

The Meaning of Physical Activity for Middle School Students in Physical Education Learning: A Qualitative Study with an Interpretative Approach

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ABSTRAK

Physical activity in Physical Education learning plays a strategic role in the development of secondary school students, not only in terms of physical fitness but also in terms of meaningful learning experiences. This study aims to understand the meaning of physical activity as perceived by secondary school students through direct experiences in Physical Education learning. The research approach used was qualitative with an interpretive perspective, which views meaning as the result of students' subjective construction based on personal and social experiences. Research subjects were selected purposively, with data collection techniques including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted thematically through an iterative interpretation process to identify emerging patterns of meaning. The results show that physical activity is interpreted by students as a personal experience involving body awareness, emotional regulation, and self-reflection. Social interactions with teachers and peers as well as a supportive learning environment play an important role in shaping these meanings. Positive meanings of physical activity have implications for increased intrinsic motivation, learning engagement, and a tendency to adopt an active lifestyle outside of school. These findings emphasize the importance of Physical Education learning that is oriented towards students' experiences and meanings to support the formation of healthy attitudes and habits in a sustainable manner.

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity is an integral part of human life, playing a vital role in maintaining health, balanced bodily functions, and overall quality of life. Technological advancements and changes in modern lifestyles have led to a decline in physical activity levels, particularly among adolescents. This situation raises concerns about the increased risk of physical and psychosocial health problems in school-age students. Educational environments play a strategic role in fostering active lifestyle habits from an early age. Schools serve as the primary social space for students to experience, understand, and internalize the values associated with physical activity. A structured learning process enables physical activity to become more than just a routine, but also an educational



experience (Mikalsen & Lagestad, 2020; Morrison & Gleddie, 2021). Physical Education serves as a formal vehicle for integrating physical activity into educational objectives. The relevance of Physical Education is growing as the need for holistic student development increases.

Physical Education in secondary schools is designed to develop students' physical, cognitive, affective, and social aspects through movement experiences. The Physical Education curriculum positions physical activity as a learning tool with long-term educational goals. The learning process emphasizes not only mastery of movement skills but also understanding the meaning behind each activity (Rubiana et al., 2025; Suparman, 2025). The interaction between students, teachers, and the learning environment shapes diverse subjective experiences. These experiences contribute to how students view physical activity in everyday life. Meaningful learning depends on students' active engagement and reflective awareness. Physical activity that is perceived positively tends to encourage continued participation. The success of Physical Education depends on the extent to which students perceive personal value from the activities undertaken (Yoisangaji, 2024).

High school students are in the adolescent developmental phase, characterized by a search for identity and the formation of meaning through various life experiences. Physical activity experienced during this phase has the potential to shape long-term attitudes toward health and an active lifestyle. Students' perceptions of physical activity are influenced by previous learning experiences, social relationships, and the teaching approach employed by teachers. Emotional responses such as joy, confidence, or anxiety often emerge during Physical Education lessons. These experiences shape personal interpretations that differ from one student to another. Diverse social and cultural backgrounds contribute to the variety of meanings that emerge. Understanding students' subjective experiences is crucial to assessing the effectiveness of learning. Without understanding students' perspectives, Physical Education objectives risk losing relevance.

Physical Education learning practices in schools are often oriented toward assessing physical outcomes and technical skills. This assessment tends to position students as objects of measurement. Students' personal experiences during physical activity often lack space for reflection (Fadillah et al., 2025). This situation has the potential to obscure the dimensions of meaning that students truly experience. Physical activity can be understood simply as an academic obligation without deep personal value. The gap between curriculum objectives and actual learning experiences can impact student motivation. Low levels of active participation are often rooted in negative interpretations of physical activity. A deeper understanding is needed to bridge this gap (Juwono, 2025).

Research approaches that focus on numbers and measurements fail to fully capture the complexity of student experiences. Quantitative data tends to simplify subjective realities, which are dynamic and contextual. The meaning of physical activity is formed through individual interpretations of life experiences (Hanif, 2024). Each student brings backgrounds, expectations, and emotions that influence how they understand learning. This complexity demands an approach that allows for the learner's voice. Qualitative research offers the opportunity to explore experiences in depth and reflectively. Understanding meaning cannot be separated from the student's social and cultural context. An interpretive perspective is relevant for understanding this reality holistically.

