Using Engaged Pedagogy to Increase Participation, Motivation, and Belonging in Physical Education

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

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- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved

Table of Contents

Abstract

This action research project examined how incorporating engaged pedagogy increased student participation, motivation, and sense of belonging in a middle school physical education classroom. Grounded in bell hooks' theory of engaged pedagogy, this study focused on how student choice, peer collaboration, flexible pacing, and inclusive instructional practices influenced engagement during a five-lesson track and field unit. Data was collected through teacher reflection journals, teacher observations, student-generated artifacts, and feedback from a mentor teacher. Findings revealed three major themes. First, student participation increased when students were given choice and autonomy during the culminating activity of the lesson. Second, student motivation was enhanced through social interaction and peer collaboration, particularly when students worked with partners to record attempts, provide encouragement, and move through stations together. Third, students developed a stronger sense of belonging when the lesson structure emphasized effort, participation, and flexible entry points rather than performance alone. Overall, the findings suggest that engaged pedagogy can support more inclusive and meaningful physical education experiences by creating conditions where students feel more ownership, connection, and confidence in their learning. This project helped me better understand how my instructional decisions as a teacher can shape student engagement and create a more supportive physical education environment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mentor teacher and second reader for their guidance, patience, and support throughout my student teaching experience and action research project. They both welcomed me into their classroom, trusted me to work with their students, and helped me grow more confident in my role as a physical education teacher. Their feedback, encouragement, and willingness to let me try new instructional strategies were an important part of this project and my development as an educator.

I am also grateful to the students who were part of this project. Their participation, effort, patience, honesty, and willingness to engage in new learning experiences shaped the direction of this research and reminded me why this work matters. They helped me better understand the importance of creating a physical education space where students feel capable, supported, and included.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, friends, and support system for encouraging me throughout my MAT program. Their patience, reassurance, and belief in me helped me continue moving forward, especially during the most challenging times of this process. This project represents not only my growth as a teacher, but also the support of the people who helped me get here.

Chapter 1: Introduction

My journey as both a student and an educator has been shaped by a deep curiosity about what makes learning meaningful and joyful. I grew up in Grants Pass, Oregon, attending Fruitdale Elementary, Lincoln Savage Middle School, and Hidden Valley High School within the Three Rivers School District. My experiences in these schools were overwhelmingly positive. I enjoyed supportive teachers, structured classrooms, and opportunities to participate in sports and extracurricular activities. As a White, athletic, and socially comfortable student, I fit easily into the system and rarely encountered barriers to participation or success. Looking back, I realize that this comfort came not only from effort or ability, but from a school environment built for students like me.

When I reflect on my K-12 years, I recognize how invisible privilege shaped me. I never had to question whether I was seen, represented, or supported in class. My interests in athletics were nurtured largely through parental support, particularly by my mother, who coached me in two of the three sports I played, and my success was most meaningfully celebrated within the running community, where sustained recognition reinforced my identity as a capable athlete. Yet I now understand that this sense of belonging was not universal. During my higher education experience, readings like Garcia et al (2012) and Hines (2016) opened my eyes to the structural inequities that have long existed within U.S. education. Garcia and colleagues describe how Mexican American students in early twentieth-century California were segregated into underfunded, overcrowded schools and tracked toward manual labor, while Hines' research highlights how Black communities fought for access to education as a form of liberation. These historical examples showed me that the "normal" schooling I experienced was not neutral - it was reflective of systems that have historically privileged some identities over others.

As I enter the teaching profession, I carry this awareness with me. My positive experiences in physical education were not simply the result of personal effort; they were shaped by an environment that valued athleticism, competition, and conformity. For many of my current middle school students, those same features of physical education can be sources of alienation. I have observed students who disengage because they feel self-conscious about their bodies, lack confidence in their abilities, or simply don't see themselves as "athletic". Others struggle because competitive games or rigid grading systems reinforce hierarchies rather than community. As a teacher candidate, I've come to see that student engagement in physical education is not only about participation - it's about belonging, motivation, and emotional safety.

This issue is significant to me both personally and professionally. Personally, I aim for every student to feel the same sense of encouragement and confidence that I experienced, but without the exclusivity that often accompanies traditional physical education. Professionally, engagement lies at the heart of effective teaching. If students are not mentally and emotionally invested, learning cannot be sustained. I want to understand how to design learning experiences that welcome every student - those who love movement and those who are hesitant - to find success, joy and purpose in physical education.

The focus of my action research, therefore, is to explore how engaged pedagogy can increase student participation, motivation, and sense of belonging in middle school physical education. By examining how teaching practices, relationships, and classroom culture affect engagement, I hope to contribute to a model of physical education that honors all learners. This inquiry also connects directly to my identity as a teacher in training. My MAT coursework has continually challenged me to reflect on who I am in the classroom, whose experiences I center, and how my beliefs align with the broader goals of education. I believe that physical education

should not simply teach motor skills - it should empower students to understand their bodies, develop healthy relationships, and build confidence that extends beyond the gym. To achieve this, I must teach not only through physical activity, but also through care, empathy, and connection.

The remainder of this chapter introduces the philosophical and theoretical foundations that ground my study. The next section explains how bell hooks' (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy provides a framework for understanding student engagement through community, care, and mutual growth. Following that, I will connect this theory to professional standards such as the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards, which emphasize inclusive environments, responsive instruction, and professional reflection. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary and a transition to the literature review in chapter two, which explores current research on engagement, motivation, and belonging in physical education.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory: Engaged Pedagogy

My approach to teaching and my action research are grounded in hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, a framework that calls on educators to teach in ways that nurture both the mind and the heart. Within hooks' framework of engaged pedagogy, traditional schooling is critiqued for emphasizing discipline, hierarchy, and content mastery over personal connection and critical thought. In contrast, engaged pedagogy frames education as a practice of freedom - one in which both teachers and students are active participants in a shared journey of growth, healing, and transformation.

According to hooks' (1994), engaged pedagogy requires teachers to bring their whole selves into the classroom. It demands authenticity, vulnerability, and the willingness to care. She writes, "To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn, that

comes from the capacity to love." This idea has resonated deeply with me. I have witnessed how relationships built on trust and empathy can motivate students to try new activities, take risks, and connect learning to their own lives. In physical education, where students often experience anxiety about performance, body image, or peer comparison, an ethic of care is essential for engagement.

Engaged pedagogy also extends Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes dialogue and shared learning between teacher and student. Freire urged educators to reject the "banking model" of education, in which knowledge is deposited into passive learners. Engaged pedagogy positions transformation as the result of teachers modeling self-actualization while fostering students' emotional and spiritual development, an idea advanced by hooks'. This theoretical stance directly informs my own beliefs as a physical educator, as I view physical education as a critical site for developing the whole person - not only physical competence, but also reflection, cooperation, and community belonging.

One of the key principles of engaged pedagogy is mutual participation. In my teaching, this means involving students in decision making: allowing them to design warm-ups, select activities, or co-create fitness goals. These opportunities help students see themselves as agents of their learning rather than passive participants. It also means being transparent about my own learning process. When I share with students that I am trying a new instructional strategy or refining a class routine, it communicates that learning is a shared human experience, not a one-way transaction.

Another central concept is holistic engagement. Within hooks' work, teachers are challenged to intentionally connect the intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions of learning. In physical education, this idea is especially powerful because movement inherently

bridges these domains. I can use reflective discussion, goal-setting, and cooperative games to help students see how physical activity relates to emotional regulation, teamwork, and self-esteem. John Dewey (1916) similarly argued that education should connect experience to reflection - a principle I apply by guiding students to debrief after challenging activities through specific prompts that ask them to identify decision-making strategies, emotional responses to success or failure, and evidence of personal growth beyond performance outcomes or competition.

Engaged pedagogy also values joy and healing as legitimate educational outcomes. In hooks' (1994) work, teaching is framed as life-affirming, with joy positioned as central to the process of liberation. I have seen this in moments when students laugh together during a new game, celebrate a peer's progress, or show pride in achieving a personal fitness goal. These moments are not trivial; they are evidence that learning can restore confidence and connection. As Grace Lee Boggs (2012) notes, social transformation begins with small acts of renewal and community building. For me, that transformation begins in the gym through a classroom culture that honors each student's dignity and potential by establishing clear norms of respect, offering multiple ways for students to participate and succeed, and emphasizing effort, collaboration, and personal growth over comparison or performance alone.

Finally, engaged pedagogy demands ongoing self-reflection. Within hooks' framework, teachers are called to remain self-aware and to continually examine how their positionality, biases, and emotions shape their teaching practice. This expectation has resonated with my experience as a teacher candidate, as my self-reflection has taken place both during and after lessons. During instruction, I intentionally monitor the energy I bring into the gym, the tone and language I use to motivate students, and how my expectations may implicitly encourage or

discourage participation. After class, I reflect on moments of student engagement or withdrawal by reviewing lesson outcomes, recalling specific interactions, and asking myself what instructional choices may have influenced student responses. When I notice disengagement, I no longer interpret it solely as student misbehavior; instead, I view it as feedback on the learning environment and my instructional decisions. This shift in perspective reflects Freire's (1970) belief that teachers are also learners and that humility is essential to authentic education.

In the context of my action research, engaged pedagogy offers both a philosophy and a practical framework. It challenges me to examine not just how students behave but why they engage or withdraw. It encourages me to design learning experiences that affirm identity, promote agency, and build relationships. Most importantly, it reminds me that engagement is not achieved through control - it is cultivated through connection.

By grounding my work in engaged pedagogy, I hope to contribute to a model of physical education that celebrates diversity, fosters confidence, and promotes lifelong wellness. In the next section, I will connect these beliefs to specific InTASC Standards that guide professional practice and reflect the competencies needed to implement this philosophy in real classrooms.

Connection to InTASC Standards

As I continue to grow as an educator, I rely on professional frameworks like the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Standards to help translate my philosophy into practice. These standards outline what effective teaching looks like across all content areas and grade levels. They emphasize that great teaching is not only about delivering instruction - it is about building inclusive, learner-centered environments that nurture growth, equity, and reflection. My professional goals as a physical educator align strongly with several of these standards, particularly standard 2 (learning differences), standard 3 (learning

environments), standard 5 (application of content), standard 8 (instructional strategies), and standard 9 (professional learning and ethical practice).

Learning Differences (Standard 2)

Standard 2 reminds teachers to "use understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments" (CCSSO, 2013, p. 10). Engaged pedagogy directly supports this goal because it centers human connection and affirms every learner's identity. In physical education, differences in ability, confidence, and physicality are visible and sometimes stigmatized. I strive to design activities that value progress over performance - using tiered tasks, peer support, and flexible grouping - so that all students, regardless of athletic skill, feel capable and included. In hooks' (1994) work, teachers are urged to honor the lived experiences of their students; for me, this means intentionally creating space for multiple definitions of success and celebrating diverse ways of moving, learning, and participating.

Learning Environments (Standard 3)

Creating a supportive and engaging learning environment is at the heart of my action research. Standard 3 emphasizes that teachers should "work with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning" (CCSSO, 2013, p. 11). In physical education, this involves more than classroom management - it means cultivating trust, empathy, and cooperation. I use routines that help students transition smoothly, peer-led warm-ups that promote ownership, and restorative conversations that rebuild relationships when conflicts arise. These strategies mirror hooks' belief that learning communities thrive when students feel safe to express themselves and take risks. A gym that operates on care and respect rather than control allows students to reimagine physical education as a space of belonging rather than performance.

Application of Content (Standard 5)

Standard 5 calls on teachers to connect content knowledge to meaningful, real-world applications. For physical education, this involves teaching students not only *how* to move but *why* movement matters for physical, mental, and social well-being. Engaged pedagogy supports this by encouraging students to link their experiences in class to personal wellness goals and community engagement. For example, after completing a cooperative fitness circuit, I invite students to reflect on how teamwork and perseverance apply outside of school. Dewey (1916) believed that learning should connect experience and reflection; this principle underlies how I help students translate physical learning into life skills such as resilience, collaboration, and self-awareness.

