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EMBRACING DEMOCRATIC PEDAGOGIES THROUGH MEANINGFUL PE: EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract. Fun, challenge, social interaction, motor competence and personal relevance have been identified as key principles of Meaningful physical education (MPE). They are incorporated through democratic pedagogy, within which student voice and choice are promoted and supported, as well as through inclusive pedagogy, which enables inclusive and encouraging student experiences to be encouraged and nurtured through physical education and sports teaching. In this paper, we present experiences of teachers, pioneers from North Macedonia, related to the planning, implementation and evaluation of meaningful physical education. Data were collected from individual interviews and analyzed using six phase thematic analysis. Findings indicate positive changes in student behavior, including increased motivation, engagement, willingness to participate and express their opinions. The benefit of the application of MPE was also noted among students, in terms of their greater motivation, responsibility, more pronounced inclusiveness during and after physical education lessons, and also among teachers in terms of a clear picture of the needs of students, for the application of more responsible practice. In fact, the value of democratic and inclusive pedagogies was realised, and the significance of the principles of MPE in the direction of promoting and achieving quality physical education of the younger generations.Students reported greater ownership and inclusion in PE, while teachers gained new insights into students' needs, prompting more responsive practice. The findings highlight the value of integrating democratic pedagogies within MPE to enhance participation and inclusive quality PE.

Keywords: principles of meaningful PE; PE teachers; pedagogies in PE; democratic; children voice

1. Introduction

The promotion of physical activity, health, social and emotional development and motor skills in children and young people is the key goal of physical education. In recent years, in line with trends toward achieving quality physical education, the emphasis has been placed on its multidimensional character, i.e., on achieving the holistic development of the young person in and through physical education by integrating the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social components.In a global context, PE faces numerous challenges, including reduced physical activity due to sedentary lifestyles, impact of technology, inequalities in the access to resources, cultural differences, inclusion of children with special needs etc. All of this required the application of new, innovative approaches in the process of teaching, learning, and instruction. Traditional PE models focus on developing physical skills, applying standardized exercises, measuring performance, and fostering a competitive spirit, with the teacher as the authority. The reduced motivation, as well as the unmet needs of individual students, taking into account the fact that in the classes we have students with different educational needs, is another indicator of the need for changes in traditional approaches in the implementation of physical education, i.e. the application of an inclusive, emancipatory, democratic approach in teaching physical education.In the modern education, democratic approaches are considered the foundation for developing inclusive, equitable, and emancipatory pedagogical practices. They are based on the principles of student participation, freedom of choice, critical thinking, and social justice. The starting point for applying the new approaches is Dewey and Freire‘s theory of democratic education and critical pedagogy. According to these theories, education should be seen as a process that is achieved through dialogue, a process that leads to the liberation of the individual, a process in which the student is at the centre of the learning process and is treated as a subject with the right to vote and personal choice in creating their own experiences. (Freire, 2020). Creating an inclusive educational environment gives students opportunities to participate in decision-making, promotes a sense of ownership and empowerment (Lynch & Sargent, 2020). Knowledge about democratic, inclusive pedagogy, as well as knowledge about the effects of applying reflection in teaching, can be applied in all subjects and areas, including the subject of physical education.

1.1. The concept of Meaningful Physical Education (MPE)

The implementation of democratic and inclusive pedagogies, as well as reflective pedagogical practices, is carried out within the framework of the concept of Meaningful Physical Education. Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín (2017) define it as a new innovative pedagogical framework aimed at creating relevant, enjoyable and meaningful experiences for each student, through physical education. According to Ni Chróinín et al. (2023) in this framework, the emphasis is placed on encouraging engagement through movement with a focus on a more comprehensive approach aligned with the needs of students, an approach that leads to the enrichment of students‘ lives. MPE integrates elements such as kindness, physical activity, enjoyment, and quality education, tailored to the specific context of each school to create impactful and relevant experiences for students (Vasily et al., 2021). Pedagogies of MPE aimed to transform students experience in PE. When PE is meaningful and personally relevant, it becomes a tool for personal growth, social

integration and better quality of life (Walseth et al., 2018; Beni et al., 2021). Fletcher et al. (2021), recognizes meaningful PE as an approach to teaching and learning that emphasizes facilitating meaningful experiences for students as the primary filter for pedagogical decision-making. It involves creating activities that are relevant to students' interests, needs, and life contexts, engaging them in meaningful learning, self-reflection, and intrinsic motivation.

