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PROMOTING YOUNG LEARNERS' INTEREST IN SPORT AT SCHOOL: DEVELOPMENTAL FEATURES AND MODERN PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

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Abstract. Developing a lasting interest in sport during the early school years is an important educational task because attitudes formed in childhood often influence later patterns of physical activity. The purpose of this article is to examine the developmental characteristics that affect younger learners' participation in sport and to discuss modern methodological approaches that can make school physical education more engaging, inclusive and meaningful. The paper emphasizes the role of play, emotional safety, perceived competence, peer relations, autonomy, differentiated tasks and positive feedback.

Keywords: schoolchildren, sport motivation, physical education, game-based learning, gamification, cooperative learning, learner-centred approach.

Interest in sport is not formed only through physical ability. It develops through a combination of emotional experience, social interaction, perceived success, teacher support and opportunities for meaningful participation. For younger schoolchildren, especially those in the primary and lower-secondary stages, sport may become either an attractive part of everyday life or an activity associated with fear of failure, public comparison and pressure. Therefore, the task of the school is not simply to teach techniques or organize competitions, but to create conditions in which children want to move, play, practise and improve.

The health value of regular physical activity is well established. The World Health Organization recommends that children and adolescents aged 5–17 years accumulate an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day across the week, with additional muscle- and bone-strengthening activity on several days (WHO, 2020). School physical education and sport are important environments for supporting this recommendation because they reach children with different levels of ability, family support and previous sporting experience. UNESCO also stresses that quality physical education should be inclusive, varied and learner-centred rather than limited to performance-oriented instruction (UNESCO, 2015).

Younger learners differ from adolescents and adults in the way they perceive effort, competition, rules and success. One of the most important characteristics is the dominance of play-based motivation. Children usually respond more positively to an activity when it contains a clear challenge, an element of imagination, movement variety and an achievable goal. Repetitive drills can be useful for skill development, but long periods of technically correct repetition may quickly reduce attention. For this reason, the same motor skill can be practised through relays, obstacle courses, team missions, movement stories or short competitive games.

Gamification is related to game-based learning but is not identical to it. It introduces selected game elements into ordinary learning activities, for example points for personal improvement, badges for teamwork, class missions, progress levels or collective challenges. The aim should not be to reward only the strongest pupils. A better model is to award progress, effort, cooperation, fair play and consistency. Used in this way, gamification can make progress visible and give children short-term goals without turning every lesson into high-pressure competition.

Learner-centred and autonomy-supportive teaching also deserves attention. Children can be offered limited but meaningful choices: which station to start at, which of two difficulty levels to attempt, which role to take in a group, or which movement to include in a short sequence. Choice

should be structured rather than unlimited. The teacher remains responsible for safety and learning objectives, but children gain a sense of ownership. Evidence from motivation research suggests that autonomy support is associated with stronger engagement, self-beliefs and autonomous motivation (White et al., 2021).

Digital tools can support physical education when they serve a clear pedagogical purpose. Short video demonstrations, simple movement-recording tasks, step counters, interactive challenges or QR-code stations can make lessons more visual and provide immediate information about progress. However, technology should not replace movement or face-to-face interaction. For younger learners, digital tools are most effective when they are brief, easy to use and connected to an active task. The key principle is that technology should increase meaningful movement, reflection or feedback rather than increase screen time.

A motivating lesson can be organized around several simple principles. First, the opening activity should create immediate movement and curiosity. Instead of a long verbal explanation, the teacher can begin with a two- or three-minute movement challenge. Second, instructions should be short, demonstrated visually and checked through action. Children learn physical tasks more effectively when explanation and movement are closely connected.

Third, the main part of the lesson should include variety but not confusion. Three or four stations can target the same skill at different levels of difficulty. For instance, when teaching throwing accuracy, one station may use a large target at a short distance, another a smaller target, and a third a moving or timed challenge. Pupils can progress when they are ready. This makes adaptation natural and reduces the embarrassment of being labelled as weak or strong.

Fourth, competition should be used carefully. Competition can be exciting, but it should not dominate every lesson. Short races, team contests and personal-best challenges can be combined with cooperative tasks. Teachers should change teams regularly and avoid public selection methods in which the same children are repeatedly chosen last. Recognition can include sportsmanship, persistence, creativity and support for classmates as well as speed or technical accuracy.

Fifth, feedback should be specific and formative. Instead of simply saying “good” or “wrong”, the teacher can identify one successful feature and one next step. For example: “Your eyes stayed on the ball; now try to soften your hands when you catch it.” Such feedback helps learners understand that ability can improve through practice. Brief self-assessment can also be used at the end of the lesson: pupils may show with fingers how confident they feel, select a difficulty level for the next lesson, or name one skill they improved.

Finally, school sport should extend beyond formal physical education lessons. Short activity breaks, class tournaments with inclusive rules, family sport days, clubs with beginner groups and school-wide movement challenges can give children more opportunities to discover activities they enjoy. The objective is not to direct every child toward competitive sport, but to help each child find forms of movement that are enjoyable, socially positive and sustainable.

Encouraging young children to become interested in sport requires more than increasing the number of exercises. Interest grows when children experience movement as enjoyable, achievable, socially safe and personally meaningful. Their age-related need for play, variety, recognition and peer belonging should shape the methodology of physical education. Modern approaches such as game-based learning, carefully designed gamification, cooperative learning, differentiated tasks and autonomy-supportive teaching can create these conditions.

The teacher’s role is therefore changing from that of a controller of performance to that of a designer of motivating learning experiences. Effective school sport programmes balance skill development with enjoyment, competition with cooperation, common objectives with individual differences, and digital innovation with real physical activity. When progress is valued more than comparison and every child has a meaningful role, physical education can contribute not only to

physical fitness but also to confidence, social development and a long-term positive attitude toward an active lifestyle.

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