

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Deciphering achievement goals and motivation: A phenomenological inquiry into college students' lived experiences in physical education

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Abstract

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Motivation is a critical factor influencing student engagement and achievement in Physical Education (PE). This phenomenological study explored the achievement goals and motivational factors shaping college students' participation in PE through thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals. Key findings highlighted themes such as perceived competence, intrinsic motivation (e.g., enjoyment and personal satisfaction), and the benefits of movement for physical and mental well-being. Extrinsic motivators, like academic requirements, played a secondary role. Challenges included resource limitations, low confidence, and balancing academic workloads. Students valued PE for fostering physical competency, strategic thinking, and teamwork, which contributed to their overall development. Recommendations include enhancing intrinsic motivators, promoting inclusivity, and addressing resource constraints to sustain engagement in PE.

Introduction

In all areas of education, including Physical Education (PE), motivation is a crucial factor influencing student engagement, learning, and achievement. Encouraging motivation in PE is essential not only for fostering lifelong physical activity but also for improving health outcomes and promoting cognitive and social development. Recent studies emphasize the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in shaping students' attitudes toward physical activity, with intrinsic drivers such as enjoyment and personal satisfaction playing a significant role in sustained participation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivators, including grades and curriculum requirements, are also relevant but tend to have a lesser impact on long-term engagement.

Achievement goals, a central aspect of motivation, provide valuable insight into how students approach challenges in PE. Goals centered around personal growth and skill development (mastery-oriented objectives) have been shown to enhance internal motivation and improve outcomes, whereas performance-based goals, such as outperforming peers, can sometimes lead to anxiety and disengagement (Elliot et al., 2023). Furthermore, the principles of Quality Physical Education (QPE), as proposed by UNESCO, advocate for fostering physical literacy across psychomotor, cognitive, and affective domains to support holistic student development (UNESCO, 2019). Despite these advancements, significant gaps remain in understanding the lived experiences of students in PE, particularly in how demographic factors like age, gender, and academic standing influence their achievement goals and motivation. Existing research has

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largely focused on quantitative approaches, leaving a need for qualitative insights into how students perceive and navigate barriers such as limited resources, low confidence, and academic pressures. Additionally, while the benefits of collaborative and inclusive environments in PE are well-documented, less attention has been given to identifying practical strategies that address these challenges in diverse educational settings.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the nuanced experiences of college students in PE through a phenomenological lens. By examining themes such as perceived competence, social interactions, and motivational drivers, this research aims to provide actionable insights for improving curriculum design, fostering inclusivity, and enhancing engagement in PE programs. This focus on qualitative data enriches the current understanding of how motivational frameworks can be effectively applied to support diverse student populations in achieving their physical, cognitive, and social development goals.

The study aimed to explore college students' experiences and perceptions of achievement goals in Physical Education, focusing on key motivational factors influencing their participation. It also examined how demographic characteristics such as age, sex, and grade level impact their motivation and goal-setting. Additionally, the study investigated the challenges students face in maintaining motivation and achieving their goals. Lastly, it aimed to explore students' perspectives on the role of Physical Education in fostering their physical, cognitive, and social development.

Methods

Research Design

In order to investigate college students' lived experiences with motivation and accomplishment goals in physical education (PE), this study used a phenomenological research approach. In order to fully comprehend and characterize the substance of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards physical education—as well as the meanings they ascribe to their participation in such activities—the phenomenological technique was selected. This approach is well suited to identify the fundamental elements driving student motivation, allowing for an in-depth analysis of their subjective realities in the context of their educational environment.

As a qualitative method, phenomenology seeks to understand how people interpret their experiences and how those interpretations influence their actions and viewpoints (Creswell, 2018). The goal of this study was to identify the common motifs and basic ideas that characterize students' motivated experiences in physical education while emphasizing the subtleties of their individual and social environments.

Respondents of the Study

The study involved 108 college students enrolled in a university in Metro Manila, selected to reflect demographic diversity in terms of age, gender, and academic standing. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 25 years, with the majority (60%) falling within the 18-21 age bracket. Gender distribution was balanced, with 54 male students (50%) and 54 female students (50%). Academic standing varied across year levels, with 30% of respondents being first-year students, 25% second-year, 20% third year, and 25% fourth year. To be eligible for the study, participants were required to have completed or be currently enrolled in at least six units of PE courses, ensuring sufficient experience to provide meaningful insights into motivational dynamics in PE. These demographic details provide a comprehensive context for interpreting the findings and underscore the diverse perspectives represented in this research.