Meaningful PE emphasizes following key aspects: social interaction, fun and enjoyment, challenge, motor competence and personally relevant learning (Beni et al., 2017). The key principles of MPE enable: establishing continuous interaction, strengthening the possibility of cooperation, empathy, teamwork (principle - social interaction); promoting a positive attitude towards physical activity through pleasant and inspiring activities (principle – fun and enjoyment); design of tasks, balanced enough not to cause frustration, aimed at greater intrinsic motivation of students, their comprehensive engagement (principle – challenge).The aspect of motor competence refers to the central element of PE, i.e., the development of physical skills. This should be connected to practical experience and the enhancement of motor abilities in a way that is relevant to students. Personal relevant learning helps students to recognize the importance of what they are learning and to connect this to their personal needs, interests and experiences outside the school. This supports their engagement and enhance their meaningful participation in PE classes. By implementing reflection during or at the end of the lesson, the teacher gradually guides students towards raising awareness of what contributed to their experiences becoming meaningful, how to reflect on their own learning, how to assess personal achievements, how to independently set future goals. These futures of MPE do not function in isolation but are interwoven in the learning process. According to Fletcher & Ní Chróinín (2022), together, the teacher and students create an environment in which they can feel connected on a deeper level to physical activities.

1.2. Democratic pedagogy: characteristics and links to MPE

Democratic pedagogy is the basis of MPE. According to it, education is a process in which cooperation takes place between student, teacher and vice versa. The foundation of MPE lies in democratic pedagogy, which sees education as a process of cooperation between teachers and students. According to Fletcher et al. (2021) and Walseth et al. (2018), this approach implies an active role of students in the process of shaping their own learning, in the sense of participation in the decision-making process about the content of the curriculum, learning activities and assessment. Similar considerations are also made by Beni et al. (2021), who believe that MPE emphasises student autonomy, their voice, the possibility of choice and joint decision-making, and is aimed at creating an environment that is student-centred, which values students' perspectives and experiences. Beni et al. (2021), Walseth et al. (2018) and Enright & O'Sullivan (2010), will also emphasise that the application of the new MPE approach by encouraging dialogue and co-construction of knowledge leads to encouraging teachers and students to engage in reflective, participatory and empowering learning experiences.

Democratic pedagogy implies the application of a series of key principles: respecting the voice of students, supporting the expression of their own needs, thoughts and interests, encouraging feelings of ownership over the learning process (Lynch & Sargent,

2020); the opportunity to choose activities, methods, approaches to learning and their autonomy, which in turn leads to strengthening their engagement, their motivation (Riddick, 2023); the inclusion of all students regardless of their background, ability or interest and the opportunity to feel valuable, respected in the environment, which leads to the achievement of social justice and inclusiveness (Azzarito et al., 2017); established dialogue through the engagement of students and teachers in reflective discussions aimed at assessing experiences and shaping future teaching practices (Ní Chróinín, 2023).

Creating an environment in which students feel empowered, included, and motivated to participate is a feature of those education systems whose focus is the achievement of democracy and the promotion of equal opportunities. It is precisely towards the creation of such an environment, towards the achievement of democracy, the promotion of equal opportunities that this new MPE approach is aimed. Democratic pedagogy is particularly important for physical education, which includes physical, social and emotional interactions. The choice of activities, partner, equipment, respect for rules is what democratic pedagogy offers, which leads to strengthening student motivation, a sense of responsibility and inclusion. According to Ní Chróinín (2023), transferred to physical education refers to the application of strategies that offer students greater control over their experiences and strengthen their autonomy, while allowing them to reflect on their experiences and make suggestions for future improvements.

The connection between democratic pedagogy and MPE can actually be seen through the prism of autonomy, reflection and social justice. Namely, if we take into account autonomy and choice, MPE focuses on the choice of activities that are meaningful to students, aligned of course with the principles of democratic pedagogy (Riddick, 2023); or if we take into account reflection and social justice, MPE, through the implementation of reflective practices, offers students the opportunity to consider their own experiences in a broader social context, i.e., taking into account inclusiveness and equality (Azzarito et al., 2017; Ní Chróinín, 2023). According to Lynch & Sargent (2020), the tendency of both approaches is to create environments in which all students feel included, which in turn leads to better results in physical education.

The connection between democratic pedagogies, inclusiveness, and PE is multifaceted. Namely, the application of democratic principles is key in PE in creating environments that respect and accept diversity and promote equality.

Teachers play a key role in creating meaningful experiences through careful planning, inclusivity, and support (Beni et al., 2017; Beni et al., 2021).

