied to their own interests. She said:

I would say, ‘OK, how can we modify this? How could you play this game? How would this help you?’ ‘Oh, this is helping me with my defensive shuffle, or this is helping me with my

blast off,' for as long as you feed those kids the prompts, which are about how it helps them in their sport (R2-029).

Similarly, Teacher N helped students modify games they play at school into accessible ones they could play in their daily lives:

It's kind of nice to give them the opportunity to make it their own because there were maybe like five or six of them that were doing it, and they did more like a modified game and on a smaller pitch and had modified the rules a little bit to make it their own, right? (N2-054).

During our final interview, Teacher S commented on allowing students to make their own choices during a flag football lesson. Some students chose to practice throwing and catching, others chose a more realistic, rules-based version of the sport, while others modified it to a game they called Ultimate Football, a combination of football and ultimate frisbee: 'Some chose to go to a lower-organized activity of ultimate football, but I thought I'd help these kids feel seen because this is something new to them, still a little unfamiliar' (S2-012). For Ro, it was important to recognize students' preferences during lessons and create learning opportunities that spoke to them as individuals.

Across these instances, teachers' decisions and intentions reflected a consistent effort to contextualize their instruction with what students valued and preferred in their movement experiences. By inviting students to share their ideas, select activities, and modify how they participated, teachers created learning environments that were responsive to students' socioeconomic situations, personal interests, and movement identities. Amplifying student choice was a way to promote engagement, foster autonomy, and represent their identities so students could adapt activities and skills that supported agency within the classroom. In addition to these strategies, teachers also used equipment to help them conceptualize how to make these modifications a reality in their lives outside of school.

Concrete objects

In this research, typical physical education equipment could be conceptualized as concrete objects; however, this is often expensive and inaccessible for most students (e.g. volleyball nets). Rather than traditional equipment, teachers often used household items or materials to help students take their learning beyond the classroom, demonstrating how these objects mediated learning for deeper meaning-making in the classroom. For example, Teacher R reflected on a previous unit where she used her sock as a way to play bean-bag toss, saying: 'I actually took my sock off and whipped my like, tucked my shoe off and, you know, whipped my sock off and turned it into a little mini bean bag' (R2-017). Teacher R explained that she showed her students how easy it was to create a game using household objects, saying, 'it's more so the socioeconomic piece at our particular school, now, we talked about that, like: "You probably don't have this equipment, but how can you still play a game without it?"' (R2_028). Similarly, Teacher N incorporated diverse, accessible equipment to help students understand how to apply the games and skills they learned in class to their lives outside of school. I observed Teacher N discussing this:

The students chose their groups, game, rules, and objects. Teacher N explained why the mats are set up, so students can see that they can play in different ways and set up a court. She said

to the students, ‘You can also use chalk, or an obstacle, use sticks, or string with a sheet over it for a net.’ She’s helping them find ways to modify activities to make it their own and asks them where they might be able to do these activities in their own lives (N_Observation_12June25).

In another instance, Teacher R made use of Google Maps to demonstrate specific locations where students could apply their learning outside the classroom. Although this helped students make connections to local communities (see Researcher Reflection, June 13), it was a clear example of a digital artifact that explicitly connected school-based instruction to opportunities beyond the classroom.

Across the broader dataset, the use of concrete objects was primarily characterized by adaptation rather than conceptual elaboration. Teachers frequently instructed students to utilize everyday household items as substitutes for standard physical education equipment. The stated purpose of these substitutions was to demonstrate that participation did not require specialized gear. Consequently, the data revealed that while objects were often used to facilitate access and replicate activities at home, there were fewer instances in which artifacts were employed to mediate conceptual understanding of the games themselves. This practical orientation reflects an awareness of equity, as teachers helped students recognize that physical activity can be inclusive and low-cost.

Knowledge from travelling abroad/diverse cultures

This orientation was also not strongly represented in the data; however, some teachers did refer to cultural aspects of students’ identities and histories, both of which could be considered personal issues or connected to cultural traditions of newcomer immigrants. For example, Teacher R reflected on a time when a first-generation immigrant student was excited that cricket was being discussed, ‘We now have a cricket set because a kid is like, “Oh, my dad plays cricket ... He said he would come in and do this with us”. So now we know we’re starting in September with some cricket’ (R2_030). Beyond this excerpt, there was insufficient data to support teachers’ intentional enactment of this orientation.

Discussion

In this research, we provide evidence of four primary physical education teachers’ enactment of contextualized instruction and demonstrate how it supported them in making pedagogical decisions that incorporated local community resources, students’ lived experiences, and identities. Using Silseth and Erstad’s (2018) framework as both a guide for pedagogy and an analytic lens, three orientations for contextualizing instruction were most prominent: local community, everyday practices, and personal issues. Teachers used maps, bulletin boards, and community stakeholders to intentionally and explicitly link classroom learning to local natural and built environments. This created conditions that may increase students’ awareness of and opportunities to be physically active beyond the classroom – a long-standing aspiration in physical education curricula (Casey et al. 2014; Kilborn, Lorusso, and Francis 2016). These findings illustrate Kretchmar’s (2000) proposal for physical education teachers to act as ‘activity brokers’ (24) in supporting how students can connect learning experiences from inside and outside the

classroom. In doing so, teachers help students see the relevance of their learning experiences and link movement opportunities across their own contexts and lived realities.

