

Beyond Participation: College Students' Lived Experiences of Motivation and Engagement in Physical Education

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Abstract: Physical Education (PE) plays an essential role in promoting students' physical, social, and psychological development. However, limited qualitative research has examined how college students experience motivation and engagement in PE classes. This study explored the lived experiences of college students regarding motivation, engagement, teaching strategies, challenges, and meaningful experiences in Physical Education. Using a phenomenological qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine college students enrolled in Physical Education courses. The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed that students' motivation and engagement were influenced by social support, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, and task orientation. Factors affecting motivation included grades, social enjoyment, weather conditions, and curiosity. Students identified collaborative game-based learning, guided discovery, direct instruction, teacher enthusiasm, and demonstration-practice approaches as teaching strategies that enhanced engagement. Conversely, physical health concerns and emotional challenges reduced participation. Participants also described PE as a meaningful educational experience that fostered social connection, enjoyment, and physical and personal development. The findings highlight the importance of creating supportive, engaging, and student-centered PE environments that promote motivation, participation, and holistic student development.

Keywords: Physical Education, motivation, engagement, college students, lived experiences, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Physical Education (PE) is a fundamental component of higher education that promotes physical fitness, health awareness, social interaction, and lifelong participation in physical activity. Beyond developing physical competencies, PE contributes to students' psychological well-being, self-confidence, motivation, and personal growth. Motivation is widely recognized as one of the most influential factors affecting students' engagement and participation in physical activity settings.

Motivation in Physical Education can be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic forms. Intrinsic motivation refers to participation driven by personal interest, enjoyment, and satisfaction, whereas extrinsic motivation involves engagement due to external rewards, grades, recognition, or social approval. Research has consistently demonstrated that intrinsically motivated students exhibit greater persistence, enjoyment, and long-term participation in physical activities, while extrinsic motivators often influence short-term engagement and performance outcomes.

Within the Philippine context, Martin et al. (2016) found that motivation significantly predicts physical activity participation among Filipino college students. Similarly, Martin, Santos, and Tubera (2017) reported that students' motivational profiles influence their willingness to engage in physical activities, highlighting the importance of both task orientation and ego orientation in shaping participation behaviors. Students who focus on personal improvement and mastery tend to demonstrate higher engagement, while those motivated by competition often participate to outperform peers and gain recognition.

Student engagement is another critical factor in effective Physical Education instruction. Engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that influence students' willingness to participate actively in learning experiences. According to Mujriah and Irmansyah (2025), motivated and engaged students demonstrate persistence, effort, and enthusiasm during learning activities, whereas disengaged students often display avoidance behaviors and reduced participation.

Teaching strategies also play a crucial role in shaping motivation and engagement. Student-centered approaches such as guided discovery, collaborative learning, game-based learning, and practical demonstrations have been associated with increased participation and enjoyment. Santos et al. (2022) further emphasized the importance of perceived competence in PE participation, demonstrating that students are more likely to engage when they feel capable of performing required skills and activities.

Moreover, social support and instructional climate significantly influence students' learning experiences. Pestaño et al. (2025) found that participative coaching and supportive instructional practices enhance self-confidence and self-efficacy among student-athletes. Likewise, Martin and Santos (2015) identified social and environmental barriers as important determinants of physical activity participation among college students.

Despite growing interest in motivation and engagement within PE, existing research has predominantly employed quantitative approaches. Limited studies have explored how college students personally experience motivation, engagement, challenges, and meaningful learning experiences in Physical Education classes. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for developing instructional strategies that foster sustained participation and positive educational outcomes. Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of college students regarding motivation and engagement in Physical Education classes.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of college students regarding motivation and engagement in Physical Education classes. Phenomenology is appropriate for investigating how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences related to a particular phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon centered on students' experiences of motivation, participation, engagement, instructional practices, challenges, and meaningful learning within Physical Education settings.