The concept of MPE and within the democratic pedagogies are being implemented in several European countries, through the Erasmus + funded project Champions of MPE of Inclusion and Diversity. It provides a possibility for teachers from five countries (Ireland, North Macedonia, Norway, Denmark and Spain) to learn about the futures of MPE and how to implement them within their PE classes. Within this scope, and intending to explore the potentials of MPE and democratic pedagogies in PE toward creating a personally relevant and more inclusive educational experience, presented study explores the experiences of three PE teachers from North Macedonia in using the democratic pedagogies in PE and noted changes in students' behavior.

2. Methods

The presented study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of PE teachers in North Macedonia in implementing democratic pedagogies within the framework of MPE. The subject of the research was the perceptions and experiences of physical education teachers, pioneers of MPE from North Macedonia, in terms of planning, organisation and implementation of MPE, as well as changes in student behaviour in three cities (Ohrid, Kumanovo, Shtip), in North Macedonia over a period of three years, i.e. from 2024 to 2026. It was qualitative research, most appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation, which, according to Creswell & Poth (2018), allows for a detailed examination of personal perspectives and contextual factors, as well as an understanding of the dynamics of teaching practices within a specific socio-cultural context.

Context of the study. The research was conducted in real urban school environments in the Republic of North Macedonia (Shtip, Kumanovo, Ohrid), further emphasising the importance of contextual understanding of specific teaching practices related to the applicability of MPE and democratic pedagogies in different educational contexts.Data collection. We utilized the method of theoretical analysis, descriptive-analytical, and descriptive-explanatory methods. Data collection techniques included semi-structured individual interviews with three teachers, using pre-prepared questions covering topics such as MPE, teachers' experiences from MPE training, the implementation of MPE principles, strategies of implementation of democratic pedagogies, self-reflection of teachers on their own teaching practices and reflection of observed changes in students' behavior, teachers' reflections. Flexibility was maintained to ask follow-up questions based on the interviewees' responses.

Individual online interviews were conducted on the Teams platform with each participant, lasting 45 to 60 minutes. A free-form interview protocol was used as an instrument. The conversations were recorded, transcribed, and thematic analysis was performed on them.

Sample of participants. Given the fact that this was qualitative research, the sample consisted of three teachers, pioneers in the implementation of MPE in North Macedonia. It was purposive in nature. The three teachers were representatives from North Macedonia, participants in the MPE Champions for Inclusion and Diversity project. As participants in the project, in the first sixth of its duration, they were included in a six-month training that included online workshops organised by the project coordinator, involving experts from participating and partner countries. The workshops were aimed at understanding the purpose of the project, getting acquainted with the principles of MPE, democratic and reflective pedagogies; A series of practical sessions and reflective discussions were also conducted, aimed at encouraging teachers to reconsider their own teaching practices, and to empower them to create an inclusive environment for the implementation of meaningful physical education, which focused on the holistic development of the student. Teachers received guidance on adapting the principles of MPE to the specific educational context, as well as constant feedback towards higher achievements, from their mentors, teacher educators from the university. After the six-month training, the teachers began implementing meaningful physical education, applying democratic, inclusive pedagogy, and the principles of MPE, in their classes in various urban school environments, in accordance with the existing curriculum**.**

Data analyses. Data processing involved the application of thematic inductive analysis. The thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) six–phase approach. We used an inductive, bottom-up approach where codes and themes are derived from the content of the data (Braun & Clark, 2012, p. 58).

3. Results

Findings from the data analysis from the three teachers revealed three interrelated themes illustrating how democratic pedagogies were enacted in PE while using the learnings from MPE. They are following: 1) Enacting democracy in practice: give students voice and strategies for shared decision-making, 2) Student transformation: ownership, motivation, and inclusion, and 3) Teacher learning and reflection: challenging assumptions and adapting practice. Together, these themes highlight how democratic pedagogies can enhance the meaningfulness of PE experiences for both students and teachers.

Enacting democracy in practice: give students voice and strategies for shared decision-making

Teachers described using a range of strategies for applying democratic pedagogies, give students voice and promote student participation in decision-making processes during PE lessons. These strategies included offering opportunity to choose activities, select warm-up exercises and games, form their own groups or pairs, decide on starting stations or equipment. Through such practices, teachers sought to move away from traditional, teacher-directed models toward a more collaborative and participatory learning environment. As one teacher noted:

"I achieved the students' interest in the lesson by giving them the opportunity at the very beginning to independently suggest and choose the games they wanted to play, and to independently set up the equipment.". Another teacher explained *"I allowed them to choose the music for the activities, particularly their favorite songs, they participated with enthusiasm. This was a clear contrast to previous classes, when I choose the music. Students were disinterested, sitting on the sidelines, whispering, and not all of the m engaged"*.