The interpretive approach views reality as the result of constructing meaning through subjective experience. Physical activity in Physical Education learning is not understood as a single, objective phenomenon. The meaning of physical activity emerges from the interaction between students, the activity, and the learning environment. Researchers act as the primary instrument in interpreting students' experiences. The meaning-making process is influenced by language, symbols, and individual reflection. This approach allows for the exploration of the hidden meanings behind physical actions. Deep understanding can be gained through students' narratives and direct experiences. The interpretive approach contributes to the development of experiential learning theory.

Studies on the meaning of physical activity for secondary school students are still relatively limited in the Physical Education literature. Existing research focuses more on fitness aspects and measurable learning outcomes. The student perspective, as the primary subject of learning, often receives less attention. Yet, student experiences are a crucial source of information for improving learning practices. Understanding meaning can help teachers design more inclusive and reflective strategies. Physical activity that is positively interpreted has the potential to increase learning engagement. The relevance of learning increases when students perceive their learning experiences as meaningful. The need for research that focuses on student perspectives is increasingly pressing.

Based on this description, research into the meaning of physical activity for secondary school students is important. A qualitative approach with an interpretive perspective allows for an in-depth and contextual exploration of students' experiences. The research focuses on how students understand, perceive, and give meaning to physical activity in Physical Education learning. The results are expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the reality of student learning. These findings can form the basis for developing more meaningful learning strategies. Physical Education can be directed not only at physical achievement but also at developing students' self-awareness. Understanding the meaning of physical activity contributes to learner-centered learning. This research is expected to enrich the academic study and practice of Physical Education in secondary schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive perspective, aiming to understand the meaning of physical activity as experienced and interpreted by high school students in Physical Education learning. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore students' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of physical activity in depth and context. Reality in this study is viewed as a social construction formed through interactions between students, learning activities, and the school environment. The focus of the research is directed at understanding meaning, not on measurement or statistical generalization. The research process emphasizes the exploration of students' direct experiences as the primary source of data. The researcher acts as the primary instrument in data collection and interpretation. The researcher's sensitivity to the context and experiences of participants is a crucial factor in generating a comprehensive understanding. An interpretive approach is used to capture the complexity of meaning that cannot be reduced to numbers.

The research subjects consisted of high school students actively participating in Physical Education lessons. Subject selection was conducted purposively, considering variations in gender, grade level, and experience participating in physical activities at school. Subject selection criteria were based on students' ability to reflect and verbally

express their learning experiences. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data sufficiency to achieve information saturation. The diversity of student backgrounds was expected to enrich the variety of meanings that emerged. Participants were positioned as key informants with direct experience of the phenomenon being studied. The relationship between researchers and participants was built dialogically to create an open atmosphere. Research ethics were maintained through participant consent and confidentiality of identities.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to explore students' perceptions, feelings, and experiences related to physical activity in Physical Education learning. Interview questions were open-ended and flexible to allow for the emergence of personal meanings from students' perspectives. Participant observation was conducted to understand the learning situation, social interactions, and student responses during physical activity. Field notes were used to record dynamics not always revealed in interviews. Documentation in the form of lesson plans, activity photos, and student reflection notes served as supporting data. Triangulation techniques were applied to increase data credibility. Data collection was carried out repeatedly to deepen understanding of the phenomenon.

Data analysis was conducted thematically using an interpretative approach through several stages. The data obtained were transcribed and read repeatedly to understand the overall meaning. The coding process was carried out to identify units of meaning relevant to the research focus. Categories and themes were developed based on patterns of student experiences and interpretations. Interpretation was carried out by linking emerging themes to the context of Physical Education learning. The researcher's reflection was used to understand the relationship between subjective experiences and the surrounding social conditions. The analysis process took place cyclically between data collection and interpretation. The validity of the findings was maintained through member checking and peer discussion. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of descriptive narratives that represent the meaning of physical activity for students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of Physical Activity as a Personal and Reflective Experience for Students

The meaning of physical activity for high school students emerges as a personal experience shaped through direct involvement in the Physical Education learning process. Physical activity is not understood simply as a series of structured movements, but as an experience involving body awareness, emotions, and self-reflection. Students interpret physical activity based on their subjective experiences during the learning process. These experiences shape their understanding of their own abilities and physical limitations. One student expressed,

“During gym class, I learned how far my body could move and what I needed to improve.”