Instructional Strategies (Standard 8)

Designing instruction that actively engages learners is central to my teaching philosophy and action research. InTASC Standard 8 emphasizes that teachers should "understand and use a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections, and to build skills to apply knowledge in meaningful ways" (CCSSO, 2013, p. 14). In physical education, this means moving beyond one-size-fits-all instruction toward learning experiences that invite student voice and shared responsibility. I use station rotations, structured student-choice time, and goal-setting reflections to promote autonomy, critical thinking, and collaboration. These strategies reflect hooks' (1994) characterization of engaged pedagogy as dynamic and participatory, where knowledge is co-created rather than delivered. When students have opportunities to influence how they practice and demonstrate learning, they invest more deeply in the process. This instructional

approach also aligns with Freire's (1970) call for dialogic education, in which teachers and students share responsibility for meaning-making and learning.

Professional Learning and Ethical Practice (Standard 9)

Ongoing professional reflection and ethical growth are essential to sustaining responsive teaching practices. InTASC Standard 9 states that teachers should "engage in ongoing professional learning and use evidence to continually evaluate their practice, particularly the effects of their choices and actions on others" (CCSSO, 2013, p. 15). This expectation directly informs my action research process, as I systematically examine my instructional decisions and their impact on student engagement and participation. Engaged pedagogy requires educators to remain open to self-critique and transformation, a commitment emphasized in hooks' (1994) work on reflective teaching. My self-reflection takes shape through post-lesson journaling, analysis of student responses, and feedback conversations with my mentor teacher, all of which help me identify patterns of engagement and areas for growth. Each lesson becomes an opportunity to refine my practice, ensuring that my teaching remains responsive to students' evolving needs and grounded in ethical responsibility.

Taken together, these InTASC Standards form a professional framework that grounds my personal philosophy in recognized best practices. They affirm that engagement is not incidental to learning - it is fundamental. By aligning engaged pedagogy with these standards, I am building a professional identity that values inclusion, empathy, and continuous improvement. In my physical education classroom, these standards come alive through everyday moments: the way I greet students at the door, the care I take in grouping teams, and the patience I show when a student hesitates to participate. Each decision reflects a commitment to teaching the whole

child - body, mind, and spirit - in line with both hooks' philosophy and the professional ideals of effective, ethical teaching.

Summary

Reflecting on my own educational journey and the teachers who shaped me has clarified why this research on student engagement in middle school physical education is so important to my personal and professional growth. I was fortunate to experience supportive, well-resourced schools where I felt seen and encouraged. However, through my coursework and clinical teaching, I have come to recognize that not all students share those same experiences of belonging. For many, physical education can be intimidating, exclusionary, or disconnected from their interests and identities. This realization drives my commitment to transform physical education into a space where every student feels valued, capable, and excited to participate.

This chapter established the philosophical and theoretical foundation for that goal. By grounding my action research in hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, I have adopted a framework that prioritizes care, community, and empowerment. Engaged pedagogy teaches that learning should engage the whole person - mind, body, and spirit - and that teachers must model the vulnerability, empathy, and reflection they wish to see in their students. This approach aligns naturally with physical education, where movement and emotional connection are intertwined. It also connects with the principles of Paulo Freire (1970) and John Dewey (1916), who both emphasized active participation and experiential learning. Collectively, these ideas remind me that genuine engagement emerges from trust, relevance, and shared ownership of the learning process.

In addition, aligning my philosophy with the InTASC Standards (CCSSO, 2013) helped me translate these beliefs into actionable professional goals. Standards 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9 - focusing

on learning differences, environments, application of content, instructional strategies, and professional learning - provide a structure through which I can operationalize engaged pedagogy in my teaching practice. Whether through differentiated activities, cooperative games, or reflective dialogue, each standard reinforces my intention to foster inclusive, equitable, and joyful participation in physical education.

In summary, my philosophy of education is grounded in the conviction that engagement is relational - that learning occurs when students feel safe, respected, and connected to both the content and their community. Through this lens, physical education becomes not just a class about fitness or skill, but a platform for empowerment, self-discovery, and social connection. In chapter two, I will review relevant literature that examines the factors influencing student engagement in physical education, including motivational theories, culturally responsive practices, and the role of teacher-student relationships. This review will provide a research-based foundation for my action plan, offering insights into how engaged pedagogy can be effectively implemented to improve participation and belonging for all middle school students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The focus of my action research project was understanding how to improve student motivation in physical education, primarily for middle school students who often experience declining engagement during adolescence. I conducted this review in order to learn what scholars had identified as the key factors that shaped students' willingness to participate, the emotional and social conditions that supported motivation, and the teaching practices most strongly linked to positive experiences in physical education. With my theoretical framework being drawn from hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, I was especially interested in literature that explored care, connection, autonomy, community building, and the relational dimensions of student motivation. Reviewing this research allowed me to develop a clearer understanding of how these ideas appeared in real physical education classrooms and how they related to students' feelings of competence, belonging, and intrinsic interest.

To build my annotated bibliography, I conducted searches through Western Oregon University's library databases. I selected articles using the search terms "motivation in physical education", "middle school physical education", and "hooks' engaged pedagogy", which helped me find studies focused on student motivation, adolescent physical education populations, and pedagogical theories connected to my framework. I chose these terms intentionally to capture research that addressed both the practical and theoretical sides of my project–the day-to-day experiences of students in physical education as well as the deeper educational philosophies that shaped how teachers understand and cultivate motivation. By reviewing these studies, theoretical analyses, and intervention-based research, I was able to gather a wide range of perspectives that collectively informed how I might design more motivating, and engaged physical education learning environments for my students.

Van Doren, N., Compernolle, S., Bouten, A., Haerens, L., Hesters, L., Sanders, T., Slembrouck, M., De Cocker, K. (2025). How is observed (de)motivating teaching associated with student motivation and device-based physical activity during physical education? *European Physical Education Review*, 31(4), 541-562. DOI 10.1177/1356336X24

In this 2025 study, Van Doren et al. sought to determine how physical education teachers' observed motivating and demotivating behaviors relate to students' motivation, in-class physical activity, and sedentary behavior during lessons. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the circumplex model of (de)motivating teaching, the authors examined how specific teaching approaches - such as attuning, demanding, guiding, or abandoning - impact students' experiences in classrooms. Using a cross-sectional design, the researchers recorded one lesson for each of 79 secondary physical education teachers, coded 43 teaching behaviors using the SIS-PE-Coder, and controlled student data from 885 adolescents through motivation questionnaires and accelerometers measuring in-class MVPA and sedentary time. Results indicated that attuning behaviors (e.g., offering enjoyable or innovative activities) positively predicated students' intrinsic motivation, whereas demanding and abandoning behaviors undermined it, with demanding behaviors also increasing introjected regulation. Interestingly, the demanding approach showed a dual effect - directly increasing in-class moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) but indirectly lowering MVPA due to reduced intrinsic motivation - highlighting short-term versus long-term trade-offs. No motivating approaches were directly related to MVPA or sedentary time, suggesting that only certain pressuring behaviors shift immediate activity levels. From my perspective, this study reinforces hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy by demonstrating that students respond best when teachers create

emotionally attuned, respectful, and student-centered environments rather than relying on pressure or neglect. The findings also supported my focus on student motivation in physical education by showing that while demanding strategies may create temporary compliance or activity, they ultimately damage intrinsic motivation, which aligns with hooks' argument that coercive teaching diminishes authentic student engagement. For my physical education practice, this underscores the importance of adopting attuning behaviors - such as offering enjoyable variations, acknowledging student perspectives, and supporting autonomy - to build genuine motivation and long-term participation in physical activity.

Coteron, J., Fernandez-Caballero, J., Martin-Hoz, L., and Franco, E. (2024). The interplay of structuring and controlling teaching styles in physical education and its impact on students' motivation and engagement. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(836).

In their 2024 study, Coteron et al. investigated how different combinations of structuring and controlling teaching styles influence students' motivation, basic psychological needs, and engagement in physical education classrooms. The authors grounded their research in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the circumplex model to understand how teachers' interpersonal behaviors support or frustrate students' psychological needs. Using a cross-sectional design, they surveyed 56 physical education teachers and 540 students with validated questionnaires measuring teaching styles, motivational regulations, need satisfaction and frustration, and student engagement. Their analysis revealed three teacher profiles - high structure-low control, high structure-high control, and low structure-low control - showing that the high structure-low control profile

produced the most adaptive outcomes, including higher autonomous motivation, lower amotivaiton, greater need satisfaction, and stronger behavioral engagement. The authors concluded that physical education teachers should provide clear expectations and supportive guidance while avoiding controlling practices, as control increases psychological need frustration and undermines motivation. My personal analysis was that these findings strongly align with hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which emphasizes care, empowerment, and student agency over domination, reinforcing my focus on improving student motivation in physical education. This study provided empirical support for the idea that students thrive when teachers create structured yet autonomy-supportive environments, a principle central to both SDT and engaged pedagogy. Overall, the article strengthened the theoretical grounding of my project by demonstrating that motivation and engagement increase when students feel respected, supported, and meaningfully involved in their learning process.

Lambert, K., Hudson, C., & Luguetti, C. (2024). What would bell hooks' think of the remote teaching and learning in physical education during the COVID-19 pandemic? A critical review of the literature. *Sport, Education, and Society*, 29(6), 667-683.

In their 2023 critical review, Melero-Canas et al. examined how remote physical education during the COVID-19 pandemic aligned - or conflicted - with hooks' vision of engaged, liberatory pedagogy. Using hooks' theoretical framework as the central analytic lens, the authors evaluated existing scholarship on online physical education to explore how care, community, empowerment and anti-oppressive teaching were (or were not) upheld during remote learning. They conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed

studies published between 2020 and 2022, synthesizing research that documented teachers' strategies, student experiences, technological challenges, and pedagogical shifts across multiple countries during pandemic-based school closures. The researchers found that remote physical education frequently fell short of hooks' pedagogical principles, especially in its inability to cultivate genuine community, relational care, and student agency - conditions that hooks' deemed essential for meaningful learning. Their review also highlighted that many students experienced disengagement, inequitable access to resources, and a loss of embodied, joyful movement opportunities. Although some teachers attempted creative, student-centered adaptations, the overall conclusion was that remote physical education often reproduced traditional, top-down, task-focused instruction rather than participatory and critical approaches hooks' advocated. My analysis was that this article strengthened my understanding of hooks' engaged pedagogy by showing how easily motivation and connection deteriorate when learning environments lack relationships, dialogue, and shared power. For my action research on student motivation in physical education, the review reinforced that autonomy, belonging, and care are not "extras" - they are fundamental elements that sustain engagement, especially during challenging circumstances. This work also pushed me to think critically about how my in-person physical education instruction can intentionally build the community, joy, and empowerment that hooks' believed were central to humanizing education.

Murillo-Morano, J., Calmaestra, J., Morente, A., Benitez-Sillero, J.D. (2025) Influence of School Bullying on Motivation in Physical Education Classes. *Journal of School Violence,* 24(1), 64-80.