Another teacher further explained:

"These strategies gave students a sense of responsibility for their learning, fostering a more inclusive and positive class climate".

In terms of inclusion through democratic pedagogies, one teacher explained how the simple change in warm up organization supported inclusion:

"*Often for practical reasons, we make divisions that suit us as teachers. At the beginning of the class, everyone lines up in a row by height. I used to separate boys and girls as it was easier for me. I don't do that anymore. Now, after being aware of MPE, I've started lining them up by height regardless of whether they're boys or girls. So now they are mixed. This had a very positive impact on one fifth-grade class where there was a significant division based on gender. I noticed changes in the dynamics. When I lined up the students by height without distinguishing between boys and girls, they naturally mixed. The group became diverse, inclusive, and with equal rights, without needing additional interventions*" (Teacher 2).

These examples highlight how important it is to listen to the students' voices and provide them with choices, especially for younger students. The implementation of

democratic pedagogy implied a free daily choice of games and equipment in the hall and the classroom, which in turn meant a changed, active role of the student, distribution of "power" with the teacher, other students, i.e. active participation in the process of constructing one's own knowledge. This approach marked a step forward towards building the so-called jointly constructed experiences in the learning process.

Student Transformation: Ownership, Motivation, and Inclusion

The use of democratic pedagogies initiated significant changes in students' behavior. Teachers noted transformation in their attitudes and engagement. For instance, one of the teachers explained:

"*I changed the traditional warm-up and instead start with a game, for example, "Bridges and Rivers,". The students have to pair up with the person next to them and that doesn't mean they'll always be with someone of the same gender. On the contrary, they mix freely, without resistance or discomfort. Boys and girls play together with respect and natural cooperation. Inclusion is natural and there is no gender or close-close friend selection as it used to be*" (Teacher 1).

Another teacher shared:

"*When I started giving students to choose between two activities, or to choose music for the dances, they started to appreciate that their voice matters. They feel important and aware that they're part of the process. They become more responsible, active because their voice and role is valued*" (Teacher 2).

The third teacher explained how giving the choices (game, partner, equipment) change the communication within the class:

"*There was no anger, no show of force, no authoritarian approach. It's open dialogue, understanding, and respect. It's a process we walk through together. Things changed. And not just changed, they transformed*". *One of the teachers also noted that "Students who were usually quiet started giving suggestions about games or how to change rules. They seemed more confident because their ideas were being listened to"* (Teacher 2).

Another reflected that:

"When they chose what to do, participation improved, especially among those who used to avoid PE" (Teacher 3).

The implementation of democratic strategies led to "expected" positive changes in the behavior of students. Changes were observed in terms of their motivation, engagement, readiness for active participation in physical education classes, a higher level of self-confidence observed in expressing one's own attitude, opinion, more intense social interaction, greater inclusiveness, respect for "the other". Discuss the sense of belonging and empowerment that emerged when students' voices were valued.

The learning process and reflective practice

The implementation of democratic and inclusive pedagogy and the principles of MPE was the path traced towards personal and professional growth, professional learning of the pioneer teachers. On that path, filled with numerous challenges, the pioneer teachers acquired numerous insights related to the needs, interests, and motivation of the students, their weaknesses, their strengths, but also opportunities. One of the teachers explained:

"*Achieving the curriculum and delivering a quality lesson remain important, but I now see that it's not enough. It's essential to listen to the student's voice, observe and value their reactions, adapt the teaching to their needs and interests, and encourage and*

support them as individuals. If something isn't working well for them, I change it. If they show more interests for something, I include it. I do all of this through their perspective, not just according to a pre-set plan. That, in my opinion, is the fundamental change: to see the student as a person, to support, encourage, educate, and involve them in the learning process in a way that is meaningful to them."

Another one shared her experience with selection of games:

"I had three games on my mind. We tried them all and I asked them to vote which one they like most. I was surprised. I realized that what the game I thought students enjoyed the most, was actually the most boring one for them. I learned that it`s important to hear what they want and like. Listening to them changed the way I plan lessons now" (Teacher 2).

According to Teacher 3:

"*Listening what students want and giving them a possibility to choose, really changed the flow of communication at the class. The children felt heard and valued, and that strengthened our relationship. Therefore is important we as teachers to be open to change, learn, and adapt, just like the students do*" (Teacher 2).

The first teacher also noted that the change in certain activities towards encouraging freedom of choice and inclusiveness had no impact on their acceptance by the students:

This showed me that when a teacher creates a safe and supportive environment, students are open to new experiences and embrace changes as something normal and positive".

