

# Toward Confidence in Movement

How to Enhance Girls' Self-Efficacy  
in Physical Education Courses?

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Experts are sounding the alarm: young adults aren't active enough. College students, especially young women, are no exception. A study shows that 79% of female CEGEP students do not meet the World Health Organization's recommendation of 150 minutes of physical activity per week. What's more, 41% of them are active for less than 10 minutes per week and are therefore considered sedentary (Leriché *et al.*, 2015). How can we encourage them to be more active? What measures should be taken in Physical Activity and Health (PAH) courses to stimulate their engagement in physical activity and thus combat this public health problem? Research conducted at the college level has highlighted the suggestions made by female CEGEP students regarding teaching practices that are likely to enhance the development of their self-efficacy. Implementing their suggestions could be a promising avenue for improvement.

In Quebec, only 33% of female high school students perceive themselves as competent in PAH, compared to 77% of boys (Robitaille, 2019). Also in Quebec, only adolescent girls report that their physical activity preferences are not taken into account at school, which hinders their interest in PAH (Dubuc *et al.*, 2021). Robitaille (2019) notes that in high school, PAH courses offer more team sports, activities that are perceived as less interesting by girls.

Typically masculine characteristics associated with traditional sporting activities clash with feminine values (Davison *et al.*, 2010). As the female gender comes into conflict with the practice of physical activity in this singular context, young women invest little time in developing their skills. A vicious cycle begins. The less physical activity they engage in, the less competent they feel. The less competent they feel, the less physical activity they engage in. As a result, after high school, young women's perceptions of their competence in PAH decline. As college teachers, we can certainly ask ourselves how we can reverse this trend and encourage them to move more.

## Context of the study

It appears that the development of self-efficacy can have an impact on engagement in physical activity (Lecomte, 2004). In a nutshell, self-efficacy refers to a student's perceived competencies in a particular area of activity. For example, a person with a positive perception of their competencies is better equipped to deal with obstacles that lead to the adoption of a behaviour. Conversely, a person with low self-efficacy tends to abandon

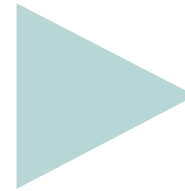
said behaviour when obstacles arise (Bandura, 2007; Godin, 2012). While female CEGEP students feel "less good" at PAH than their college counterparts (Chiasson, 2005), increasing their self-efficacy appears to be a promising way to support the adoption and maintenance of health-related behaviours (Godin, 2012).

## Female CEGEP students' point of view

Following this line of reasoning, research conducted as part of a master's thesis<sup>1</sup> examined female college students' perceptions of the construct of self-efficacy in PAH. Thirty-eight female college students from the Montreal metropolitan area, aged 18 to 28, participated in the study, which specifically sought to identify their perspectives on the behaviours that PAH teachers would benefit from adopting in order to increase their self-efficacy.

The views of the participants (n=38) were collected in meetings using the nominal group technique (Delbecq & Van de Ven, 1971). This data collection method allowed each participant to select ideas and rank them according to the importance she attached to them. The participants attached great importance to three main themes, which are the focus of this article: 1) planning courses based on the preferences of female CEGEP students, 2) offering courses in a pleasant atmosphere, and 3) evaluating based on criteria adapted to the level of technical skills of female CEGEP students. It should be noted that the students' comments are based on their own perceptions, which do not always reflect the reality or the intentions of PAH teachers. It should also be noted

that some of the recommendations made could just as easily apply to male students taking PAH courses. Finally, we'd like to point out that there are a number of avenues for intervention that could be thought-provoking for teachers of all disciplines, especially those typically associated with males, such as science and math.



<sup>1</sup> For more on the dissertation that led to this article, see Caplette Charette, 2014.

## Course planning

The participants' testimonials highlight the teaching practices related to the planning of PAH courses that help to increase the self-efficacy of female CEGEP students. These practices include adapting course offerings to the tastes of female CEGEP students, taking into account their preferences when planning activities, and planning certain activities separately for female and male students during PAH courses. Let's take a closer look at these suggestions.

### Adapting course offerings to the tastes of female CEGEP students

A majority of participants suggested that courses should offer a greater variety of physical activities, both individual and cooperative. What's more, a high proportion of participants stressed the importance of getting their first choice of course, as it respects their tastes and level of competence. It seems that failure to obtain this first choice of course is seen as an obstacle to the development of self-efficacy in the population studied. Although there are logistical limitations that influence the courses offered by the different PAH departments, these results give cause to reflect on the possibilities of further diversifying them. For each set of courses, it might be interesting to look at the offering from the point of view of female students. Are the physical activities offered of interest to them? Are the courses varied enough? Although the courses offered should be developed taking into account the facilities available and the interests and competencies of the PAH teaching staff, is it possible to renew them so that they meet the needs of both male and female students?