In their 2025 study, Murillo-Morano et al. investigated how gender, age, and different bullying roles like the victim, perpetrator, active bystander, and passive bystander both in a physical education classroom and the broader school context are related to students' motivation toward physical education. Grounded in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the authors examined how self-determined versus controlled forms of motivation, summarized in a self-determination index, connect to students' experiences of bullying and their responses as bystanders. Using a cross-sectional design, they surveyed 1,352 Spanish students from late primary through upper secondary school, who completed questionnaires on bullying involvement (victimization and perpetration), motivation in physical education (intrinsic, identified, introjected, external, and amotivation), and attitudes as active or passive bystanders, with data analyzed via t-tests, ANOVA, correlations, and multiple regression models. Their results showed that boys reported higher intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, and self-determination. On the other hand, girls showed slightly higher demotivation, and that increasing age predicted lower self-determined motivation and higher demotivation toward physical education. Victimization in both physical education and the general school environment was associated with lower intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, and self-determination, and with higher external regulation and demotivation, whereas active defending behavior predicted more self-determined motivation, and passive bystanding predicted greater external regulation, demotivation, and lower self-determination. The authors concluded

that fostering active defense of victims and reducing the association victimization through physical education based interventions was crucial for supporting students' autonomous motivation and a healthier classroom climate. From my perspective, this study strongly resonates with hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which insists that meaningful learning requires classrooms grounded in safety, care, and community rather than fear, humiliation, or silence in the face of harm. The findings underscored that student motivation in physical education is not just about the activities or content but about whether students feel protected, respected, and supported by both peers and teachers, which directly aligned with my research focus on cultivating motivation through relational and emotional safety. This article pushed me to see anti-bullying work, the promotion of active bystanders, and the creation of cooperative, non-shaming learning tasks as central practices for building an engaged, hooks'-inspired physical education environment where all students can participate with confidence and agency.

Reppy, D., & Larwin, K.H. (2020). The Association Between Perception of Caring and Intrinsic Motivation. *The Journal of Education,* 200(1), 48-61. DOI 10.1177/00220574-9875-23

In their 2020 study, Reppy and Larwin explored how urban middle school students' perceptions of feeling cared for within their school environment relate to their intrinsic motivation for learning. Drawing on concerns about declining academic engagement in adolescence, the authors sought to better understand whether students' sense of being supported by teachers, peers, and administrators could predict motivational outcomes. To investigate this relationship, the researchers conducted a large quantitative survey with over 700 students in grades 6-8, gathering demographic data alongside responses to

school-climate questions informed by Noddings's care theory and items from the Academic Motivation Scale. They used ANOVA, correlations, and regression analyses to examine how perceptions of care, perceptions of the school environment, and socioeconomic status interacted with intrinsic motivation. The study was grounded in Noddings's (1984) ethics of care, positioning the teacher-student relationship as a reciprocal dynamic in which authentic caring can influence students' emotional, social, and academic development. Results indicated that students who felt more cared for by teachers and peers reported higher intrinsic motivation, and that positive perceptions of the overall school environment significantly predicted motivational outcomes. Interestingly, socioeconomic status did not moderate these relationships, suggesting that caring relationships may support motivation regardless of economic background. The authors concluded that improving social-emotional learning structures and strengthening caring relationships in schools may boost student engagement and academic success. From my perspective of a future physical educator guided by hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, this study reinforced the importance of relational teaching as central to student motivation. In physical education - where students are often vulnerable, self-conscious, or hesitant - cultivating genuine care, belonging, and reciprocity aligns closely with hook's call for educators to teach in ways that honor students' full humanity. The findings affirm that when students feel truly cared for, they are more likely to take risks, stay engaged, and develop intrinsic motivation, which directly supports my action research focus on strengthening motivation in middle school physical education contexts.

Denham, M., Miller, L.M., McCauley, J.K., Schieber, D., Morrison, T.L., & Drumm, C. (2024). *This Is Why We Do It: Faculty Motivations for Embracing Community-Engaged Pedagogy.* 16(1), 38-55.

In their 2024 study, Denham et al. investigated what motivates higher-education faculty to adopt and persist with community-engaged pedagogy, particularly in the context of rebuilding such efforts after the COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant decline in course offerings. To explore these motivations, the authors conducted a narrative content analysis of 36 archived nomination packets for a university-wide community engagement teaching award, coding faculty responses through iterative dyad review, constant comparison, and qualitative software analysis to identify themes across student-centered, faculty-centered, community-centered, and institution-centered motivations. Although the article draws on multiple theories of motivation - such as the Self-Determination Theory and Faculty Engagement Model - its analytic foundation ultimately centers social capital theory, using bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital to interpret why faculty are drawn to and remain committed to community-engaged teaching. The results indicated that student-centered motivations dominated the dataset, with faculty frequently citing students' real-world experience, career readiness, skill development, civic responsibility, and increased enthusiasm as primary reasons for using community engaged pedagogy. Community benefits, particularly the opportunity to support partners and produce tangible local impact, emerged as the second-strongest theme, while institutional motivations - such as reputation enhancement and alignment with mission - also played a notable role. In contrast, faculty-center benefits such as personal fulfillment or scholarly opportunities appeared much less frequently, suggesting that faculty

undertake this labor primarily for students and communities rather than for professional advancement. From my perspective, this article aligned closely with hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which frames teaching as a relational, community-rooted practice grounded in mutual care, shared responsibility, and the nurturing of human potential. In physical education settings, the emphasis on real-world experiences, civic engagement, and relationship-building mirrors hooks' view that education should connect students to their communities and empower them through meaningful participation rather than passive compliance. This study reinforced my belief that student motivation in physical education grows when learning feels purposeful and connected to something larger than gym walls - whether that is community health, teamwork, or collective well-being - which strengthened the foundation for my action research project.

Işıkgöz, M.E. (2025) Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation in high school physical education: Which fuels adolescent achievement emotions better? *PLoS One* 20(6). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0327393

In this 2025 study, Işıkgöz examined how intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation toward high school physical education are related to students' positive and negative achievement emotions, such as pride, enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom. Guided in the Self-Determination Theory and Basic Psychological Needs Theory, as well as Control-Value Theory of achievement emotions, the study framed motivation quality and basic need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) as key drivers of students' emotional experiences in physical education. Using a cross-sectional design, the researcher surveyed 1,399 Turkish high school students (ages 14-18) during the

2024-2025 school year, administering the Motivation for Participation in Physical Education Lesson Scaled and the Achievement Emotions Scale for Physical Education, and then analyzed the data with structural equation modeling and multi-group (gender) SEM. Results showed that intrinsic motivation strongly predicted higher positive achievement emotions and lower negative emotions, while amotivation predicted fewer positive emotions and more negative emotions. Extrinsic motivation had only a weak positive link to positive emotions and no meaningful relationship with negative emotions. Additional analyses of discrete emotions revealed that intrinsic motivation was positively associated with pride and enjoyment and negatively associated with anger, anxiety, hopelessness, and boredom, whereas motivation showed the opposite pattern, and gender moderated some of these paths, with slightly stronger intrinsic-emotion links for girls. The author concluded that intrinsic motivation is the primary driver of healthy emotional experiences in physical education, extrinsic motivation has limited and fragile benefits, and amotivation is a significant risk factor for negative emotions and disengagement. I believed this article aligned closely with hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which emphasizes nurturing students' inner desire to learn rather than relying on external pressure on rewards. For my action research project on student motivation in physical education, the findings reinforced that creating autonomy-supportive, competence building, and relationship-centered environments is essential if I want students to experience more joy and pride - and less anxiety or boredom - during physical activity. This study strengthens my commitment to designing physical education lessons that center intrinsic motivation, student voice, and caring relationships, rather than

overemphasizing grades, performance comparisons, or other extrinsic motivators that may not sustain students' emotional well being over time.

Yang, J.Y. (2025). Teacher relatedness support and after-school physical activity in university physical education: Mediation role in intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. *European Journal of Psychology Open*, 84(3), 107-119.

In this 2025 study, Yang investigated how teacher relatedness support in university physical education influences students' after-school physical activity, focusing particularly on whether intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy mediate this relationship. Using a cross-sectional design, the researcher served 297 university students from South Korea who were enrolled in sport electives such as tennis, golf, bowling, badminton, and yoga. Administering validated questionnaire on relatedness support, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and after-school physical activity at the end of the semester; the data were analyzed through structural equation modeling with bootstrapped confidence intervals. Grounded in again the Self-Determination Theory and Bandura's self-efficacy framework, the study positioned teacher relatedness support - behaviors that show care, warmth, communication, and interpersonal connection - as a key social contextual factor shaping students' motivation and beliefs. Results showed that teacher relatedness support was directly associated with higher intrinsic motivation, stronger self-efficacy, and greater intentions to be physically active after school, and it also indirectly influenced physical activity through both mediators. Intrinsic motivation significantly predicted students' after-school physical activity, as did self-efficacy, and the strongest effect emerged when intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy operated sequentially as mediators

linking teacher relatedness support to active-lifestyle habits. Yang concluded that relatedness-supportive behaviors - such as showing care, fostering teamwork, and maintaining warm communication - are key drivers of students' motivation and physically active lifestyles beyond class time. I believed this article strongly aligned with hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which emphasizes relational care, mutual respect, and learning environments built on connection and humanity rather than authority or control. In my physical education project on student motivation, these findings reinforced my commitment to building relationships first - supporting students emotionally and socially so that their intrinsic motivation and confidence can grow naturally. This study helped me see that when physical education teachers create relationally rich, caring spaces, students are more likely to feel valued, competent, and self-directed, which mirrors hooks' argument that meaningful learning is rooted in love, connection, and shared empowerment.

Ulstad, S.O., Amdal, S.I., Mehus, I., & Skjesol, K. (2025). Assessment for learning, need satisfaction, motivation, and grades in physical education at upper secondary school. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy, & Practice*, 32(4), 386-400. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2025.2565386

This article explored how assessment for learning (AfL) connects to students' psychological need satisfaction, autonomous motivation, effort, and grades in Norwegian upper-secondary physical education, addressing a gap in research that had not yet examined AfL within an Self-Determination Theory based model. To answer this question, the authors surveyed 237 students across 12 physical education classes using

validated measures of AfL, basic psychological needs, autonomous motivation, effort, and self-reported grades, then applied structural equation modeling with bootstrapped indirect-effect testing to analyze the relationships among variables. The researchers framed their work through Self-Determination Theory - specifically Basic Psychological Needs Theory and Organismic Integration Theory - treating autonomy, competence, and relatedness as mediators linking AfL to self-determined forms of motivation and academic outcomes. Their findings revealed that AfL significantly predicted greater need satisfaction, which in turn enhanced autonomous motivation, ultimately leading to higher effort and better grades; although AfL did not have direct effect on grades, it exerted meaningful indirect effects through these motivational pathways. The model demonstrated strong indirect links between AfL and both effort and grades, showing that students who received clear expectations, constructive feedback, and opportunities for self-assessment experienced stronger psychological need satisfaction and engaged more deeply in physical education. Overall, the authors concluded that AfL is a powerful instructional approach for fostering self-determined motivation, especially for students who may otherwise feel discouraged by performance-based grading practices in physical education. Reading this through the lens of hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, I saw strong alignment with her emphasis on learning environments rooted in transparency, dialogue, and shared responsibility - exactly the goals of AfL in physical education. For my research on student motivation, this article reinforced that when physical education teachers involve students in meaningful assessment conversations, acknowledge their efforts, and highlight growth rather than deficit, students feel more empowered and intrinsically motivated. The findings strengthened my belief that motivation in physical

education is fundamentally relational and justice-oriented, and the AfL offers a concrete, practical pathway for creating the kind of caring, inclusive classrooms that hooks' describes and that I aim to cultivate in my own teaching practices.