Participants of the Study

Nine (9) college students currently enrolled in Physical Education classes at Central Luzon State University participated in the study. Participants were selected through convenience sampling based on their accessibility and willingness to share their experiences.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions and experiences regarding motivation, engagement, teaching strategies, challenges, and meaningful PE experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy and completeness of data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and pseudonyms (P1–P9) were used to protect participant anonymity.

3. Results and Discussions

Motivation and Engagement in Physical Education Classes

Theme 1: Social Support

Students' motivation was often strengthened by the presence of peers and the enjoyment they felt during class. When PE activities were socially engaging, students became more eager to join and perform better.

"I always do my best to participate in our activities and because of my classmates, I enjoy our PE which focuses on fitness." - P2

"At first, I thought I wouldn't enjoy our PATHFIT, but because of my classmates, I am motivated to participate and do better." - P9

Physical activities involving several individuals and direct connection are recognized as a sociological phenomenon. Engaging in physical activities, whether actively or passively, provides a suitable setting for social development and sharing. According to Hellison et al. (2025), physical activities are described as a collection of activities that support an individual's physical, mental, and social growth and help them achieve a healthy existence. The importance of peer support identified in this study aligns with Martin et al. (2016), who reported that social influences significantly contribute to Filipino college students' participation in physical activity. Students who feel supported by peers are more likely to enjoy activities and remain actively engaged.

Theme 2: Extrinsic Motivation and Ego-Orientation

Extrinsic motivation and ego orientation were repeatedly mentioned as major reasons for participating in PE. For many students, external rewards, recognition and outperforming others the desire to meet course requirements motivate them to remain engaged.

"My motivation and engagement in our PE class primarily come from the grades." - P4

"I don't want to participate in activities if I lose, and as I've said earlier, I am very competitive." – P8

Extrinsic motivation emerged as a factor influence on students' participation in PE, particularly through extrinsic motivation and ego-orientation. Students tended to exert engage when performance was tied to academic outcomes like grades and recognition or when success meant outperforming others, indicating that external rewards and competitive achievement shaped their engagement in the subject. These findings support Martin, Santos, and Tubera (2017), who found that ego-oriented students are often motivated by competition,

recognition, and performance outcomes. The emphasis on grades and outperforming others demonstrates how external rewards shape engagement in PE.

Theme 3: *Intrinsic Motivation and Task-Orientation*

Intrinsic motivation and task oriented were another factor affecting their participation in physical education classes. Students who had personal interest and progress in activities or were personally motivated by what they were doing showed intrinsic motivation.

"I always do my best to participate in our activities and because of my classmates, I enjoy our PE which focuses on fitness." - P2

"I don't care much about the course which is physical education, but more than going with the flow or meeting the requirements needed." - P9

According to Işıkgöz, M. (2025), pupils who are intrinsically driven participate in physical education activities due to intrinsic causes like curiosity, a desire to learn new abilities, or a love of exercise. Task-orientation also emerged as a relevant factor in students' participation in PE. Students who participated because they enjoyed learning new skills reflect task-oriented motivation. Similar findings were reported by Martin et al. (2017), who found that mastery-oriented students demonstrate greater persistence and satisfaction in physical activity participation.

Factors Influence Motivation

Theme 1: *Grades*

Grades continued to appear as an important motivational force in this section. Students often linked their effort in PE to the need to earn good scores, showing that academic rewards remained closely tied to participation.

"Grades influence my engagement in our PE class; my goal is to achieve 1.00 grades to compensate for my other grades in major subjects." - P1

"Even though I like our PE class, I am more eager to achieve high grades because I want to have a high general weighted average at the end of the semester." - P4

In physical education, grades continue to be a powerful external incentive. According to studies on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in physical education, students frequently participate because they value external outcomes like grades, recognition, and performance expectations in addition to their enjoyment of the subject. This supports the notion that academic rewards can influence effort even when physical education is regarded as a minor subject Ferraz, et al., (2021).