Data Collection Instruments

To capture the rich, lived experiences of participants, this study utilized a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals.

1. *Semi-Structured Interviews:* Each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview lasting 45 to 60 minutes. These interviews included open-ended questions designed to delve into participants' motivations, experiences, and challenges in PE. This method allowed for in-depth exploration while providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their perspectives.
2. *Focus Group Discussions:* Two focus group discussions, each comprising eight to ten participants, were conducted to encourage peer reflection and shared dialogue. Guided by a semi-structured question set, these discussions provided diverse viewpoints and fostered a broader understanding of collective experiences in PE.

3. *Reflective Journals*: Participants maintained reflective journals over a four-week period, documenting their thoughts, feelings, and observations related to their PE experiences. The analysis of these journals was conducted using thematic coding. Researchers employed a systematic approach, starting with open coding to identify initial patterns and followed by axial coding to integrate these patterns into broader themes. Journal entries were triangulated with data from interviews and focus groups to ensure consistency and enrich the analysis. This process enhanced transparency and provided nuanced insights into participants' internal reflections and evolving attitudes toward PE.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Patterns within the qualitative data were found, examined, and reported using thematic analysis as part of the data analysis and interpretation process. In order to fully understand the data, a thorough transcription and review of interviews and journals was conducted. Open coding was then used to find noteworthy statements about motivation and achievement goals in physical education, and these codes were then categorized into themes that appeared again and again. Reflecting the complex nature of motivation in PE, themes like "Perceived Competence," "Social Interactions," "Personal Growth," and "Challenges in PE" emerged. In order to assure correctness and uniqueness, these themes underwent thorough assessment and revision. They were then interpreted in the context of the body of knowledge and theoretical frameworks

surrounding motivation in education. An extensive and morally sound analysis that offered insightful information about the motivational dynamics of college students in PE was ensured by carefully obtaining informed consent, anonymizing data, and protecting participant privacy and confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Thorough ethical protocols were followed throughout the study, and all participants gave their informed consent after being made fully aware of the goal of the investigation, the nature of their voluntary participation, and their freedom to leave at any moment and without consequence. Anonymization of personal information and the inability to link responses to specific people helped to ensure confidentiality. An accredited ethical review institution in the Philippines granted ethical approval for the research through its institutional review board. Several strategies were used in this study to ensure its trustworthiness: transferability was achieved by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings; dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting all stages of data collection and analysis; confirmability was maintained through reflexivity, with the researcher keeping a reflexive journal to acknowledge personal biases and ensure interpretations were grounded in the data.

Results

Table 1
Respondents' experiences and perceptions of achievement goals in physical education.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Physical Competency and Self-Perception of Fitness	General	Students perceive the development of motor skills and physical fitness as critical for confidence in PE activities.
	General	Achieving physical competence is linked to higher self-esteem and better performance in physical tasks.
	General	Many students recognize the importance of understanding PE principles for improving overall fitness and engagement.
Benefits of Movement for Physical and Mental Well-being	General	Students describe physical activities as beneficial for improving cardiovascular health, muscle strength, and endurance.
	General	Many students report reduced stress and anxiety levels due to regular engagement in physical activities.
	General	Physical activity is perceived as essential for enhancing overall mental health and well-being.

Table 1 – Continued

Respondents' experiences and perceptions of achievement goals in physical education.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Community Building through Collaborative Physical Activities	Typical	Students perceive PE as a space for fostering teamwork, cooperation, and social skills.
	Typical	Collaborative activities in PE contribute to a sense of belonging and positive social interactions.
	Typical	Autonomy-supportive environments in PE are seen as essential for inclusive participation.
Motivational Factors Influencing Engagement in Physical Education	Typical	Students are motivated primarily by intrinsic factors, such as enjoyment and satisfaction from participation.
	Typical	External motivators, like academic requirements, are acknowledged but less impactful compared to intrinsic factors.
	Typical	Innovative approaches, including the use of technology, are considered engaging and enhance motivation.
Challenges and Barriers in Achieving PE Goals	Variant	Some students find PE challenging due to a lack of confidence or insufficient physical competence.
	Variant	There is a need for more tailored PE programs that address diverse student needs and preferences.
	Variant	Variations in motivation levels impact student participation and achievement in PE activities.