This statement demonstrates that physical activity serves as a medium for personal reflection. This reflective process contributes to the formation of individual meaning. The meanings formed are not uniform across students. Differences in the meaning of physical

activity are evident in the emotional responses that emerge during Physical Education lessons. Some students perceive physical activity as a pleasurable experience that provides a sense of freedom and a release from academic pressure. This response often arises when students feel able to participate in activities without excessive pressure (Fathoni, 2025). One student stated,

"When I exercise, I feel more relaxed and less burdened than other subjects."

This statement reflects the role of physical activity as a means of emotional regulation. Positive emotional experiences strengthen students' engagement with learning. Physical activity provides a space for self-expression rarely found in other subjects. This emotional meaning enriches students' learning experiences. The affective dimension is an integral part of the meaning of physical activity.

The meaning of physical activity also develops through students' experiences of success and failure. Successfully completing movement tasks fosters self-confidence and personal achievement. Conversely, failure is not always interpreted negatively if supported by a safe learning environment (Mahmudah, 2025). One student stated,

"At first I couldn't, but after trying a few times I finally did it, so I felt proud."

This experience demonstrates a progressive learning process. Physical activity becomes an arena for building resilience and perseverance. The meaning that emerges doesn't stop at the end result, but rather at the process undertaken. Repeated experiences deepen students' interpretations of physical activity. Physical Education learning serves as a learning space based on life experiences (Salahudin et al., 2024; Alfajri & Hadi, 2024).

The personal meaning of physical activity is strengthened when students are able to relate it to their daily lives. Students begin to see physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle, not just an academic requirement. Learning experiences raise awareness of the importance of maintaining physical fitness. One student stated, "After frequently participating in sports at school, I'm used to moving outside of class." This statement demonstrates the internalization of the value of physical activity. The meaning formed extends beyond the classroom and class hours. Physical activity is understood as a sustainable personal need. Physical Education contributes to the formation of long-term habits. This process of meaning-making strengthens the relevance of learning to students' lives.

The meaning of physical activity is inseparable from the ongoing interpretive process students experience throughout their learning. Each new experience enriches or revises previous understandings. Physical activity becomes a means of reflective learning that continues to develop. Students construct meaning through a combination of physical, emotional, and social experiences. One student expressed, "Every PE lesson feels different, depending on the activities and the atmosphere." This statement demonstrates the dynamic nature of meaning-making. The meaning of physical activity is contextual and situational. Physical Education provides space for this interpretive process. These findings confirm that physical activity has complex and multidimensional dimensions of meaning.

The Role of Social Interaction and Learning Environment in the Formation of the Meaning of Physical Activity

The meaning of physical activity is not only shaped by individual experiences but is also significantly influenced by social interactions during learning. The relationship between students and teachers plays a crucial role in shaping the learning experience. A supportive teacher attitude creates a sense of security for students to actively participate. Constructive feedback helps students interpret physical activity as a learning process. One student stated,

"If the teacher supports me, I'll be more courageous in trying, even if I can't do it yet."

This statement demonstrates the influence of pedagogical relationships on student courage. A positive social environment reinforces the meaning of physical activity. Learning becomes a collaborative space that encourages participation, and pedagogical interactions become the foundation for meaning-making (Arifin, 2017).

Peer interactions also influence how students interpret physical activity. The presence of friends provides a sense of community that enriches the learning experience. Physical activity is often interpreted as a means of building solidarity and cooperation. One student explained,

"If you do it with friends, exercise becomes more fun."

These collective experiences create strong social meaning. Physical activity serves as a medium for intense social interaction. Group dynamics influence student motivation and engagement. An inclusive social environment fosters positive meaning-making. Physical education becomes a space for meaningful social learning (Ardiyanto & Mustafa, 2021).

Conversely, unsupportive social interactions can create negative meanings for physical activity. Experiencing ridicule or excessive comparisons can create feelings of discomfort. These conditions impact students' confidence in participating in learning. One student explained,

"I don't really like sports because I'm afraid of being teased if I do something wrong."

This statement reflects the impact of the social environment on meaning-making. Physical activity can be interpreted as a source of anxiety if not managed properly. The teacher's role is crucial in managing classroom dynamics. A safe environment supports positive meaning-making (Mustafa, 2022). These findings demonstrate the importance of social sensitivity in learning.