Sotos-Martinez, V. J., Tortosa-Martinez, J., Baena-Morales, S., & Ferriz-Valero, A. (2023). Boosting students' motivation through gamification in physical education. *Behavioral Sciences,* 13(2), 165. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13020165

This study sought to determine whether a short-term gamified intervention in elementary physical education could meaningfully shift students' motivation compared with traditional instruction, responding to the growing concern that many young learners show early signs of amotivation in school settings. To examine this, the researchers implemented a natural experimental design with cluster randomization, assigning 72 students across two Spanish elementary schools to either an experimental gamified group or a control group, and collecting pre- and post-test motivation data using the CMEF-EP questionnaire. The gamified condition consisted of ten lessons using ClassDojo paired with PBL and MDA design models, while the control group completed the same lesson without gamification. The work was grounded in Self-Determination Theory, particularly the continuum of motivational regulations (intrinsic, identified, introjected, external, and amotivation), which provided a framework for understanding how game elements might influence the satisfaction or frustration of students' basic psychological needs. Findings showed significant increases for the gamified group in intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, and external regulation, while the control group demonstrated no meaningful changes on any motivational dimension. Moreover, only

intrinsic motivation showed a significant interaction effect between time and group, indicating that gamification was uniquely effective at strengthening students' internal desire to participate in physical education activities. A notable exception was amotivation, which did not change for either group, possibly due to already low baseline levels or limitations in how competence was supported within the intervention. From my perspective, this study complemented hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy by illustrating how playful, student-centered structures can cultivate joy, participation, and relational connection - key ingredients of a liberatory learning environment. In the context of my action research on physical education motivation, the findings reinforced that when students feel immersed, supported, and emotionally engaged, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning and participate enthusiastically. This article strengthened my belief that thoughtfully implemented gamification can align with hooks' emphasis on care, creativity, and community-building, especially when used not as reward-and-punishment systems but as tools for fostering belonging and intrinsic excitement in physical education.

Gonzalez-Peno, A., Grasten, A., & Jaakkola, T. (2022). TARGETing secondary school students' motivation towards physical education: The role of student-perceived mastery climate teaching strategies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2002.1004005

This research focused on understanding how mastery-oriented teaching strategies - captured through TARGET framework - shape secondary students' motivation toward physical education, addressing concerns about declining motivation in adolescence. To

explore these relationships, the authors surveyed 535 Finnish secondary school students using adapted questionnaires measuring students' perceptions of TARGET-aligned teaching strategies (task, authority, recognition, grouping, evaluation, and time), their satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and their autonomous and controlled motivation; data were analyzed with structural equation modeling. Their work was grounded in Achievement Goal Theory and Self-Determination Theory, integrating both frameworks to explain how mastery-climate teaching practices cultivate psychological need satisfaction and higher-quality motivation. The results demonstrated that student-perceived mastery climate strategies - especially the task, authority, and recognition dimensions - positively predicted autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction, which in turn promoted autonomous motivation toward physical education. Controlled motivation, however, was not significantly predicted by these strategies, suggesting that mastery-focused teaching environments primarily foster self-determined engagement rather than externally pressured participation. The authors concluded that mastery climate teaching using TARGET principles is an effective pathway for shaping motivationally supportive physical education environments and should be intentionally adopted by teachers aiming to enhance student engagement and well-being. For my own action research, this article reinforced hooks' (1994) belief that learning thrives in classrooms where students experience empowerment, shared responsibility, and opportunities to grow - conditions that mirror the autonomy - supportive and mastery-oriented strategies measured in the TARGET framework. These findings strengthened my commitment to structuring physical education lessons around meaningful tasks, student choice, personal improvement, and inclusive recognition, as

these strategies directly support intrinsic motivation. Overall, this study deepened my understanding of how to design a physical education climate that aligns with engaged pedagogy and fosters sustained motivation, belonging, and confidence for all learners.

Cosgrove Miller, B., Edwards, E. S., & Nye, S. (2022). Understanding the factors that influence motivation and experiences in high school physical education. *The Physical Educator*, 79(6), 647-666. https://doi.org/10.18666/TPE-2022-V79-I6-9810

This investigation set out to identify whether high school students' physical education descriptors (enjoyment, effort, perceived competence), motivators, and overall class experiences differed by gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level, addressing persistent disparities in adolescent physical participation. To answer these questions, the authors surveyed 698 ninth- and tenth-grade students in a large Virginia high school using a comprehensive questionnaire designed for this specific population, and then analyzed group differences using Mann-Whitney U tests and Kruskal-Wallis tests with significance set as $p < .05$. Although the study was not grounded in a single theoretical model, its focus on enjoyment, competence, social influences, and teacher impact naturally aligns with motivational frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory and expectancy-value approaches, both of which emphasize social-contextual factors in shaping student motivation and participation. The results showed clear and consistent patterns: males and freshmen reported significantly higher enjoyment, effort, perceived competence, and more positive outcomes compared to females and sophomores. Racial/ethnic differences appeared in social and experiential factors, with Caucasian students reporting more negative experiences than other racial/ethnic groups in several categories - an unexpected

finding given previous research on physical activity participation trends. Gender differences were also pronounced in motivators such as social influences, competitiveness, environmental conditions, and apparel, all of which shaped whether students felt encouraged or discouraged in physical education. Overall, the authors concluded that physical education teachers must adopt sensitive, differentiated approaches to meet the varying motivational needs of diverse students, especially during the transition from middle to high school when motivation appears to shift dramatically. Reflecting on this article through hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, I saw powerful connections to her argument that classrooms must account for students' identities, lived experiences, and emotional realities if they are to feel genuinely included and motivated. This study strengthened my understanding that meaningful motivation work must attend to gendered experiences, social belonging, and the unique challenges students face during key academic transition. Ultimately, the article reinforced that physical education environments grounded in care, awareness, and responsiveness - core elements of hooks' framework - are essential for creating equitable, motivating, and joyful movement experiences for all students.

Taken together, the studies in this annotated bibliography revealed a clear and compelling picture of what drives students' motivation in physical education. Motivation flourishes in environments where students experience care, autonomy, competence, positive emotions, and meaningful relationships. Across diverse frameworks such as the Self-Determination Theory to mastery climate models and emotion-based research, the literature consistently showed that students are more engaged when teachers create physical education classrooms that are

supportive rather than controlling, relational rather than authoritarian, and centered on growth rather than compliance. Whether examining bullying, classroom climate, gamification, assessment practices, or teacher-student relationships, each study pointed to the same fundamental truth: students are motivated when they feel safe, valued, and empowered. These themes strongly support hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy which positions education as a relational, humanizing practice grounded in care and community. As a whole, this research reinforced that meaningful motivation in physical education is never just about the physical tasks themselves. It's about the quality of the learning environment and the authentic connections students experience within it. This collective understanding guided my action research by helping me design physical education instruction that intentionally nurtures students' emotional well-being, supports their autonomy, and builds a classroom climate where all learners feel capable, motivated, and excited to participate.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by practitioners within their own educational settings in order to improve practice and student outcomes. Sagor (2000) describes action research as a systematic method through which educators identify a problem of practice, develop research questions, collect data, analyze findings, and implement informed changes. Central to this process is the teacher's responsibility to hold their work to high standards of quality, particularly in regard to validity and reliability. Sagor argues that action research must be conducted rigorously because educators have an ethical obligation to students; instructional decisions informed by weak or careless data risk harming the very learners teachers aim to support.

Sagor identifies validity as the "essential truthfulness" of data - whether that data truly measure the phenomenon being studied. Reliability, in contrast, concerns the accuracy and consistency of those data. In educational contexts, both validity and reliability are strengthened through triangulation, which Sagor defines as the use of multiple independent sources of evidence to corroborate findings. Rather than relying on a single instrument or measure, teacher researchers increase credibility by collecting varied forms of data that together provide a fuller and more trustworthy picture of reality.

This framework is particularly appropriate for my study because my research question centers on student engagement, motivation, and belonging - complex and multidimensional constructs that cannot be captured through a single metric. Engagement in physical education is behavioral, emotional, and relational. Motivation is internal yet observable through participation patterns. Belonging is experienced socially and expressed through interaction. To responsibly

examine these phenomena, I collected multiple forms of data during a five-lesson track and field unit in my sixth grade physical education class.

The guiding question for this study is: *How can incorporating engaged pedagogy increase student participation, motivation, and sense of belonging in middle school physical education?* This question is grounded in bell hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which emphasizes relational care, shared power, and holistic engagement, and is supported by literature reviewed in chapter two demonstrating the importance of autonomy-supportive and mastery-oriented environments for fostering intrinsic motivation. Action research is an appropriate methodology because it allows me, as both teacher and researcher, to systematically examine how my instructional choices influence student engagement within my own classroom context.

Throughout the five lesson unit, engaged pedagogical strategies were embedded intentionally, with particular emphasis on student voice, mastery-based assessment, cooperative structures, and a culminating mini meet that prioritized personal progress over comparison. Data were collected through three primary sources: (1) a structured teacher reflection journal focused on student engagement and instructional decisions, (2) a student engagement rubric chart documenting observable participation patterns, and (3) students' self-scoring track and field recording pages. Consistent with Sagor's emphasis on triangulation, these sources provided corroborating evidence across teacher observation, structured rating, and student self-assessment.

By grounding this study in Sagor's framework of validity, reliability, and triangulated data collection, I sought to ensure that the conclusions drawn are ethically responsible, methodologically sound, and genuinely reflective of my students' lived experiences in physical education.

Participants and Setting

This study took place at a public middle school located in southern Oregon. The school serves approximately 400 students in grades six through eight. The surrounding community is semi-rural, and the student population reflects a predominantly White demographic with representation from Hispanic/Latino, Multiracial, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Approximately 42% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, indicating notable socioeconomic diversity and economic hardship within the community. Additionally, approximately 16% of students receive special education services. The school implements Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) structures, as well as offers counseling and district level support services to promote academic and socio-emotional well-being.

The focal classroom for this research was a sixth grade physical education class consisting of 24 students during second period. Instruction occurred in the gymnasium and on outdoor track facilities during a five-lesson track and field unit. The class includes male and female students and reflects the broader demographic composition of the school. While emergent bilingual students are not present in this particular class, diversity exists in socioeconomic background, learning profiles, and prior athletic experience.

Several students in this class receive support under IEPs or 504 plans. Identified needs include Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, anxiety, specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairment, and other health impairments. These students benefit from structured routines, visual modeling, simplified directions, extended processing time, and proactive behavioral supports. Physical education can be socially and sensorily intense, so predictable lesson structure, clear transitions, and relational check-ins are critical for equitable participation.

Students in this class bring varied funds of knowledge related to movement and sports. Some students actively participate in community athletics and demonstrate high confidence during competitive tasks. Others have limited exposure to organized sports and exhibit hesitancy or lower perceived competence. These differences significantly influence participation patterns and motivation within physical education. Students who identify strongly with athletic identities often engage readily, whereas those who do not may disengage in performance-oriented contexts. This dynamic directly informs the focus of this study, as traditional competitive structures can reinforce hierarchies rather than foster belonging.

Socially, the class demonstrates strong peer relationships and responsiveness to cooperative structures. Many students thrive in team-based and collaborative environments. However, some students struggle with perseverance, confidence, or peer interactions when tasks become challenging. These strengths and needs underscore the importance of designing instruction that prioritizes mastery, relational safety, and personal growth.

I have worked with this group of students since the beginning of the school year and have established consistent routines and rapport. My strengths include relationship building, structured lesson organization, and consistent behavioral expectations. At the same time, I continue refining how I elevate student voice and autonomy within instructional design. The five lesson track and field unit provided a focused context to embed engaged pedagogical practices, particularly during the culminating mini meet, where students self-recorded performance and emphasized personal improvement.

Situating this action research within my own classroom allows for close examination of how engaged pedagogy functions within a real middle school context characterized by socioeconomic diversity and varied ability levels, which was essential for interpreting the data

collected and ensuring that findings remained contextually grounded rather than abstracted from lived classroom realities.

Data Collection & Analysis

Consistent with Sagor's (2000) framework, multiple forms of data were collected to strengthen validity and reliability through triangulation. Sagor emphasizes that complex educational constructs such as student engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging cannot be captured through a single measure; instead, researchers must gather diverse sources of evidence that collectively provide a more complete and trustworthy understanding of the phenomenon under study. In alignment with this approach, data for this study were collected from four primary sources: (1) student-generated artifacts and assessments, (2) teacher observations of student engagement, (3) structured teacher reflection journals, and (4) feedback from a mentor teacher.