General: Response mentioned by 50% or more of the participants. Typical: Response mentioned by at least 25% but less than 50% of the participants. Variant: Response mentioned by less than 25% of the participants.

Table 2

Motivational factors influencing participation in physical education.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Intrinsic Motivation and Personal Enjoyment	General	Students report participating in PE because they enjoy the activities and feel a sense of accomplishment.
	General	Personal satisfaction and enjoyment from being physically active are key drivers of continued engagement.
	General	Students are motivated by the feeling of mastering new skills and improving their physical fitness.
Health and Fitness Benefits	General	The desire to maintain or improve physical fitness, strength, and health is a major motivating factor for students.
	General	Students see PE as essential for long-term health benefits, including cardiovascular and muscular health.
	General	Many participate to improve their overall well-being, reduce stress, and manage weight.
Social Interactions and Peer Influence	Typical	Participating in group activities provides opportunities for social interaction, fostering a sense of belonging.
	Typical	Peer encouragement and teamwork are significant factors that motivate students to actively engage in PE.
	Typical	Social experiences in PE contribute to students' positive attitudes toward participation.

Table 2 – Continued

Motivational factors influencing participation in physical education.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
External Rewards and Academic Requirements	Typical	Some students are motivated by fulfilling academic requirements, such as PE grades and credits.
	Typical	Students recognize the role of PE in improving their overall academic performance and fulfilling curriculum demands.
	Typical	External rewards, such as recognition from instructors, also play a role, but are less significant than intrinsic factors.
Challenges in Maintaining Engagement	Variant	A small number of students find PE challenging due to a lack of perceived competence or confidence in their abilities.
	Variant	Some participants report that the variety of activities offered does not always align with their interests.
	Variant	Limited facilities or resources sometimes act as barriers to sustained engagement in PE activities.

General: Response mentioned by 50% or more of the participants. Typical: Response mentioned by at least 25% but less than 50% of the participants. Variant: Response mentioned by less than 25% of the participants.

Table 3

Impact of demographic characteristics on achievement goals and motivation in physical education.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Age and Physical Competency Perception	General	Older students (21-25 years) reported higher physical competency and confidence in participating in PE activities.
	General	Younger students (17-20 years) were less likely to view themselves as competent, affecting their motivation to engage in PE.
	General	Increased age correlates with greater recognition of the health benefits and lifelong importance of physical fitness.
Sex and Participation Levels	General	Female students were less confident in their physical abilities but more motivated by social and community-building aspects of PE.
	General	Male students expressed higher confidence in physical competency and were more motivated by competitive elements.
	General	Males tended to have higher participation in sports-focused activities, while females emphasized health and fitness benefits.
Grade Level and Achievement Goals	Typical	Students in higher grade levels (3rd and 4th year) showed more significant alignment with achievement goals related to physical fitness and motor skills.
	Typical	First-year students displayed lower engagement in PE activities and were less focused on long-term fitness goals.
	Typical	Grade level significantly impacts students' focus on building a foundation of physical fitness versus achieving advanced competencies.
Influence of Gender on Motivation	Typical	Female students were more motivated by collaborative and community-focused activities, with a preference for non-competitive environments.
	Typical	Male students showed higher motivation toward achieving performance-based goals, such as excelling in specific sports.
Barriers Related to Demographics	Variant	A small number of students, particularly younger females, reported feeling uncomfortable or less capable in PE, impacting their motivation.
	Variant	Some students expressed that the availability of activities catered more toward traditionally male sports, creating an imbalance in participation rates.

General: Response mentioned by 50% or more of the participants. Typical: Response mentioned by at least 25% but less than 50% of the participants. Variant: Response mentioned by less than 25% of the participants.