Speaking about democratic approach in general, one of the teachers explained:

"*I think it offers the most opportunities for student engagement; you just need to find the right way to ask questions and offer choices. It's important not to offer superficial or unrealistic choices (for example, if someone asks for a spiky ball and you don't have one, that choice isn't feasible*".

All teachers agree that making time for reflection and feedback is very important. One of them stated:

"*Using different reflective prompts I receive valuable feedback about what students like/ dislike/enjoy/ have difficulties etc. This allows me to adapt and improve future classes. It helps me to focus on activities the students truly enjoy, and use those insights to create a more pleasant learning environment*".

Another one shared:

"*When started with reflection, I thought younger children wouldn't give such detailed responses as they did. But I was wrong. They're open, saying everything without any issues. Honestly and directly. I didn't expect such honesty. They were just waiting to be asked, nothing more. Now they have that opportunity and they love it*" (Teacher 3).

Engaging in democratic pedagogy encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their practice and assumptions. The application of joint discussions, dialogue, and participation of both teachers and students in the decision-making process has also influenced the change of the teachers themselves, in terms of strengthening their empathy, adapting to the real context in accordance with knowledge of the needs and interests of the students

4. Discussion

The implemented qualitative research indicates that the application of democratic and inclusive pedagogy and reflective practices in physical education teaching lead to

changes in the experience of students and teachers. Namely, when there is a change in the position, the role of the two significant factors, the teacher and the student, when the student‘s voice is heard, when he exercises the right to choose, when he has an active role in the decision-making process, when a constructive dialogue with the teacher is established, when they make decisions together, when there is mutual respect between the teacher and the student, between the students, when everyone feels equally heard, valuable, then learning through movement really becomes a reality, a joy. It is through MPE that this approach is a reality or as Fletcher & Ní Chróinín (2022) and Beni et al., (2017) will point out, this approach has one main goal, i.e. helping students find personal meaning, social connection and joy in movement.

Pioneering PE teachers also highlighted the value of the strategies used (everyday pedagogical choices, different options for performing activities, lesson design, etc.) in applying democratic principles in practice. Such findings are also in line with the results of previous relevant research (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010), which discusses the role of listening to the voice and choosing physical education lessons in fostering student motivation and emotional investment. By giving students, the opportunity to shape their learning, teachers not only enhanced engagement but also contributed to the development of social and emotional skills essential for lifelong participation in physical activity.

Furthermore, the process of implementing democratic pedagogies fostered meaningful teacher learning. The teachers‘ statements point to a strengthening of their awareness of the need to understand the needs and interests of students, but also to an awareness of the need for constant re-examination and reflection of their own practice in order to improve their own activities. In fact, this is the basis for the application of the so-called research-based teaching and democratic teaching. Such findings are in line with the results of other relevant research that confirm that democratic pedagogies support the growth of teachers as reflective practitioners who can respond to complex social realities in physical education classrooms (Cardiff et al., 2023; Ní Chróinín et al., 2024; Iannucci et al., 2024).

Ultimately, embedding democratic pedagogies within PE represents not only a pedagogical shift but also an ethical and social commitment to equity and inclusion. When students are empowered to co-create their learning, PE becomes a more meaningful. It's a place for participation for all and a safe space where students voices are heard and appreciated. This result promotes PE as a setting for personal and collective growth. It also goes in line with personal relevance as one of the components of MPE (Beni et al., 2017). When students feel that their voices matter, they are more likely to engage and to experience PE as an inclusive and empowering space. Teachers noted that these practices helped create a stronger sense of belonging and cooperation among students, better communication and reflects the social and affective outcomes central to the MPE approach.

Engaging in democratic pedagogy encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their practice and assumptions. The established constructive dialogue, joint decision-making, awareness of the different needs and interests of students, have enabled teachers to be more adaptable, more strongly expressed in empathy, flexibility, responsibility, and reflectivity of their own practice.They began to view teaching as a dynamic process of learning with and from students. These reflections are in line with Fletcher and Ní Chróinín's (2021) argument that democratic pedagogies support teachers' professional growth through relational and reflective engagement.

5. Conclusion

Findings from our study illustrate how the integration of democratic pedagogies within the MPE framework can enhance student participation, their motivation for active engagement in PE classes, supporting different forms of inclusion, but also teacher learning.By listening to students' voices, following their interests and enacting shared decision-making, teachers fostered a sense of ownership and motivation among students while developing a deeper understanding of how to create responsive and student-centered learning environments that encourages fun, support, and collaboration.This reciprocal process underlines the transformative potential of democratic pedagogies in promoting quality, meaningful, and inclusive PE.

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