Theme 2: *Social Motivation and Enjoyment*

Students' motivation was often strengthened by the presence of peers and the enjoyment they felt during class. When PE activities were fun and socially engaging, participants became more eager to join and perform better.

"We also have classmates who encourage us to participate even if we're not very good." - P1

"I have supportive classmates, so I am highly motivated and engaged." - P6

In this sense, it is thought that motivation and enjoyment are linked, leading to the conclusion that both have an impact on the level of engagement with exercise and physical activity in physical education classes. Students' perceptions of their physical competence have an impact on how much they like their PE classes. It can serve as a useful predictor of two circumstances: first, it can forecast the desire and intention to start an ongoing physical activity; second, it can indicate whether an individual would continue an already-started physical activity. In this

sense, engaging in an activity for the purpose of increasing or maintaining future engagement in that habit is the outcome of intrinsic motivation (Hopkins et al., 2022; Pascual, 2026).

Theme 3: *Weather Condition*

Environmental conditions such as uncomfortable heat influenced students' willingness to participate. These external conditions sometimes reduce motivation because they affect comfort, performance and safety.

"When jogging on the oval, if the field is wet, I can't run properly which can lead to injury." - P3

"Aside from that, there's the heat, especially in the open area where we're playing." - P9

The weather has been identified as a perceived barrier to participation in physical activity, but exactly which adverse weather conditions are most important, and the extent to which they contribute to decreases in physical activity have rarely been quantified in populations. High or low temperatures, rain, snow or wind may all serve to decrease the pleasure derived from outdoor activities (Wilkins & Horne, 2024).

Theme 4: *Psychological: Curiosity*

Curiosity emerged as another important factor influencing motivation. Some participants became more engaged when they were interested in learning new skills or trying unfamiliar activities.

"When I am curious, I learn a lot of skills that can help me develop myself." - P7

"When I am curious, I want to learn more. Even if I know that I'm not good at something, I will be able to learn it because I'm curious enough to be motivated to learn, and I can't before." - P8

Curiosity can be defined as "noticing, exposing and desiring to explore new, difficult and ambiguous incidents and the potential of dealing with the incident" in light of these concepts. Numerous experimental and empirical studies demonstrate that curiosity has a favorable impact on developing the desire to think, performing well academically, and being object-oriented during the academic process. Curiosity is found to be positively correlated with explaining good emotions, self-regulation, a state of overall happiness and psychological well-being, embracing experiences, extroversion, sensitivity, positive self-concept, self-determination, and ego power. According to Asif and Naveed (2026), the traits of a lifelong learner include curiosity, interest in novel ideas and topics, information literacy, organization, and learning abilities.

Teaching Strategies Affect their Engagement

Theme 1: *Collaborative and Interactive Game-Based Learning*

Collaborative and interactive game-based activities made PE more engaging for many participants. Students were more motivated when lessons involved teamwork, competition, and interactive tasks that allowed them to learn while enjoying the activity.

"During our swimming class, we had an activity called "Save the Bottle" and the game had different levels and our scores depended on the level we could achieve, so I was very engaged that time." - P5

"In our class, our professor incorporated the app "Active Arcade," which features different games that serve as our physical activities. During our final exam, we participated in an "Amazing Race," where I needed to complete all the stations. All our activities were enjoyable and tiring at the same time, but I felt happy when I received the score I expected." - P6

Game-based learning has emerged as an effective instructional approach that promotes active participation, motivation, and the development of 21st-century skills. Modern educational environments require learners to develop skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving (Kalukar et al., 2024).

Theme 2: *Guided Discovery Learning and Direct Instruction*

Guided discovery learning and direct instruction were viewed as effective teaching strategies because they helped students understand the activity more clearly. Participants appreciated when professors provided direction while still allowing them to discover skills through guided participation.