Table 4

Challenges in achieving goals and maintaining motivation in physical education.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Lack of Confidence in Physical Competence	General	Many students report feeling inadequate in their physical abilities, which affects their participation and engagement in PE activities.
	General	Perceived lack of competence hinders students from setting and achieving higher physical fitness goals.
	General	This lack of confidence is more prevalent among younger and female students, contributing to lower motivation levels.
Limited Access to Resources and Facilities	General	Inadequate facilities and lack of access to necessary equipment prevent students from fully engaging in activities and reaching their PE goals.
	General	Students' express frustration over the quality of facilities, especially when trying to perform advanced skills or activities requiring specific equipment.
Time Constraints and Academic Workload	Typical	Students struggle to balance PE participation with academic responsibilities, leading to lower motivation for physical activity.
	Typical	Heavy academic workloads lead to PE being deprioritized, with students seeing it as less important than other subjects.
Lack of Interest in Certain PE Activities	Typical	Students report lower motivation when activities do not align with their interests, particularly when PE focuses on traditional sports.
	Typical	Students prefer a wider variety of physical activities, including more contemporary or recreational options, to stay motivated.
Social Anxiety and Peer Comparison	Variant	A small number of students express discomfort participating in group activities due to social anxiety or fear of judgment from peers.
	Variant	Comparison with more skilled peers discourages some students from fully engaging in activities and setting higher goals.
Physical Injuries or Health Concerns	Variant	Some students mention injuries or health concerns as barriers to maintaining consistent participation and motivation in PE.
	Variant	Health-related challenges, including chronic conditions, lead to reduced participation and goal-setting in physical activities.

General: Response mentioned by 50% or more of the participants. Typical: Response mentioned by at least 25% but less than 50% of the participants. Variant: Response mentioned by less than 25% of the participants.

Table 5

Respondents' perception of the role of physical education in physical, cognitive, and social development.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Physical Development through Fitness and Skill Acquisition	General	Students perceive PE as crucial for improving physical health, fitness, and motor skills.
	General	Many students believe PE contributes to their strength, endurance, flexibility, and overall physical well-being.
	General	PE activities help students achieve physical competence, which enhances their confidence in engaging in sports.
Cognitive Development through Learning Strategies and Health Awareness	General	PE is seen as promoting cognitive skills by teaching students' strategies, rules, and the importance of health.
	General	Students acknowledge that PE helps them understand the value of exercise, nutrition, and overall health awareness.
	General	Learning problem-solving techniques, strategic thinking in sports, and decision-making are key cognitive outcomes of PE.

Table 5 – Continued

Respondents' perception of the role of physical education in physical, cognitive, and social development.

Essential Theme	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Social Development through Teamwork and Collaboration	General	PE is highly valued for its role in promoting social skills such as teamwork, cooperation, and communication.
	General	Students view collaborative activities in PE as essential for building interpersonal relationships and a sense of community.
	General	Participation in group sports enhances students' ability to work together, share responsibilities, and respect others.
Mental and Emotional Benefits of Physical Education	Typical	PE is perceived as contributing to mental well-being by reducing stress and improving mood through physical activity.
	Typical	Students experience emotional benefits from PE, such as increased self-esteem and a positive outlook on physical challenges.
Impact of PE on Lifelong Healthy Habits	Typical	PE helps students develop lifelong healthy habits, including regular exercise and fitness routines.
	Typical	Students report that the lessons learned in PE help shape their future lifestyle choices regarding physical activity.
Challenges in Achieving Cognitive and Social Goals	Variant	Some students face challenges in applying cognitive strategies learned in PE to real-life situations.
	Variant	A small number of students find it difficult to engage socially in PE due to discomfort or social anxiety.

General: Response mentioned by 50% or more of the participants. Typical: Response mentioned by at least 25% but less than 50% of the participants.

Variant: Response mentioned by less than 25% of the participants.

Discussions

This study examined the motivation and accomplishment objectives of college students studying physical education (PE), emphasizing important topics such community building, physical competency, the advantages of movement, and the difficulties students encounter in maintaining their enthusiasm. The study's qualitative analysis demonstrated how both internal and external factors, such as students' age, sex, and grade level, affect their experiences in physical education and how these elements affect how they see their own aspirations for performance.

Physical Competency and Self-Perception of Fitness

A salient element that emerged was the contribution of physical proficiency to augmenting students' incentive to participate in physical education exercises. More than half of the participants said that one of the main reasons they participated was to increase their physical competency through motor skills and fitness activities. This result is consistent with studies by Bardid et al. (2020), which bolster the idea that motivation in sports and perceived physical competence are related. According to what respondents said:

"When I feel fit and able, I'm more confident to try new activities, and that makes PE more fun and engaging for me."- (M21-01)

"I want to improve my fitness because it makes me feel better about myself and gives me more energy."- (F19-12)

This indicates that when students feel physically capable, they are more likely to engage actively in PE, supporting previous studies that emphasize the link between perceived competence and sustained participation.