Student-generated artifacts served as a primary source of evidence for capturing engagement, motivation, and ownership of learning. These artifacts included structured worksheets and performance-based tasks, such as a partner-based long jump checklist and a self-recording mini meet performance card. Each of these tools was intentionally designed to promote student reflection, choice, and active participation in the learning process. For example, the mini meet recording card required students to track their own performance data, identify a technique focus, and reflect on personal progress. This structure emphasized autonomy and mastery-based learning, aligning with principles of engaged pedagogy. Similarly, partner-based checklists facilitated peer feedback by prompting students to observe specific performance cues and provide structured responses, supporting both skill development and relational engagement.

Teacher observations and reflection journals functioned as complementary qualitative data sources that captured both real-time and reflective perspectives on student engagement. Observations were documented through structured field notes and an engagement rubric, allowing for systematic tracking of behavioral participation, effort, and social interaction during lessons. These observations were particularly important for identifying patterns among students who may not have expressed their experiences verbally or through written artifacts. In addition, teaching reflection journals provided ongoing documentation of instructional decisions, student responses, and emerging trends across the unit. Together, these sources supported what Sagor (2000) describes as practitioner inquiry, in which educators analyze their own teaching practices in order to improve student outcomes.

Feedback from my mentor teacher served as an additional external data source, providing an outside perspective on both instructional effectiveness and student engagement. This feedback offered valuable insight into classroom dynamics that may not have been fully captured through my own observations and reflections. Incorporating this perspective helped reduce potential researcher bias and strengthened the overall credibility of the data set by including a professional viewpoint beyond my own.

Data analysis followed a traditional qualitative analysis procedure consistent with action research methodology as described by Sagor (2000). First, all data sources were organized and reviewed multiple times in order to develop familiarity with the dataset. This process included examining student artifacts, reflection journals, observational notes, and mentor feedback to identify recurring patterns and significant moments related to engagement, motivation, and belonging. This initial immersion phase allowed for a holistic understanding of the data before assigning specific codes.

Following this, open coding was used to make sense of the data. During open coding, segments of data were labeled with descriptive codes that captured key ideas and patterns observed across sources. Examples of initial codes included “increased participation”, “student choice”, “peer encouragement”, “hesitation or avoidance”, “task ownership”, “positive emotional response”, and “off-task behavior”. These codes were derived directly from the data and were applied consistently across multiple sources, including reflection journals, student artifacts, and observational notes.

After initial coding, codes were compared and grouped into broader categories in order to identify emerging themes. For example, codes related to autonomy, self-monitoring, and personal goal setting were grouped into a theme of “student ownership and agency.” Codes connected to peer interaction, collaboration, and encouragement contributed to a theme of “relational engagement and belonging.” Additionally, patterns of increased effort and sustained participation were grouped under a theme of "behavioral engagement.” This process reflects Sagor’s (2000) emphasis on moving from isolated observations to meaningful patterns that can inform instructional decision making.

To ensure that the identified themes were conceptually aligned with the theoretical framework outlined in chapter one, triangulation was used across both data sources and theory. Specifically, the emerging themes were analyzed through the lens of engaged pedagogy, which emphasized relational care, shared power, and holistic engagement. For example, increased student participation during cooperative activities and self directed tasks were interpreted as evidence of autonomy supportive instruction, while positive peer interactions aligned with relational engagement. This process ensured coherence between the research question, instructional practices, and findings.

Finally, to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, I sought feedback from my mentor teacher. My mentor teacher reviewed portions of the data analysis and provided input on whether the identified codes and themes accurately reflected classroom experiences. This feedback helped refine interpretations, challenge initial assumptions, and ensure that conclusions were grounded in observable evidence rather than personal bias. This process enhanced the overall credibility of the study, aligning with Sagor's (2000) emphasis on rigorous and ethically responsible action research.

Researcher Positionality

As both the teacher and researcher in this study, I recognize that my layered identity directly shapes how I design instruction, interpret student behavior, and analyze data. I enter this research as a White, middle-class, former student athlete who experienced success and belonging within traditional physical education structures. As described in chapter one, my own schooling was largely positive and affirming; I benefited from environments that valued athleticism, competition, and confidence - traits that aligned naturally with my identity and lived experience. These experiences provided me with opportunities, encouragement, and affirmation that were not universally available to all students.

My educational background positioned me as someone who thrived in conventional physical education settings. I needed to remain aware of how those experiences influenced my assumptions about motivation and engagement. It was easy to interpret participation through a narrow lens - equating visible enthusiasm, competitiveness, or extroversion. However, hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy challenges educators to examine how systems privilege certain identities while marginalizing others. My identity as someone who historically felt "at home" in athletic spaces requires me to intentionally attend to students who may experience physical

education differently - particularly those who feel self-conscious, hesitant, or excluded from traditional performance-based norms.

My positionality also shaped how I interpreted student data. When reviewing my engagement rubric, students' self-recording sheets, and reflection journal entries, I needed to critically ask whether I was privileging behaviors that resemble my own learning style. For example, students who demonstrate quiet persistence or internal goal setting may be equally engaged as those who outwardly display excitement. Recognizing this bias was essential to maintaining validity in my data interpretation. As Sagor (2000) emphasizes, researchers must question whether intervening variables - including their own assumptions - distort their understanding of the phenomenon under study. In this case, my own athletic identity is an intervening lens through which I interpreted motivation.

At the same time, my positionality provided strengths that support this inquiry. My background as a coach and athlete allows me to model vulnerability, goal setting, and reflective growth within the track and field unit. I understand the emotional dimensions of competition, success, and failure, which helped me empathize with students navigating similar experiences. My commitment to relational care, influenced by hooks' engaged pedagogy, positioned me to prioritize belonging over comparison and growth over performance.

Additionally, as a teacher candidate actively engaged in reflection and professional learning, I approached this research with humility. I acknowledge that my authority as both instructor and evaluator influenced student behavior. Students could have increased effort or participation simply because they knew they were being observed. Recognizing this dynamic allowed me to interpret engagement data cautiously and to triangulate across multiple sources rather than relying solely on my perceptions.

Ultimately, my positionality requires ongoing self-examination. Engaged pedagogy insists that teachers teach with awareness of how identity, power, and privilege operate within the classroom. By acknowledging how my experiences as a White, athletic, socially confident individual shape both my teaching and research lens, I aimed to conduct this study with integrity and reflexivity. My goal was not to replicate the physical education experience that worked for me, but to construct one that expanded belonging and motivation for students whose identities, abilities, and lived experiences differ from my own.

Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter 4 presents the findings from my action research project, which examined the question: *How can incorporating engaged pedagogy increase student participation, motivation, and a sense of belonging in middle school physical education?* This chapter analyzes the data collected throughout the unit, including teacher reflection journals, student-generated artifacts, teacher observations, and feedback from my mentor teacher. The purpose of this chapter is to identify and explain the major patterns that emerged from the data and connect those findings back to the overall research question. Through this analysis, three major themes became evident: student participation increased through choice and autonomy, motivation was enhanced through social interaction and peer collaboration, and students developed a stronger sense of belonging through inclusive practices.

Increased Student Participation Through Choice & Autonomy

A major pattern that emerged across all data sources was the impact of student choice and autonomy on participation levels. As the unit progressed, instructional decisions that allowed students to take ownership of their learning - particularly during the track and field mini-meet - resulted in noticeably higher engagement levels and sustained participation. These findings were drawn from my teacher observations and reflection journal, student-generated artifacts, and feedback from my mentor teacher. Together, this evidence supports my research question, which seeks to understand how engaged pedagogy can increase student participation in a middle school physical education setting.

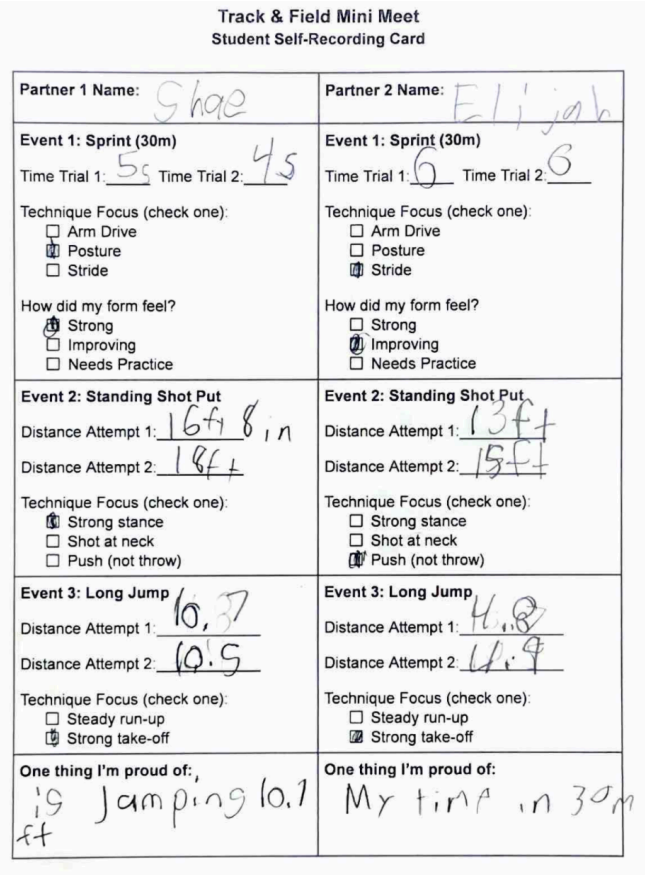
Early in the unit, participation levels were more inconsistent, with some students requiring prompting or redirection to remain on task. However, during the final mini-meet lesson, I intentionally shifted the structure of the activity by allowing students to move between

events at their own pace and choose the order in which they completed the events. Once students realized they could begin at any event and progress independently, they became more willing to participate. In my teacher reflection journal after the mini-meet lesson, I noted "Students were rarely waiting in lines or disengaged, and more were actively participating in one of the three events. If one partner was actively performing the event, the other partner had the clipboard and was keeping track of their score." After the lesson I also met with my mentor teacher who stated "Students were consistently active throughout the lesson, and there was minimal downtime, suggesting that the autonomy built into the lesson structure supported continuous engagement." These reflections support the finding that student choice increased participation because students were not waiting for whole-class directions before engaging in the next activity.

Student-generated artifacts further supported this pattern by showing varying levels of participation across the self-recording cards. The artifacts represented three levels of completion: exceeds, meets, and not-yet meets. Analysis of the exceeds-level students' work, shown in Figure 1, demonstrated complete data tracking across all three events, multiple recorded attempts, selected technique focus areas, and a specific written reflection indicating pride in performance. This level of detail suggests that the students were not only participating, but also taking ownership of the activity by monitoring performance and reflecting on progress. The thorough completion of the self-recording card supports the finding that autonomy increased participation because students used the mini-meet to remain engaged, and self-directed.