The physical learning environment contributes to the construction of meaning in physical activity. Adequate facilities provide a sense of comfort and support student participation. Open learning spaces allow students to express their movements more freely. One student stated, "If the field is nice, I'm more enthusiastic about moving." This statement demonstrates the relationship between the physical environment and motivation. The condition of the infrastructure influences the quality of the learning experience. Physical activity is inseparable from the space in which it takes place. The

learning environment becomes part of the construction of meaning. Physical Education requires attention to both physical and social aspects simultaneously.

The meaning of physical activity is formed through complex interactions between individuals and their environment. Each social element contributes to students' learning experiences. Physical activity becomes an arena where personal experience meets social reality. The learning process is intersubjective and dynamic. Students construct meaning through dialogue with their surroundings. Physical Education provides a space for this interaction. Understanding meaning cannot be separated from the social context of learning. These findings confirm that physical activity is a meaningful social experience.

Implications of the Meaning of Physical Activity on Student Motivation and Involvement in Physical Education

The meaning of physical activity, formed through personal and social experiences, directly impacts students' motivation to learn. Positive meaning fosters intrinsic motivation in Physical Education learning. Students feel compelled to participate not out of obligation but because of perceived personal value. One student stated,

“I participate in sports because I enjoy it, not because I'm afraid of grades.”

This statement demonstrates a shift from external motivation to internal motivation. Physical activity is understood as a personal need. Intrinsic motivation strengthens long-term engagement (Mumtazza et al., 2024). Learning becomes more meaningful and sustainable. Physical education plays a role in fostering authentic motivation.

Student engagement in learning increases when physical activity is interpreted positively. Students demonstrate active participation and a willingness to try new activities. Positive interpretations lower resistance to physical challenges. One student stated,

“If you enjoy it, you won't feel so tired.”

This statement demonstrates the relationship between meaning and perceived effort. Physical activity is no longer seen as a burden. Cognitive and affective engagement occur simultaneously. The learning process becomes more lively. Physical education gains stronger relevance.

Conversely, negative interpretations of physical activity result in low motivation and participation (Putriana et al., 2024). Students tend to withdraw or participate minimally in learning. Negative experiences foster a defensive attitude toward physical activity. One student stated,

“I came along just to avoid being absent, not because I wanted to.”

This statement reflects external and fragile motivation. Physical activity is perceived as merely a demand. Learning engagement becomes shallow. This situation has the potential to hinder learning objectives. Physical Education faces challenges in building positive meaning.

The meaning of physical activity also influences students' attitudes toward an active lifestyle outside of school (Zahraini, 2023). Students who perceive physical

activity positively show a tendency to remain active independently. Learning experiences serve as a reference in daily decision-making. One student stated,

“After getting used to school, I started exercising on my own more often.”

This statement demonstrates the transfer of meaning to real life. Physical activity is understood as part of self-identity. Physical education contributes to the formation of healthy habits. The implications of learning extend beyond the classroom. The meanings formed have long-lasting impacts.

The implications of understanding physical activity require reflection on Physical Education learning practices. Teachers play a strategic role in creating meaningful learning experiences. Learning needs to be process-oriented, not just physical outcomes. Understanding students' meanings can inform learning strategy design. Physical activity needs to be positioned as a holistic educational experience. Physical Education has the potential to shape long-term attitudes and values. These findings reinforce the importance of a student-centered approach. The meaning of physical activity is key to successful Physical Education learning.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study indicates that physical activity in Physical Education learning is interpreted by secondary school students as a personal, reflective, and multidimensional learning experience. This meaning is formed through students' direct involvement in movement activities that simultaneously involve physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects. Students' subjective experiences show that physical activity is not perceived merely as a curricular requirement, but rather as a means of self-discovery and developing body awareness. Social interactions between students, teachers, and peers play a significant role in shaping how students interpret physical activity during learning. A supportive and inclusive learning environment reinforces positive meanings of physical activity. Conversely, less supportive social experiences have the potential to form negative meanings that affect student engagement. The meaning of physical activity has direct implications for student motivation and participation in Physical Education learning. Physical activity that is interpreted positively encourages the emergence of intrinsic motivation and more consistent learning engagement. The meanings formed also influence students' attitudes toward physical activity outside the school environment. Physical Education plays a strategic role in building active lifestyle habits through meaningful learning experiences. Understanding the meaning of physical activity provides an important foundation for developing student-centered learning strategies. This research emphasizes the need for a Physical Education learning approach that is not only oriented towards physical achievement, but also towards constructing the meaning of students' learning experiences.

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