"My professor provided supplemental videos and links to help us understand the material." - P1

"Since our classes are primarily exercises, our professor gives us clear instructions during class. In addition, she provides links to other videos that we can watch." - P2

According to the study by Woods et al. (2024) and Martin & Santos (2019) highlighted that student-centered teaching approaches, such as guided discovery, encourage engagement by allowing learners to actively participate in the learning process while receiving appropriate guidance from their instructors. This is evident in the participants' experiences, as they appreciated professors who provided clear instructions, supplemental learning materials, hands-on guidance, and constructive feedback. These teaching practices enhanced their understanding of activities and increased their engagement in Physical Education classes.

Theme 3: *Teacher's Enthusiasm as Motivational Course*

Teacher enthusiasm was repeatedly mentioned as a source of motivation. When professors were energetic, lively, and positive, students became more interested and active in class.

"A comedian professor or not-so-serious professor gets me motivated and engaged during our PE class." - P7

"He teaches us very interactively; he jokes a lot during our class, not in a way that is out of context, so we can easily understand the lessons because we are never bored." - P9

A teacher's enthusiasm in class can be beneficial to students. Generally, the college physical activity felt that when they initiate conversations with students, listen to students, and are excited about what they are teaching show to students that they are enthusiastic instructors. The motivational influence of enthusiastic teachers parallels the findings of Pestaño et al. (2025), who demonstrated that supportive and participative coaching practices enhance confidence, self-efficacy, and student engagement in physical activity settings.

Theme 4: *Demonstration and Practice Style*

Demonstration and practice style also played a key role in sustaining engagement. Students felt more confident when professors showed them how to perform the activity first and then allowed them time to practice the skill themselves.

"Our professor always demonstrates the skills of dry swimming so that we can see the right form before applying it in the water." - P5

"For me, I really like the approach of my professor when our professor guides us, gives instructions and lets us understand the rules of the sport while playing the game without proper lecture, but our professor guides us and very hands-on in providing feedback." - P8

Demonstration and practice styles are effective teaching strategies in Physical Education because they enable students to understand skills through direct observation and repeated performance. By teacher demonstrating the proper technique and students would then practice the skill individually with the teacher providing feedback and correction as needed (Treschman et al., 2024).

Challenges Reducing the Student's Participation

Theme 1: Physical and Health Problems

Physical and health problems affected students' ability to participate fully in PE. Body pain, low stamina and personal difficulties sometimes made it hard for students to remain active during class.

"My main problem is that my body aches after PE class. After jumping rope, I feel tired, which makes it hard for me to participate actively." P4

"I have health problems—asthma—and ever since, it limits my potential to do more." - P7

The barriers reported by participants are consistent with Martin and Santos (2015), who identified physical discomfort, environmental factors, and personal limitations as significant obstacles to participation in physical activity among college students.

Theme 2: Emotional Challenges

Emotional challenges also reduced participation, especially when students felt shy, embarrassed or afraid of being judged. These emotional barriers lowered confidence and made some participants hesitant to participate in activities.

"When our professor gives negative comments, I am emotionally affected because I did my best, which reduces my confidence and discourages me from engaging." - P1

"I easily get unmotivated when I think that I can't do certain activities. One time, I didn't attend class because I felt like I wouldn't be able to participate in the activity. I am affected by my emotions during those times, thinking I'm incapable of doing it." - P9

Emotion is an important aspect of motivation, behavior, and commitment in PE, which helps to foster a lifelong participation in physical activity (Manalad et al., 2026). Pleasant feelings concerning a specific task makes it worthwhile to turn one's attention to it, to engage oneself in this task, and to want to do it again. Unpleasant feelings towards a task, however, encourage oneself to avoid the task.

Meaningful PE Experiences

Theme 1: Social Connection

Social connection was an important part of how students described their PE experiences. Many participants saw PE as a chance to bond with classmates, *build friendships and strengthen their sense of belonging*.