Figure 1

Exceeds-Level Students Self-Recording Card Demonstrating Full Participation & Reflection



Track & Field Mini Meet
Student Self-Recording Card

Partner 1 Name: Shae	**Partner 2 Name:** Elijah
Event 1: Sprint (30m) Time Trial 1: 5s Time Trial 2: 4s Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☑ Posture ☐ Stride How did my form feel? ☑ Strong ☐ Improving ☐ Needs Practice	**Event 1: Sprint (30m)** Time Trial 1: 6 Time Trial 2: 6 Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☐ Posture ☑ Stride How did my form feel? ☐ Strong ☑ Improving ☐ Needs Practice
Event 2: Standing Shot Put Distance Attempt 1: 16ft 8in Distance Attempt 2: 18ft Technique Focus (check one): ☑ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☐ Push (not throw)	**Event 2: Standing Shot Put** Distance Attempt 1: 13ft Distance Attempt 2: 15ft Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☑ Push (not throw)
Event 3: Long Jump Distance Attempt 1: 10.37 Distance Attempt 2: 10.5 Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Steady run-up ☑ Strong take-off	**Event 3: Long Jump** Distance Attempt 1: 4.8 Distance Attempt 2: 4.9 Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Steady run-up ☒ Strong take-off
One thing I'm proud of: is Jamping 10.1 ft	**One thing I'm proud of:** My time in 30m

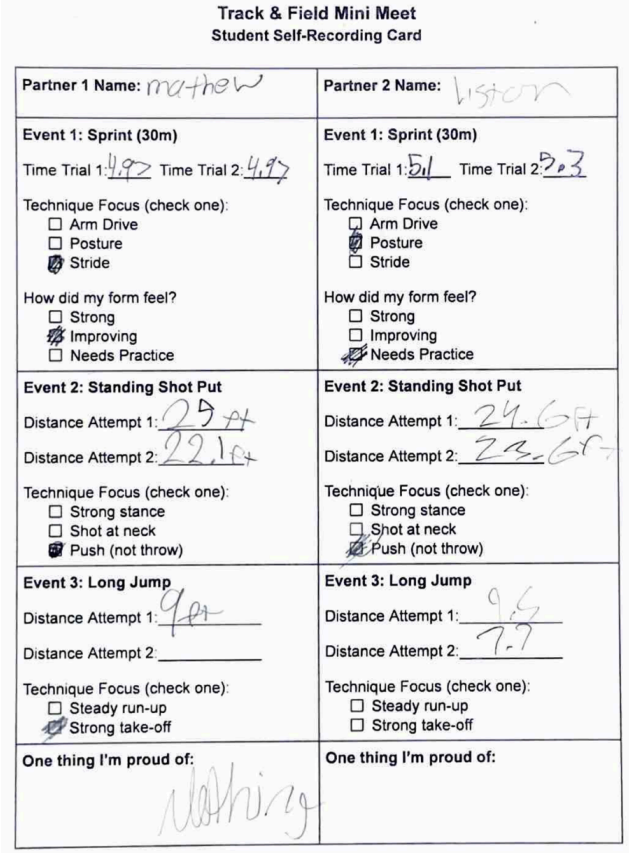
Note. Figure 1 shows an exceeds-level students artifact from the track and field mini-meet. The students recorded performance data across all three events, identified specific technique focus areas, and included a written reflection about their performance. This artifact supports the finding that choice and autonomy contributed to high participation because the students demonstrated full completion, self-monitoring, and personal investment in the activities.

In comparison, analysis of meets-level students' work revealed moderate participation with some inconsistencies. As shown in Figure 2, the students recorded some performance data, such as sprint times or shot put distances, which shows that they engaged in the activity. However, some sections of the self-recording card were left incomplete, and the written reflections were brief or general rather than detailed. This suggests that while the students were

participating, their level of engagement was not as deep as the exceeds-level students' work shown in Figure 1. Overall, Figure 2 demonstrates moderate participation, while also showing less complete engagement than the exceeds-level artifact.

Figure 2

Meets-Level Students Self-Recording Card Demonstrating Partial Completion & General Reflection



Track & Field Mini Meet
Student Self-Recording Card

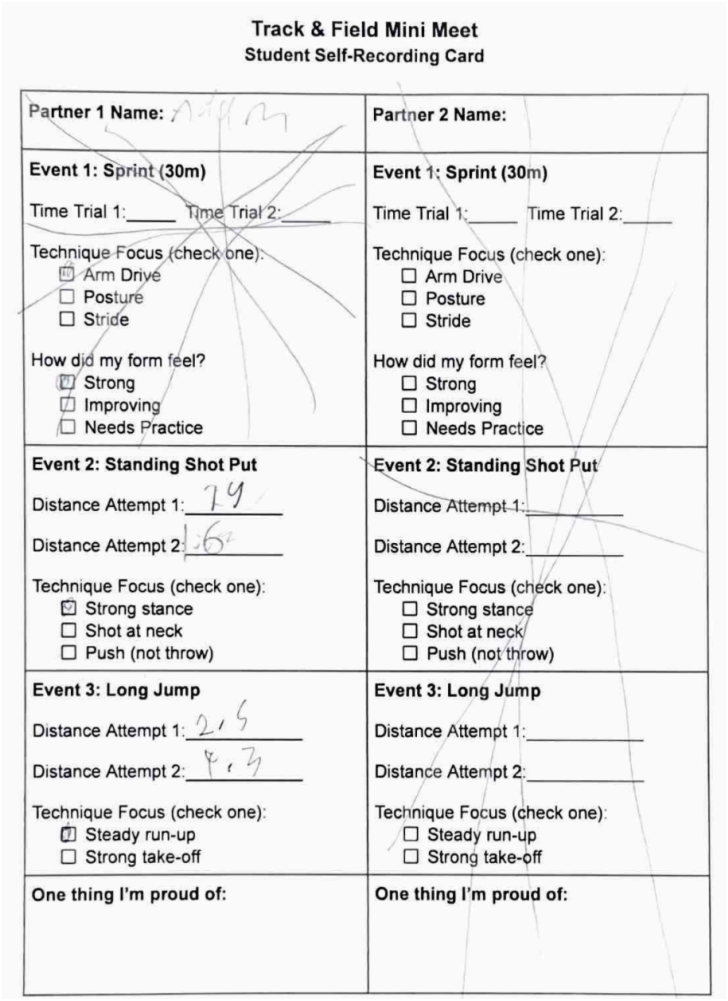
Partner 1 Name: mathew	**Partner 2 Name:** Liston
Event 1: Sprint (30m) Time Trial 1: 4.97 Time Trial 2: 4.97 Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☐ Posture ☑ Stride How did my form feel? ☐ Strong ☑ Improving ☐ Needs Practice	**Event 1: Sprint (30m)** Time Trial 1: 5.1 Time Trial 2: 5.3 Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☑ Posture ☐ Stride How did my form feel? ☐ Strong ☐ Improving ☑ Needs Practice
Event 2: Standing Shot Put Distance Attempt 1: 29 ft Distance Attempt 2: 22.1 ft Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☑ Push (not throw)	**Event 2: Standing Shot Put** Distance Attempt 1: 24.6 ft Distance Attempt 2: 23.6 ft Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☑ Push (not throw)
Event 3: Long Jump Distance Attempt 1: 9 ft Distance Attempt 2: _____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Steady run-up ☑ Strong take-off	**Event 3: Long Jump** Distance Attempt 1: 9.6 Distance Attempt 2: 7.7 Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Steady run-up ☐ Strong take-off
One thing I'm proud of: Nothing	**One thing I'm proud of:**

Note. Figure 2 shows a meets-level students artifact from the track and field mini-meet. The students recorded some performance data and participated in the activities, but several sections were incomplete and the written reflection was more general. This artifact supports the finding that choice and autonomy encouraged participation, while also showing that the depth of engagement varied across students.

The not-yet-meets sample provided an important contrast in understanding participation levels. While only one student artifact fell into this category, the student work shown in Figure 3 offered valuable insight into lower levels of engagement through several incomplete sections, missing performance data, and no reflection. Although the student completed only portions of the worksheet and did not fully engage with the reflection components, they still participated in some aspects of the activity. This suggests that the structure of the lesson allowed for partial engagement, even when full participation was not demonstrated. Overall, Figure 3 supports the idea that autonomy can create entry points for participation, but some students may still need additional support, encouragement, or structure to engage more fully.

Figure 3:

Not Yet-Level Student Self-Recording Demonstrating Limited Participation



Track & Field Mini Meet
Student Self-Recording Card

Partner 1 Name:	**Partner 2 Name:**
Event 1: Sprint (30m) Time Trial 1:____ Time Trial 2:____ Technique Focus (check one): ☑ Arm Drive ☐ Posture ☐ Stride How did my form feel? ☑ Strong ☑ Improving ☐ Needs Practice	**Event 1: Sprint (30m)** Time Trial 1:____ Time Trial 2:____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☐ Posture ☐ Stride How did my form feel? ☐ Strong ☐ Improving ☐ Needs Practice
Event 2: Standing Shot Put Distance Attempt 1: 7 4 Distance Attempt 2: 6 Technique Focus (check one): ☑ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☐ Push (not throw)	**Event 2: Standing Shot Put** Distance Attempt 1:_____ Distance Attempt 2:_____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☐ Push (not throw)
Event 3: Long Jump Distance Attempt 1: 2, 5 Distance Attempt 2: 4, 3 Technique Focus (check one): ☑ Steady run-up ☐ Strong take-off	**Event 3: Long Jump** Distance Attempt 1:_____ Distance Attempt 2:_____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Steady run-up ☐ Strong take-off
One thing I'm proud of:	**One thing I'm proud of:**

Note. Figure 3 shows a not-yet-meets-level student artifact from the track and field mini-meet. The student completed only portions of the self-recording card, with missing performance data and no written reflection. This artifact provides a contrast to Figures 1 and 2 by showing that choice and autonomy created opportunities for participation, but did not result in full engagement for every student.

To further illustrate trends across student performance levels, Table 1 summarizes key patterns I observed in the student artifacts. As shown, students in the exceeds category demonstrated full participation and deeper engagement, while meets-level students showed moderate participation with some inconsistencies. The not-yet sample, although limited to one artifact, highlighted reduced engagement but still indicated some level of involvement. These patterns suggest that the structure of the lesson supported participation across a range of student abilities, while also showing that autonomy did not lead to the same depth of engagement for every student.

Table 1:

Summary of Student Participation Based on Artifact Analysis

Performance Level	**Completion Level**	**Reflection Quality**	**Participation Indicator**
Exceeds	Complete	Detailed	High
Meets	Partial	General	Moderate
Not Yet	Incomplete	Minimal/None	Low

Note. Table 1 summarizes participation patterns across the three student artifact levels. Completion level, reflection quality, and participation indicators were used to compare how students engaged with the mini-meet.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that autonomy did not mean the absence of teacher structure. During the mini-meet, my role shifted from leading every movement of the class to setting clear expectations, monitoring safety, encouraging participation, and redirecting students when needed. Students were expected to participate in each event, record their attempts, and remain active with their partners. Therefore, the increase in participation cannot be attributed to choice and autonomy alone. Instead, the data suggest that participation improved because students had more control over the pace and sequence of activities while still working within clear teacher-established expectations. This balance between autonomy and accountability helped create a structure where students had freedom, but also understood that participation was still required.

Additional evidence from my observations and my reflection journal supports this theme. In my reflection journal I stated, “During the mini-meet lesson, students required minimal redirection, and most teacher involvement was related to safety rather than behavior. Teachers were positioned at each event to monitor safety, and there were few instances of off-task behavior.” This represents a shift from earlier lessons in the unit, where more active classroom management was required. However, this also shows that autonomy was not completely separate from teacher structure. Although students had freedom to choose the order of events and move at their own pace, teacher presence, safety monitoring, and clear expectations still helped guide participation. The reduction in redirection suggests that students were more self-regulated when

given ownership of their learning, but that self-regulation was supported by the expectations already established for the activity.

Furthermore, students remained consistently active throughout the lesson, with very little downtime between activities. Once students understood that they could begin at any event and move at their own pace, they were more willing to participate and remained engaged for the duration of the class period. At the same time, students were still expected to complete the events, record their attempts, and remain active with their partners. This adds nuance to the finding because participation appeared to increase through both student autonomy and clear teacher expectations. In other words, the structure of the mini-meet gave students more control over their learning, while the expectations of the task still communicated that participation was required. This observation reinforced the idea that autonomy contributed to sustained participation, especially when paired with clear expectations and teacher support.

Feedback from my mentor teacher further supports this finding. My mentor teacher noted, “Once initial setup challenges were resolved, the lesson ran smoothly and students remained actively engaged throughout the mini-meet.” She also observed that students were attentive and consistently participating, reinforcing the idea that autonomy contributed to increased engagement.

Overall, the data indicated that providing students with choice and autonomy significantly increased participation across the unit. By allowing students to control the pace and sequence of activities, the lesson created an environment where students were more willing to engage and remain active. These findings support the idea that student-centered instructional strategies can positively impact participation in middle school physical education settings.