Benefits of Movement for Physical and Mental Well-being

With a general response from more than 50% of the participants acknowledging the favorable physical and mental health outcomes linked with regular physical activity, the advantages of movement emerged as another crucial subject. Improvements in stress reduction, mental clarity, and general well-being were frequently mentioned by respondents as reasons to engage in physical education. The results of Burnette et al. (2022), who emphasized the psychological advantages of physical activity, are in line with this. Respondents mentioned:

"PE helps me manage stress and stay in shape, which makes me feel better overall."- (F20-02)

"Doing physical activities during PE really helps me clear my mind and reduce the stress from other classes."- (M19-41)

This illustrates how physical education plays a dual role in promoting social and physical health, with the additional difficulty of managing time because of academic obligations.

Community Building through Collaborative Physical Activities

Regarding the contribution of physical education to the development of community and teamwork, a common response was noted from 25% to 50% of participants. Respondents emphasized how cooperative learning experiences in physical education foster social skills and a sense of community, both of which increase students' enthusiasm to engage in the activity. Casey and MacPhail (2020), who stressed the significance of collaborative learning environments in PE for increasing social interaction, corroborate this conclusion. Respondents pointed out:

"Working with others in PE helps me learn how to communicate better, not just in sports but in other areas too."- (M20-55)

"PE builds my teamwork skills because we have to work together in most of the activities."- (F21-03)

This implies that although though physical education (PE) programs foster social cohesiveness, competitive settings may occasionally prevent children who lack confidence from participating, underscoring the need for more inclusive methods.

Challenges in Achieving PE Goals and Maintaining Motivation

The survey also identified a number of obstacles that students must overcome to meet their physical education objectives. A general reaction revealed that pupils, especially the younger and female ones, lacked confidence in their athletic talents. Significant obstacles to sustaining motivation in PE, according to several respondents, also included time limits brought on by academic pressures

and restricted access to resources. Respondents pointed out:

"I feel discouraged when I can't keep up with others in sports, which makes me not want to try."- (M20-64)

"I want to do well in PE, but with so much homework, I just don't have the time."- (F22-87)

These challenges align with findings from Cury et al. (2020), who noted that external pressures such as academic demands can negatively affect students' motivation to participate in physical activities.

Motivational Factors Influencing Participation in Physical Education

Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors affected students' motivation in physical education, with intrinsic motivation—such as enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and health benefits—being the predominant response. This is consistent with the findings of Ntoumanis et al. (2021), who discovered that long-term engagement is more significantly influenced by intrinsic drive. A smaller subset of students still experienced extrinsic factors, such as meeting academic requirements and earning prizes from outside sources, but they had less of an effect. As the respondents thought:

"I like being physically active not because it's required but because it makes me feel good about myself."- (M19-14)

"Grades are important, but I enjoy PE because it's a break from sitting in class all day."- (F20-22)

This emphasizes how crucial it is to support intrinsic motivators, such enjoyment and self-improvement, in order to maintain engagement in physical education programs.

Conclusions

This study investigated the lived experiences and motivational factors of college students in PE, addressing critical research questions related to achievement goals, demographic influences, and the barriers affecting participation. The findings revealed that intrinsic motivation, such as personal enjoyment and perceived competence, played a dominant role in fostering sustained engagement, while extrinsic motivators, though present,

were less impactful. Participants' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and academic standing, significantly shaped their experiences and motivational dynamics. For instance, older students reported higher confidence and greater recognition of long-term health benefits, while female students emphasized the importance of social interactions and non-competitive activities. The study also highlighted challenges, including limited access to resources, low confidence levels among younger and female participants, and time constraints due to academic workloads. These findings align with existing literature and underscore the importance of addressing these barriers to enhance PE engagement. For example, incorporating inclusive practices and diverse activity options has proven effective in similar contexts (UNESCO, 2019; Dudley et al., 2020). Limitations in data collection, such as potential biases in self-reported reflective journals and the restricted geographic scope, may influence the generalizability of the findings. Acknowledging these limitations provides transparency and a basis for future research.

Recommendations include enhancing resources and facilities, fostering inclusive and supportive environments, and promoting intrinsic motivators through diverse and personalized PE activities. Specific examples, such as implementing peer mentoring programs and integrating technology to track progress, can address identified challenges and build on successful implementations in prior studies (Kwon et al., 2022; Casey & MacPhail, 2020). Including more participant narratives in future research could further enrich the understanding of diverse student experiences and strengthen the applicability of findings.

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