Opportunities for Recognition Can Improve Learning and Performance

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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2013.818409

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Today, many physical educators are assigned to teach large classes that they get to see only once or twice a week. Some of these teachers may feel that they teach these students in waves. Generally, the students are lined up in front of their general classroom, gymnasium locker room, or blacktop, where they immediately walk to their assigned spots or numbers. These spots or numbers were occupied just a few minutes earlier by students from the previous class, who are now walking out the back door of the gymnasium or off the blacktop to their next class. In an environment with so many students, physical educators expect their students to demonstrate appropriate performance and learning behaviors. Most do, and those students are typically unconsciously ignored or not noticed by the physical educator. “Unfortunately, teachers often fail to see the powerfully reinforcing value of such natural human behaviors as eye contact, smiles, kind words, physical proximity, and social interaction” (Maag, 2001, p. 182). Attention from the physical educators or from peers, even if it is neutral or negative, is a powerful reinforcer for some students, particularly for students who generally receive very little positive attention in class. These students may act inappropriately to get attention from the physical educator or from their peers because getting any sort of attention is more reinforcing than getting no attention at all (Lavay, French, & Henderson, 2006).
Physical educators need to make the effort to catch students being good and recognize them for their positive accomplishments. Unfortunately, it is usually the students who act inappropriately who receive the majority of the teachers’ attention. For example, White (1975) recorded the natural rates of physical educators’ approval and disapproval statements in the classroom. The rates of teacher verbal approval dropped markedly after the second grade. In fact, in every grade thereafter, the rate of teacher verbal disapproval exceeded the rate of verbal approval. The rate of verbal disapproval has been shown to negatively affect students’ enjoyment of school. In a study by Dunn and Fredericks (1985), it was reported that students in classrooms where verbal disapproval exceeded verbal approval generally reported disliking school. In fact, in classes where 60 percent or more of the statements were disapproving, 100 percent of the students reported disliking school.

Ignoring is defined as “a refusal to pay attention to; disregard” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2012). Other terms that can mean the same thing are neglecting, slighting, or snubbing. Much has been written in the educational literature related to student behavior management through the use of “planned ignoring” (Kaplan & Carter, 1998; Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, & Hallahan, 1998; Skinner, 1953). Planned ignoring is a technique used to reduce students’ inappropriate behavior by removing all attention by the teacher that could reinforce the inappropriate behavior (Wielkiewicz, 1995). It can be effective when used appropriately and is generally used to reduce or eliminate mild inappropriate behaviors such as interrupting, whispering, or not standing in the assigned spot.

However, little has been discussed or reported in the literature related to the impact of the unconscious ignoring of student behavior. What is known is that unconscious ignoring can have a negative effect on a student’s performance and learning (Burden, 2000). There are always students in the class who do everything the physical educator asks them to do; they quietly stand at their spot, pay attention to instructions, and go to their stations and practice the skills until told to change activities. These students are often unconsciously ignored or not noticed by the physical educator or peers due to their good behavior. The physical educator instead is paying close attention to those students who are not doing as instructed or not performing the skills or tasks appropriately.

The problem is that students who were never a behavior problem at the beginning of the school year may become more passively noncompliant as the year progresses (Lavay, French, & Henderson, 2006). These students are just trying to get the physical educator’s attention. If they were behaving appropriately and the teacher did not notice or recognize them, they may do whatever it takes to get the teacher’s attention, which includes misbehaving.

Implication for Practice

In order to help increase learning and improve performance and behavior, the physical educator must pay attention to all students and provide frequent, positive social reinforcement and constructive feedback. Social reinforcement can be either verbal or nonverbal (Lavay, French, & Henderson, 2006). Verbal social reinforcement could be saying “hello,” “way to go,” “good listening,” or it can be more specific such as, “Tariq, I am impressed with your comments to Frank.” “Heidi, I like how you completed the obstacle course.” “Vanessa, way to shoot! You hit 10 out of 10.” Perhaps even more effective is the teacher giving verbal social reinforcement to a student for appropriate behavior or performance in front of the entire class. “Kate, I like how you helped Camille up when she fell down after kicking the ball. That was nice!” Social reinforcement in many cases only takes a few seconds to administer, but the results can be dramatic.

Nonverbal social reinforcement can be as simple as a smile, nod, wink, or high-five, or it can be slightly more complex and require more effort, such as a short handwritten note to a student or his parents, an email message, or a call home. Another example might be some type of student-recognition chart such as “Physical Education Student of the Month,” or posting the names of those students who demonstrated improvement in their fitness scores on the gymnasium bulletin board or web site (see Figure 1).

The following are some suggested techniques that can be used to increase the number of opportunities for recognition and student–teacher interactions (Strecker, 2011). These techniques have been categorized into (1) general suggestions, (2) suggestions to use while entering and exiting class, (3) suggestions to

![Figure 1. A fourth-grade Student of the Month](image)
be used during warm up, and (4) suggestions to use during skill and game instruction.

**General Suggestions**

1. Learn students’ names and use their names when addressing them. “Danny, I like the way you started the obstacle course as soon as I finished with instruction.”

2. Find as many opportunities for recognition as you can. This will get easier the more you do it. Set a rate at which you will give positive, specific feedback to students—for example, once every 3 minutes. Set your timer to vibrate at 3-minute intervals and make sure that you reinforce at least one student during that time: “Cotie, that was great keeping your eyes on the ball when it came across the plate,” or “Did you see the way Paula stepped next to the ball and kicked it with her instep? Look how far that ball went!” Gradually increase your rate so that you are taking advantage of recognition opportunities continuously. When appropriate, use the five-step approach to specific feedback. For example, when teaching a free throw in basketball:
   - Step 1: Use the student’s name: “Gordon.”
   - Step 2: Say something they did well: “I like the way you bent your knees when you shot the ball at the basket.”
   - Step 3: Tell the student something to work on: “Next time keep your eye on the rim of the basket.”
   - Step 4: Set a goal for the student: “See if you can keep your eye on the rim 4 times in a row when shooting the ball.”
   - Step 5: Check to see if they accomplished that goal: “Did you keep your eye on the rim 4 times in a row, Gordon?”