### Considering female CEGEP students when planning activities

Most of the participants suggested that the teacher plan activities according to the preferences of the students. The participants suggested involving female students in the planning of course activities to support the development of their self-efficacy. This involvement could occur at different levels. For example, in a multisport course, the planning could be revised at the beginning of the session by making a list of suggestions to incorporate the girls' choice of activities. Or, in swimming, a teacher could allow freedom of choice in swimming styles, encouraging the female students to choose the ones they prefer in order to perfect their skills. In this way, female CEGEP students have the freedom to choose activities that meet their needs, which they appreciate.

### Planning separate activities

Some participants mentioned that they would like to see girls-only courses, an option already offered in some CEGEPs, but the majority of participants wanted coeducational courses in which the teacher provides opportunities for boys to work separately from girls. Participants qualified their comments by suggesting occasional separation, for example during learning activities to optimize their skills, or during game situations. According to the participants interviewed, boys are often more skilled than girls in game situations, and they give them few opportunities to perform. In team sports, the participants noted that male CEGEP students made few passes to them, as the importance of scoring points seemed to take precedence over equal opportunities to participate.

On the other hand, according to the participants, coeducation could be maintained when differences in ability levels do not prevent girls from progressing. For example, a difference in calibre may be frowned upon by girls, even though comparing their competencies with those of boys is likely to discourage them from persevering in perfecting their technical skills. What's more, participants report that for some female students, interacting with people who have better technical skills stimulates their perseverance and helps to consolidate the development of self-efficacy.

## Course implementation

In terms of teaching and learning activities, the majority of the participants interviewed suggested that the teacher should encourage the development of female CEGEP students' technical skills, respect their limits, ensure a pleasant atmosphere and provide constructive feedback. Let's take a look at how these ideas could be put into practice in courses.

### Promoting the development of technical skills in female college students

The participants indicated that the teacher should be responsible for perfecting technical skills so that female students can improve their weaknesses. For example, they would like to have the opportunity to perfect their skills and then use them in game situations. According to the participants, this type of learning activity contributes to the development of the self-efficacy of female students because they can experience success.

## Respecting the limits of female CEGEP students

A large majority of participants consider it important to respect the limits of girls in terms of their physiological state and physical condition. For the participants, physiological condition refers to physical limitations such as menstruation or perceived fatigue. According to Bandura (2007), when negative perceptions are associated with the practice of an activity, it is detrimental to the development of self-efficacy. On the other hand, positive emotions, such as pleasure, experienced during the practice of an activity strengthen self-efficacy. In this sense, the participants suggest that the teacher adapt certain parameters of the activity, such as the intensity, in order to respect their limits and show understanding.

## Ensuring a pleasant climate

The participants affirm that a pleasant climate in which the teacher favours a pleasant interaction with them and emphasizes cooperation rather than competition is desirable. They point out that cooperation promotes the acquisition of technical skills and perceived pleasure. For example, in a weight training course, the female students work in dyads to complete a training circuit and correct each other's performance of the exercises. In this way, peer teaching contributes to the development of self-efficacy while fostering the acquisition of technical skills.

## Provide constructive feedback

The quality of communication and the words chosen by the teacher influence the development of the female students' self-efficacy. Participants

find that technical and personalized feedback improves their self-efficacy. For example, in badminton, explicit technical feedback on the backcourt release enables them to improve. They then have a precise idea of the dimension they need to work on in order to progress. In addition, the participants emphasize that the teacher should notice their efforts. This would allow female students who are making little progress to be supported in their learning. Finally, during the interviews, the participants stated that a teacher who uses their first name further reinforces the quality of communication, which contributes to the development of their self-efficacy.

## Evaluating learning outcomes

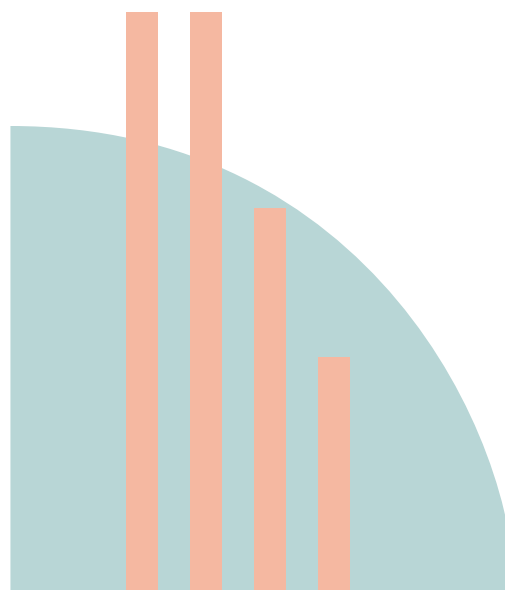
In terms of evaluation, most participants suggested that the teacher evaluate the progress of female students. They emphasized that such an evaluation approach should be adapted to the physical condition of girls, enable them to actively participate in evaluating their own learning, and be carried out in a personalized context.