Teachers acknowledged and incorporated students' everyday movement routines, such as recess play, seasonal outdoor activities, and active commuting, into the fabric of their lessons. These practices exemplified an effort to connect curricular learning with familiar patterns of movement participation, anchoring lessons in the routines and realities already present in students' daily experiences (Cheng et al. 2022). By foregrounding routines that students habitually engaged in, teachers both implicitly and explicitly acknowledged barriers to students' access and participation and positioned physical activity as a natural extension of daily experience rather than a solely school-bound endeavour.

A further key feature of teachers' enactment of contextualized instruction was its role in acknowledging students' voices and identities. This went beyond simply listening and intentionally incorporated students' preferences, local knowledge, and personal experiences to inform task design and activity selection, which could contribute to the meaningfulness students experience (Walseth, Engebretsen, and Elvebakk 2018). Furthermore, their approaches exemplify democratic and culturally responsive pedagogies that affirm students' identities by situating learning within their sociocultural realities (Paris and Alim 2017; Pill et al. 2022). In this way, teachers helped students move beyond mere participation, becoming active contributors to the design of their own learning, thereby reinforcing the relational and democratic dimensions of physical education. Beyond specific orientations, teachers' use of contextualized instruction served as a practical enactment of democratic pedagogies. By providing opportunities for voice, choice, and autonomous decision-making, teachers reinforced the pedagogical processes of meaningful physical education (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2022).

Conversely, the limited presence of the 'concrete objects' and 'knowledge from abroad' orientations may reveal that physical education tends to privilege spatial and interpersonal contextualization (e.g. community and identity) over material and travel forms of contextualization (Silseth and Erstad 2018). This finding echoes an observation by Quennerstedt, Almqvist, and Öhman (2011) that physical education pedagogy often renders artifacts invisible, focusing instead on the mover rather than the material conditions that shape and promote movement. From a sociocultural perspective, while concrete objects can function as mediating artifacts that support learners in imagining and enacting movement beyond school (Silseth 2018), this dimension appeared underdeveloped in this research. Thus, future research may examine how material tools can further support contextualized instruction to ensure that the material dimension of learning in physical education is not overlooked.

A limitation of this study is that it did not measure behavioural outcomes (e.g. student physical activity rates outside of physical education); however, facilitating explicit connections to students' lives frames physical education as an everyday resource rather than a standalone subject, fostering the connectivity and learning transfer required for sustained, lifelong participation (Bronkhorst and Akkerman 2016; Penney and Jess 2004). While we cannot claim behavioural change from the students' perspective, this research illustrates how thoughtful and intentional program design can help create the conditions for students to become aware of, identify with, and make use of opportunities for physical activity in their daily lives (Parker et al. 2018).

Taken together, these insights advance knowledge by offering practice-based evidence of teachers' enactment of contextualized instruction within primary physical education. In doing so, this research contributes to calls for pedagogies that are relational and contextually oriented, and help students identify, experience, and reflect on accessible options for movement across the lifespan (Fletcher and Ní Chróinín 2022). Until now, examples of contextualization practices have lacked a practical framework to guide teachers' enactment and its study. Contextualized instruction offers a coherent framework that can help teachers facilitate outcomes aligned with sociocultural learning theory. We position contextualized instruction as a student-centred pedagogical framework that facilitates a reciprocal exchange of learning between school and community contexts, supporting calls to situate movement learning in personally relevant, authentic and meaningful ways (Fletcher et al. 2021).

Future research should foreground students' perspectives to better understand how they interpret and experience contextualized learning opportunities and examine how such practices shape their movement identities and participation beyond school. Additionally, there is a need to explore professional learning structures (e.g. teacher education and ongoing PD) and school-community partnerships that can support teachers in designing and sustaining contextualized approaches in diverse educational contexts. Moreover, there may be value in examining teachers' sustained enactment of contextualization over time. Taken together, these directions can advance efforts to redesign physical education as a relational, context-rich, and empowering space in which all students encounter meaningful opportunities for movement both within and beyond school.

Conclusion

This research provides practice-based evidence of how contextualized instruction can be enacted in primary physical education, demonstrating concrete pedagogical strategies that meaningfully connect curriculum with young people's lives and community contexts (Lawson 2018). If the purpose of physical education is to foster lifelong engagement and relevance, then it is necessary to identify pedagogies that enable teachers to intentionally and explicitly make these connections part of their practice. We conclude that contextualized instruction can serve as one such framework and has the potential to support personally relevant and meaningful movement experiences and may promote learning across boundaries between school, home, and community settings (Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Beni, Fletcher, and Ní Chróinín 2017).

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