Enhanced Motivation Through Social Interaction & Peer Collaboration

Another major theme that emerged from the data was the role of social interaction and peer collaboration in enhancing student motivation. Throughout the unit, I used instructional strategies that allowed students to work with partners and engage in shared activities, which appeared to increase both enthusiasm and effort. This finding supports the research question by demonstrating how elements of engaged pedagogy, particularly collaboration and community, can positively influence student motivation in a middle school physical education setting.

An additional pattern I observed in relation to motivation was the consistency of student engagement once collaborative structures were established. This pattern was reflected in my teacher observations and reflection journal, where I noted that students were more vocal, active, and willing to continue participating when working with partners. For example, during the mini-meet, students worked with self-selected partners to rotate through events, record each other's attempts, compare results, and encourage one another before moving to the next station. Feedback from my mentor teacher also supported this pattern, as she observed that "students were actively engaged, working with their partners, and able to move through the mini-meet activities with less direct teacher prompting." Together, these observations suggest that motivation was not solely dependent on the activity itself, but rather on how the activity was structured to include peer interaction. The presence of peer collaboration shifted the classroom dynamic from a teacher-centered environment to a more student-centered learning space, where students relied less on teacher direction and more on one another to navigate the tasks.

In addition, allowing students to remain with partners of their choice contributed to a sense of comfort and confidence, particularly for students who may have otherwise been hesitant to participate. Although comfort and confidence were not measured through a formal survey, they were observed through student behaviors such as increased willingness to attempt events,

fewer signs of hesitation, more peer interaction, and continued participation with their chosen partners. This was especially evident among lower-skilled students, who were initially more reserved but became more willing to engage when paired with peers they felt comfortable with. In my teacher journal, I observed that students who may have otherwise disengaged when working independently were more likely to continue attempting tasks when supported by a partner. For example, during the mini-meet, some students continued rotating through the events and recording attempts because their partners helped them stay on task, encouraged them between attempts, and moved with them from one station to the next. This suggests that peer collaboration helped reduce anxiety, increased willingness to participate, and supported continued engagement by creating a sense of shared responsibility throughout the lesson.

In addition, peer interaction appeared to normalize mistakes and reduce fear of failure. This was reflected in my teacher observation notes during the mini-meet, where I observed students laughing off missed attempts, retrying events with their partners, and encouraging one another to try again instead of stopping after one unsuccessful attempt. For example, I noted that "Students were more willing to continue practicing when they saw their peers also working through challenges, rather than performing each skill perfectly." When students observed their peers making mistakes and continuing to participate, it created an environment where effort was valued over perfection. This shift likely contributed to increased motivation, as students felt more comfortable taking risks and attempting new skills without the pressure of performing correctly on the first attempt.

Student-generated artifacts further support this theme by showing how motivation was reflected in students' self-recording cards. As previously shown in Figure 1, the exceeds-level artifact demonstrated high levels of motivation through detailed completion of the self-recording

cards. These students did not simply record a final score or complete the task as quickly as possible; instead, they tracked more than one attempt, identified specific areas for improvement such as sprinting form, jumping and landing mechanics, or throwing technique, and reflected on their performance progress. This level of detail suggests that the students were engaged in self-monitoring and goal setting, which are indicators of deeper motivation. Rather than only participating physically, the students used the self-recording cards to think critically about their performance and remain invested in improving over time.

In contrast, meets-level students' work demonstrated moderate levels of motivation. As seen in Figure 2, these students participated in the activity and recorded some performance data, but their engagement was less consistent because sections of the worksheet were incomplete and written reflections were brief or general. For example, the students recorded event data but provided limited written explanations in the reflection portion, making it difficult to determine whether they were thinking about improvement beyond simply completing the activity. However, the act of recording at least one attempt in each event still suggests that these students were willing to engage with the task, even if their level of effort varied. This highlights an important distinction between participation and motivation: students may be physically participating without fully investing in the learning process through reflection or self-monitoring. At the same time, motivation should not be evaluated solely through written responses, because some students may show motivation through physical participation, persistence, and observed engagement during the lesson.

The not-yet meets sample provided additional insight into varying levels of motivation. As illustrated in Figure 3, this student demonstrated limited engagement with the worksheet, completing only portions of the activity and leaving several sections blank. Unlike the other

student artifacts, this worksheet only included one column of recorded information because the student chose to work independently rather than with classmates. This distinction is important because it shows that peer collaboration was available as part of the lesson structure, but not all students chose to use that support. This suggests lower levels of motivation compared to their peers and shows that autonomy alone did not guarantee full engagement. While the student still participated in parts of the activity, the limited completion of the worksheet indicates that some students may need additional support, encouragement, or structure to engage fully, especially when they opt out of peer interaction.

Feedback from my mentor teacher further reinforces this finding. During the lesson debrief she noted, “Students were actively engaged and consistently participating throughout the mini-meet.” This feedback supports my own observations about student engagement throughout the lesson. She also stated “Students appeared more comfortable and willing to engage when working with peers, which contributed to a more positive learning environment.” This external perspective supports the idea that peer collaboration played a significant role in increasing student motivation because it showed that the pattern was not only visible in my own reflection, but also recognized by another teacher observing the lesson.

Taken together, the data from student artifacts, my teacher observations, and mentor teacher feedback indicate that motivation was not a fixed trait, but something influenced by the instructional environment. The integration of peer collaboration, autonomy, and flexible structures created conditions that encouraged effort, participation, and persistence for the majority of students. While motivation varied across individuals, the overall trend suggests that students were more engaged when learning was structured as a shared and interactive experience.

These findings support the principles of engaged pedagogy and demonstrate the importance of collaboration in promoting motivation in middle school physical education settings.

Development of a Stronger Sense of Belonging Through Inclusive Practices

The final theme that emerged from the data was the development of a stronger sense of belonging through inclusive and student-centered practices. Throughout the unit, I used instructional strategies that emphasized autonomy, peer collaboration, and participation over performance to create an environment where students felt more comfortable engaging in physical activity. This finding is closely connected to my research question, as engaged pedagogy not only aims to increase participation and motivation, but also to foster a sense of belonging within the learning environment.

An additional pattern related to belonging was the consistency of student inclusion across different ability levels, which was supported by both my teacher reflection journal and the structure of the mini-meet lesson plan. In my reflection journal, I noted:

> Students who were initially hesitant or reserved began to engage more consistently when given the opportunity to work with peers and move through activities at their own pace. This was especially evident among lower-skilled students, who were more willing to attempt events once they were paired with a partner. The ability to participate without direct comparison to others, and within a more flexible structure, appeared to reduce anxiety and increase overall comfort.

This observation suggests that the mini-meet structure created opportunities for students to participate in some capacity, even if their level of engagement varied. The lesson plan also supported this finding because students were allowed to move through the events at their own pace, work with partners, and complete the activities in a flexible order. This structure reduced

whole-class comparison because students were not all performing the same skill at the same time or being ranked against one another. Instead, students could engage in ways that felt more manageable for their skill level and confidence. Together, the reflection journal evidence and lesson structure suggest that belonging was not limited to highly skilled or highly motivated students, but was supported across a broader range of learners through flexible pacing, peer collaboration, and multiple entry points for participation.

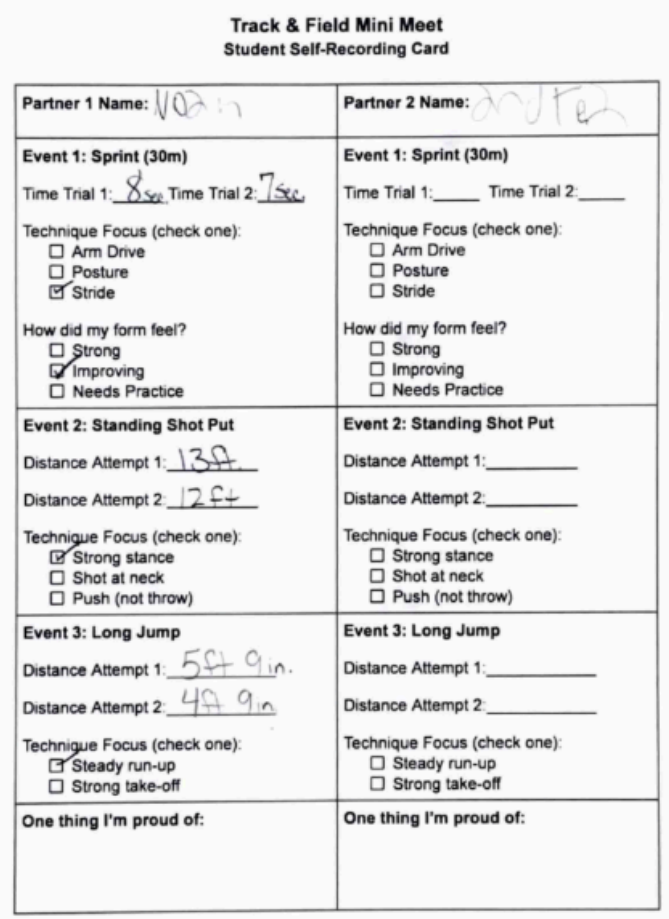
One specific observation that supports this theme was the participation of a student with Autism, who was able to successfully engage in the mini-meet lesson. This student participated in each event alongside their aide and was able to remain involved in the same activities as classmates, indicating that the learning environment provided enough structure and support for meaningful participation. This example highlights how inclusive instructional practices, such as flexible pacing, clear expectations, and structured support, can help students with diverse needs access whole-class instruction rather than requiring a completely separate activity. When the learning environment is intentionally designed to support a range of learners, students are more able to participate in shared experiences with their peers. This reinforces the idea that belonging can be fostered through inclusive whole-class structures rather than isolated support.

This example also highlights the importance of structured peer interaction in supporting inclusive practices. The lesson plan I designed intentionally built collaboration into the mini-meet by having students work with a partner, rotate through events at their own pace, and take on specific roles during each event. In the procedures section of my plan, students were told that when one partner was performing as the “athlete,” the other partner was responsible for filling out the paper as the “coach,” and then they would switch roles. The lesson plan also included expectations for students to cheer everyone on, be respectful to their partner, provide

positive encouragement only, and use checklist language when giving feedback. Peer interaction was structured through assigned roles, partner scoring, and modeled feedback language, students were not left to navigate the social environment independently. Instead, the lesson created predictable and supportive opportunities for connection, which was especially important for students who may struggle with social interactions.

Figure 4

Student Self-Recording Card Demonstrating Supported Participation in the Mini-Meet



Track & Field Mini Meet
Student Self-Recording Card

Partner 1 Name: [illegible]	**Partner 2 Name:** [illegible]
Event 1: Sprint (30m) Time Trial 1: 8 sec Time Trial 2: 7 sec Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☐ Posture ☑ Stride How did my form feel? ☐ Strong ☑ Improving ☐ Needs Practice	**Event 1: Sprint (30m)** Time Trial 1:____ Time Trial 2:____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Arm Drive ☐ Posture ☐ Stride How did my form feel? ☐ Strong ☐ Improving ☐ Needs Practice
Event 2: Standing Shot Put Distance Attempt 1: 13ft. Distance Attempt 2: 12ft Technique Focus (check one): ☑ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☐ Push (not throw)	**Event 2: Standing Shot Put** Distance Attempt 1:_____ Distance Attempt 2:_____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Strong stance ☐ Shot at neck ☐ Push (not throw)
Event 3: Long Jump Distance Attempt 1: 5ft 9in. Distance Attempt 2: 4ft 9in Technique Focus (check one): ☑ Steady run-up ☐ Strong take-off	**Event 3: Long Jump** Distance Attempt 1:_____ Distance Attempt 2:_____ Technique Focus (check one): ☐ Steady run-up ☐ Strong take-off
One thing I'm proud of:	**One thing I'm proud of:**

Note. Figure 4 shows a student artifact from the track and field mini-meet completed by a student with Autism who participated alongside their aide. The student recorded performance data across the events, showing that they were able to access the same whole-class activity with structured

support. This artifact supports the finding that flexible pacing, clear expectations, and supportive structures helped create opportunities for participation and belonging within the mini-meet.