"In our PE class I always have fun no matter what and it always shows once we are having an activity, whether alone or with my friends; tiring but fulfilling, every class I am closer to my classmates because of our PE class." - P7

"PE for me is not just about grades. Although I repeatedly said that I am more motivated by grades, I still view PE class as a source of enjoyment and improve my social skills because of the teams I'm in. Because if not for our PE class, I wouldn't initiate talking to others. I am very thankful to have experienced it during our PE class; it's not about me but about the surroundings that help me through it all." - P8

A meaningful PE experience was strongly shaped by social connections with peers and teachers. Students reported that interacting with classmates, sharing activities, and feeling supported by their teachers made PE more enjoyable and more memorable. These social relationships influenced how students viewed their PE experiences and helped create a more positive and engaging environment through gender equity (Roque et al., 2026; Santos, 2026b).

Theme 2: Enjoyable Experience

Enjoyment consistently shaped students' experiences in PE classes. Many participants described their experiences as fun and memorable, making it a positive and meaningful part of their academic life.

"I still view PE class as a source of enjoyment and improve my social skills because of the teams I'm in. Because if not for our PE class, I wouldn't initiate talking to others. I am very thankful to have experienced it during our PE class; it's not about me but about the surroundings that help me through it all." - P8

"Physical education makes my experience fun. I actively participate because of swimming because I wouldn't feel like it if it was different, like other daily physical activities." - P5

Enjoyable experience in PE can be defined as the positive, fun, and meaningful engagement students feel during physical education classes that motivates participation, fosters social bonding, and makes physical activity a memorable and valued part of their academic life. Enjoyment is characterized by feeling happy, fulfilled, and connected to classmates through shared physical activities (Antalan, 2026).

Theme 3: Physical and Personal Development

PE was also described as a space for physical and personal growth. Participants said that the subject helped them improve their skills, discipline, confidence, and overall development, while also giving them opportunities to learn new skills and try activities they had not experienced before.

"My experience in PE has been great since it has allowed me to grow, improve my well-being, and develop new skills. Aside from that, PE encourages discipline in how I participate in PE classes." - P3

"PE opened a lot of doors for me; through it, I am able to try new activities in a way that I realize I can play softball. I am good and have the skills for these physical activities and sports." - P9

Physical and personal development in PE can be defined as the holistic growth process where students improve their skills, discipline, confidence, and overall well-being while gaining opportunities to learn new activities and discover their physical capabilities. PE serves as a space for both physical skill mastery and personal character development. The findings resonate with Santos et al. (2022), who reported that perceived competence and skill development positively influence students' engagement and appreciation of Physical Education activities. Likewise, Santos (2026) found that participation in structured physical activity programs contributes to improved fitness, confidence, controlled aggression and overall well-being.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of college students regarding motivation and engagement in Physical Education classes. Findings revealed that students' participation is influenced by a combination of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, social support, and instructional practices. While grades, competition, and academic achievement served as important motivators, enjoyment, curiosity, and personal growth also played significant roles in sustaining engagement. Students emphasized that supportive peers, enthusiastic teachers, and interactive teaching approaches enhanced their learning experiences, whereas physical limitations, emotional challenges, and environmental conditions reduced participation. Importantly, participants viewed Physical Education as more than a course requirement; they described it as a meaningful space for social connection, enjoyment, self-discovery, and personal development. These findings highlight the need for student-centered and supportive PE environments that foster motivation, engagement, and holistic development among college learners.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings, Physical Education instructors should design learning experiences that encourage students to discover new skills, build confidence, and experience personal growth through active participation. Student-centered strategies such as collaborative activities, game-based learning, guided discovery, demonstrations, and practical applications should be integrated to enhance engagement and enjoyment. Schools should also strengthen PE programs by providing adequate facilities, equipment, and learning resources that support diverse student needs. Furthermore, future research should examine motivation and engagement across different educational contexts and student populations to develop a deeper understanding of factors influencing participation in Physical Education.

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