## Focus on progress

The results show that the participants would like the teacher to evaluate the progress of female students based on a variety of content and criteria, differentiated according to their level of fitness and skills. For example, in a volleyball course, girls could be invited to choose the shot on which they would be evaluated. They could make a choice based on their preference and level of expertise. In addition, the content of the evaluation could focus on various aspects, including mastery of technique,

progression and personal goals, to provide a holistic view of the female students' progress.

Participants added that teachers should avoid standardized physical tests to evaluate fitness at the beginning and end of the session, as these tests are associated with performance categories such as "very low," "low," "average," or "high". Thus, the physical condition of female CEGEP students could be assessed through "challenges" rather than standardized tests. For example, a challenge could be to perform the highest number of sit-ups in one minute. Since



there are no performance categories associated with the results, this form of evaluation would be progress-oriented rather than performance- and standard-adherence-oriented. It should be noted that standardized physical tests are very useful for measuring a population and identifying differences in fitness for entire cohorts or across years for population-based follow-up. However, the use of categories for individual evaluation is less appropriate because a certain percentage of the student population will fall at the lower end of the scale. Since these standardized categories are based on a large population, there will always be a proportion of the student population in the so-called "low" or "very low" categories, which has a negative impact on the development of self-efficacy. However, when the analysis is limited to the raw results, without the standardized categories, these "challenges" are excellent measures of fitness progress that support the development of self-efficacy.

Also, unlike standardized physical tests, the "challenge" method would encourage the choice of variants adapted to fitness level. For example, push-ups could be broken down into four variations rather than the single option suggested by standardized tests (placing knees under hips, aligning the body on a diagonal line with knees on the floor, pressing on the toes with legs at hip width, or on the toes with feet glued together). In this way, different levels of exercises allow girls to adapt the evaluation criteria to their actual level of fitness.

## Conclusion

In a context where female college students are disengaging from the

practice of physical activity, their perspectives on developing self-efficacy are important and as timely as ever. Participants' suggestions identified three categories of important interventions in PAH (summarized in **Table 1**), many of which are transferable to other college disciplines.

Table 1

### Suggestions made by female CEGEP students for developing their self-efficacy

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#### When planning courses, the teacher should:

- offer a wide range of courses
- separate male and female students for certain types of activities
- plan activities according to the interests and preferences of female students
- allow involvement in the planning of course activities

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#### When giving courses, the teacher should:

- provide encouragement and feedback
- promote quality learning
- make rewarding comparisons
- create a pleasant atmosphere
- adopt a positive attitude
- communicate constructively and meaningfully
- consider the interests of the student population
- respect each student's limitations
- adapt teaching to students' skill levels

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#### When evaluating learning, the teacher should :

- evaluate progress rather than performance
  - allow the setting of personalized goals
  - evaluate according to differentiated criteria
  - evaluate in individualized contexts
  - implement personalized evaluation of learning outcomes
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The results allow us to describe an ideal context that favours the development of self-efficacy in female CEGEP students, particularly in PAH. In this ideal context, the teacher plans a varied course offering that includes individual and cooperative activities in which the female students perform well and that allows them to participate in the choice of activities. In addition, the courses are designed to include activities that are rewarding, conducted in a positive classroom climate, and respectful of each student's limitations. Participants also

suggested that teachers evaluate female students' progress rather than their performance, thus encouraging the setting of personal goals and individualized evaluation rather than standardized tests.

Of course, it would be great to find all of these teaching practices that are conducive to the development of female college students' self-efficacy in one and the same gymnasium, or even college. At the same time, it's very likely that some of them are already in place in several Quebec colleges.

It's important to remember that the comments made by the participants during the study reflect their perceptions and not the actual intentions of PAH teachers. However, self-efficacy is based on perceptions. So it's important to focus on the perceptions of female students in developing their self-efficacy. This allows us not only to question ourselves as teachers, but also to continue to implement differentiated and innovative teaching practices. ■

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