Student-generated artifacts further support this theme by demonstrating that students across performance levels were able to engage in the activity in different ways. As previously shown in Figures 1 and 3, students demonstrated varying levels of engagement, from full completion and detailed reflection to partial completion and limited written response. While exceeds-level students demonstrated deeper reflection and full completion, meets and not-yet-meets students still participated in portions of the activity. This suggests that the structure of the lesson supported multiple entry points for engagement, which is a key component of fostering belonging.

Additionally, the use of a self-recording system allowed students to engage with the task privately, rather than performing in front of the entire class. This may have contributed to increased comfort levels, as students were able to focus on their own performance without direct comparison to others. This type of structure supports a more inclusive environment by allowing students to participate at their own level without fear of judgement.

Meets-level student work also supports the development of belonging, although to a lesser degree. As seen in Figure 2, these students participated in the activity and recorded performance data, even though their reflections were less detailed. This suggests that belonging does not necessarily require high levels of performance or deep written reflection. Instead, belonging may be reflected in a student's willingness to engage with the activity, complete portions of the task, and remain involved in the learning environment.

It is also important to recognize that belonging was not measured through a formal survey or single assessment tool. Instead, I looked for observable indicators across multiple data

sources, including student participation during the mini-meet, completion of student artifacts, peer interaction, my teacher reflection journal, and mentor teacher feedback. For example, the student artifacts showed that students across the exceeds, meets, and not-yet levels were able to participate in at least some part of the activity, even though the depth of engagement varied. My teacher observations also showed that students remained involved in the lesson by rotating through events, recording attempts, working with partners or support staff, and staying active with minimal isolation or refusal to participate. While some students appeared to demonstrate belonging through activity participation and written reflection, others showed it through consistent presence, willingness to remain involved, and participation in portions of the activity. This reinforces the idea that belonging should be understood as a range of observable experiences rather than a single behavior or formal measurement.

The not-yet-meets sample provides additional insight into how belonging may have been developing for students who showed limited engagement. As illustrated in Figure 3, this student completed only portions of the worksheet, with several sections left blank, but still participated in parts of the activity. This partial participation suggests that while a strong sense of belonging may not have been fully established, the structure of the lesson provided some degree of accessibility and inclusion. Rather than withdrawing entirely, the student remained involved at a minimal level, which indicates that the lesson created an entry point for participation even for a student who needed additional support.

Another important observation I recorded related to belonging was the overall classroom climate during the mini-meet lesson. Students appeared comfortable interacting with one another, and there were few instances of negative behavior or exclusion. The majority of students were

engaged in activities alongside their peers, contributing to a sense of shared experience within the class.

Additionally, I intentionally used flexible pacing and emphasized effort and participation rather than performance to create a more inclusive environment. By allowing students to move through the events at their own pace, they had less pressure to keep up with the entire class or compare themselves directly to their peers. I also defined success through participation, effort, and sportsmanship rather than skill level alone, which helped students engage in ways that aligned with their individual abilities and confidence levels. This shift reduced performance-related anxiety and allowed students to participate more freely, supporting the development of a stronger sense of belonging.

Feedback from the mentor teacher further reinforces this finding. My mentor teacher noted during our lesson debrief that “Students were actively engaged and participating throughout the lesson, and that the structure of the mini-meet allowed all students to be involved.” She also observed that students appeared “comfortable and attentive,” suggesting that the environment supported not only participation and motivation, but also a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Overall, the data suggests that inclusive, student centered practices contributed to the development of a stronger sense of belonging among students. By providing opportunities for collaboration, autonomy, and participation without pressure, I created an environment where students felt more comfortable engaging in physical activity. These findings align with the principles of engaged pedagogy and highlight the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment in physical education settings.

Using Engaged Pedagogy: ARP Chapter 5

The purpose of this action research project was to examine how incorporating engaged pedagogy could increase student participation, motivation, and sense of belonging in middle school physical education. Grounded in hooks' (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy, this study focused on the ways relational care, student voice, shared ownership, and inclusive instructional design could support engagement during a sixth-grade track and field unit. The findings from chapter 4 showed that students participated more consistently when given choice and autonomy, demonstrated stronger motivation through peer collaboration, and developed a stronger sense of belonging when instruction emphasized inclusion over comparison. These findings aligned closely with the scholarship reviewed in chapter 2 while also showing how engaged pedagogy can be applied through practical teaching decisions in a physical education setting.

The first finding, increased student participation through choice and autonomy, aligned closely with research on self-determination theory and autonomy supportive instruction. Several students in chapter 2 emphasized that students are more likely to engage when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in physical education. For example, Coteron et al. (2024) found that students showed stronger motivation and engagement when teachers provided structure without relying on controlling practices. Similarly, Van Doren et al. (2025) showed that attuning teaching behaviors, such as acknowledging student perspectives and creating enjoyable activities, supported intrinsic motivation more effectively than demanding or abandoning approaches. My findings supported this research because students participated more consistently during the mini-meet when they could choose the order of events, move at their own pace, and take ownership of their self-recording cards.

At the same time, my teaching extended this research by showing that autonomy does not mean removing structure. The mini-meet worked because students had clear expectations, specific events, safety guidelines, and recording tasks, but they also had flexibility within those boundaries. This balance reflected the high-structure, low-control approach described by Coteron et al. (2024). However, my approach was also grounded in hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy because autonomy was not used only as a motivational tool; it was used as a way to share power with students. By giving students more ownership over how they moved through the lesson, physical education became less teacher directed and more participatory.

The second finding, enhanced motivation through social interaction and peer collaboration, also aligned with the research reviewed in chapter 2. Reppy and Larwin (2020) emphasized that students' perceptions of care are connected to intrinsic motivation, while Yang (2025) found that teacher relatedness support can influence students' confidence, motivation, and willingness to be physically active. My study supported these findings because students appeared more motivated when they worked with peers they felt comfortable with. During the mini-meet, students encouraged one another, compared results, discussed attempts, and stayed active because the activity was socially connected rather than individually isolating.

This finding is also connected to hooks' (1994) belief that learning should be relational and humanizing. In my teaching, peer collaboration helped create a more supportive learning community. Students were not depending only on teacher feedback; they were also receiving encouragement and accountability from classmates. This shifted the classroom from a teacher-centered space to a more student-centered space. My findings extended the research by showing that peer relationships can be an important part of engaged pedagogy in physical

education. For many students, motivation did not come only from the activity itself, but from completing the activity with someone they trusted.

The third finding, the development of a stronger sense of belonging through inclusive practices, connected to research on mastery climate, assessment for learning, and student-centered physical education. Gonzalez-Peno et al. (2022) found that mastery oriented teaching strategies supported students' autonomy, competence, relatedness, and autonomous motivation. Ulstad et al. (2025) showed that assessment for learning can support motivation when students receive clear expectations, feedback, and opportunities for self-assessment. My findings aligned with this research because the mini-meet emphasized personal growth, participation, and self-recording rather than direct comparison between students. Students could complete events at their own pace, record their own results, and focus on individual improvement.

This structure supported belonging because it reduced some of the performance hierarchies that often exist in physical education. Traditional physical education can unintentionally reward students who are already athletic, or competitive, while students with lower confidence or skills may feel exposed. In my study, students still completed physical tasks, but the emphasis shifted toward participation, reflection, and improvement. This aligned with hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy because it created a more inclusive environment where students could engage as whole people, not just as performers. It also connected to my original concern from chapter 1 that physical education should help students build confidence, relationships, and a sense of belonging, not just movement skills.

Overall, this study showed that participation, motivation, and belonging were connected. When students had clear expectations, meaningful choices, and peer support they were more

willing to engage. These findings aligned with current research while also showing how hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy can be applied through practical lesson design in physical education.

Limitations

One theoretical limitation of this study was that I applied selected parts of hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy rather than every dimension of the theory. My project focused mainly on relational care, student voice, collaboration, joy, and belonging. These ideas aligned well with engaged pedagogy and supported my findings, but I did not fully explore the deeper critical elements of the theory, such as power, identity, oppression, or how physical education can reproduce exclusion and athletic hierarchies. Future studies could examine engaged pedagogy more fully by including student discussions, interviews, or reflection prompts about confidence, identity, inclusion, and power in physical education.

A methodological limitation was the short length and small setting of the study. The study took place during a five-lesson track and field unit with one sixth-grade class of 24 students. While this allowed me to closely examine my own teaching practice, it limited the amount of time available to see long term changes in participation, motivation, and belonging. It also means the findings may not apply the same way across other grade levels, schools, units, or student groups. Future research could study engaged pedagogy across a full semester, multiple units, or several class periods to see whether the same patterns continue over time.

Another limitation was the type of data collected. I used student generated artifacts, teacher observations, reflection journals, and mentor teacher feedback. These sources helped me triangulate the findings, but they still relied heavily on observable behavior and teacher interpretation. Participation and motivation were easier to see through effort, task completion, and peer interaction, but belonging was more difficult to measure because it is internal. Some

students may have felt included without showing it clearly, while others may have looked engaged but still felt disconnected. Future students could include anonymous student surveys, short interviews, or exit tickets focused specifically on belonging to better capture students' perspectives.

A practical limitation was that the success of the unit depended on the specific classroom context. This class already had established routines, positive peer relationships, and rapport with me as the teacher. These conditions likely helped student choice, partner work, and flexible pacing run more smoothly. In a larger class, a class with more peer conflict, or a setting with less space and supervision, the same mini-meet structure may be harder to manage safely and effectively. Future studies could examine how engaged pedagogy works in different physical education settings and what routines students need before autonomy based lessons can be successful.

A final limitation was that I could have gathered more direct student feedback during the unit. Although students completed self recording cards and reflection, I could have asked more specific questions about how choice, peer support, and personal improvement affected their motivation or confidence. This would have helped me understand student experiences more clearly while the unit was still happening. Future research should include more frequent student reflection throughout the process so teachers can adjust instruction in real time and better support participation, motivation, and belonging.

Conclusion

The purpose of this action research project was to examine how incorporating engaged pedagogy could increase student participation, motivation, and sense of belonging in middle school physical education. Grounded in hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, this study challenged

me to think about physical education as more than skill development or activity completion. Instead, it helped me view physical education as a space where students can build confidence, relationships, ownership, and joy through movement.

Through this project, I learned that student engagement is deeply connected to the way instruction is designed. When students were given meaningful choices, opportunities to work with peers, and chances to focus on personal growth rather than comparison, they were more willing to participate. The findings showed that autonomy supported participation, peer collaboration strengthened motivation, and inclusive practices helped create a stronger sense of belonging. These outcomes reminded me that engagement does not happen by accident. It is built through intentional routines, clear expectations, relational care, and learning experiences that allow students to feel capable and valued.

This project also helped me grow as a reflective teacher. I learned to look beyond whether students were simply "on task" and instead ask why they were engaged, hesitant, motivated, or disconnected. I became more aware of how my instructional choices shaped the learning environment and how small decisions, such as allowing partner choice or reducing direct comparison, could make physical education feel more accessible for students. Most importantly, I learned that engaged pedagogy is not just a theory I can write about; it is something I must actively practice through the way I plan, teach, observe, and respond to students.

Overall, this study strengthened my belief that physical education should be purposeful, inclusive, and humanizing. Students deserve a learning environment where they feel safe to try, supported by others, and proud of their growth. As I move forward as a physical education teacher, I will continue to design lessons that center care, student voice, and belonging.

Becoming the teacher I needed means creating a classroom where all students, not only the most athletic or confident, can experience success, connection, and joy in physical education.

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