3. Keep a list of the students in your class in your pocket or on your tablet. At the end of class, mark on the list the students you interacted with during that class period. During the next class meeting, make sure you talk to the students you had not spoken to the previous day.

**While Entering and/or Exiting Class**

1. Greet the students when they are entering and exiting class. This type of reinforcement is non-contingent on actual class performance and learning. Some physical educators have their students tap in and out on a poster with just a happy face, neutral face, or a sad face to express how they feel that day while the physical educator stands by the poster (Hellison, 2010; see Figure 2). As the class enters or exits, the physical educator can quickly provide encouraging words or, if needed, take a student aside to have a brief discussion (Lavay, Alexander, & Lawrence, 2008; Masser, 1990).

2. When it is time to put the equipment away, give students a time limit and walk around the gym praising those students who are hustling to get the equipment put away. If the class meets the
During each class...identify 10 students to greet and reinforce [and] you will start seeing some positive changes in the students’ behavior. Every student will be recognized and develop a sense of belonging as you begin to rotate your social greetings and reinforcement.

On and a rubric to record their progress. Go around the gym to check on their task card and reinforce their progress. Provide performance-contingent social reinforcement not only for completing the task but for demonstrating a specific level of performance: “Ryan, you completed your goals of 10 push-ups and 30 sit-ups; that is awesome!”

During Warm-Up
1. During the warm-up, pick a student who is stretching correctly and mention, “Drew, that is a great stretch. You are keeping your legs straight and almost touching your toes now!” This will have a ripple effect in that others will see what Drew is doing and will do the same.
2. When giving instructions for the warm-ups, point out the students who are paying attention to you: “I like the way Ami and Brit are looking at me and listening to what I am saying, you two can pick which activity we will do first today.

During Skill and Game Instruction
1. Participate with the students. When the students are playing a game such as soccer, jump in and play with them. They love it!
2. Move from learning station to learning station and socially interact with students. For example, ask the students how their day is going, if they watched the game last night, or how their soccer team is doing. Try to remember something each student is involved in and periodically ask them about it.
3. Give the students a task card with skills they are to work on and a rubric to record their progress. Go around the gym to check on their task card and reinforce their progress. Provide performance-contingent social reinforcement not only for completing the task but for demonstrating a specific level of performance: “Ryan, you completed your goals of 10 push-ups and 30 sit-ups; that is awesome!”
4. Have them write weekly goals for the skills or fitness activities they are working on and provide social reinforcement for completing their weekly goals both in writing and verbally: “Hayden, I am pleased that you completed your goals for the week and you have made more progress in your sit-ups since last week.” This provides them with a sense of direction and a better understanding of why they are practicing certain tasks (Bechtel, Stevens, & Brett, 2012). This also teaches them personal responsibility and is motivating because they can see their progress and so can you.
5. Use the Premack principle (Lavay, French, & Henderson, 2006) and tell the students that if they exhibit good sportsmanship during the game of basketball, they can play a round of their favorite game during the last 10 minutes of class instead of running laps.
6. Use a “Mystery Motivator.” Have two fun activities planned for the end of class. Select a student who was performing well in class to select the “Mystery Motivator” card from the board that tells the class what the fun activity is. That student then leads the class in that fun activity.
7. Give out colored paper cards with the school’s mascot to the students who are working hard, performing well, demonstrating good sportsmanship, etc. They can turn those cards in to the school store to buy something, or you can hold an auction at the end of the month to which students bring in a piece of equipment from home (e.g., ball, Frisbee, hula hoop) that they want to donate, and the students can use their cards to buy items at the auction.

Conclusion
With the pressure of teaching large classes, one after another, and the challenge of teaching students with more extreme learning and behavioral problems, it is often difficult to remember that all students need attention. Physical educators need to be reminded of some simple strategies for recognizing students who are performing and behaving well. These strategies will have a positive effect on the performance, learning, and behavior of all students.

Most of the techniques discussed in this article are very simple and take only a few seconds to administer. The physical educator may believe that because there are 50 students in a class it is impossible to give all students the attention they need and desire. However, there are ways of accomplishing this. If, during each class, you identify 10 students to greet and reinforce, you will start seeing some positive changes in the students’ behavior. Every student will be recognized and develop a sense of belonging as you begin to rotate your social greetings and reinforcement.

The authors challenge physical educators to conduct a simple field-based research project. Select one to five students in class or across classes and collect baseline data on the opportunities for recognition; record them on a smartphone, tablet, or other electronic device; or make a note on an attendance sheet using paper and pencil. Then select some of the techniques discussed here to increase opportunities for recognition. Collect data again to determine whether you have increased the number of opportunities for recognition. Notice the performance and behavior of the students in your class. You may be pleasantly surprised.
We think you will find that practicing the method of catching them being good, at least intermittently, will require minimal effort but will have a tremendous payoff in the form of student performance and learning. As Mosston and Ashworth (2008) rightly stated,

Ignoring is the most severe expression of abandonment. To be shunned, particularly by people we want to value us, is the harshest of feedback. Continuous and excessive ignoring is humiliating. Schools need to be safe environments where opportunities for attachments, development, and participation are guaranteed, not places that compound children’s traumas. (p. 42)

References

To learn more about this topic, refer to this AAHPERD resource at www.aaahperd.org/shop: Concepts and Principles of Physical Education: What Every Student Needs to Know.