


Between curricular promise and school experience: assessment practices and motivation in physical education and health¹

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Abstract

In Chile, Physical Education and Health is a compulsory subject throughout the school trajectory and is curricularly presented as a subject aimed at promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles. However, this promise coexists with low levels of physical activity and with student experiences that do not always foster a positive relationship with movement. Within this framework, this essay critically examines the role of specific assessment practices in students' motivation and experiences in Physical Education and Health, positioning the rise in screen time as part of the contemporary sociocultural context rather than as a sufficient explanation of the problem. It is argued that, although the promotion of active habits cannot rest exclusively on schools or on this subject alone, its compulsory status, the tendency to award high grades, and its discursive emphasis on health do not in themselves guarantee adherence, meaningful learning, or educational purpose. On the contrary, certain assessment practices may undermine students' perceived competence, autonomy, and relational experience, reinforcing logics of performance and exclusion that tension the formative purpose of the subject. Drawing on a dialogue between specialized literature, evidence from the Chilean context, and recent studies on assessment and student experiences, the essay argues for the need to move toward a more inclusive, formative, and curriculum-consistent Physical Education and Health.

Keywords: Educational assessment; motivation; physical activity; physical education; teaching practices.

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Entre la promesa curricular y la experiencia escolar: prácticas evaluativas y motivación en Educación Física y salud

Resumen

En Chile, Educación Física y Salud tiene carácter obligatorio en la trayectoria escolar y se presenta curricularmente como una asignatura orientada a promover la actividad física y los estilos de vida saludables. No obstante, esta promesa convive con bajos niveles de práctica física y con experiencias estudiantiles que no siempre fortalecen una relación positiva con el movimiento. En este marco, el presente ensayo analiza críticamente el papel de determinadas prácticas evaluativas en la motivación y en las experiencias del estudiantado, situando el aumento del tiempo de pantalla como parte del contexto sociocultural contemporáneo, más que como explicación suficiente del problema. Se argumenta que, si bien la promoción de hábitos activos no puede recaer exclusivamente en la escuela ni en esta asignatura, su obligatoriedad, la tendencia a la asignación de altas calificaciones y su énfasis discursivo en la salud no aseguran por sí mismos adherencia, aprendizaje significativo ni sentido formativo. Por el contrario, determinadas prácticas evaluativas pueden debilitar la competencia percibida, la autonomía y la experiencia relacional del alumnado, reforzando lógicas de rendimiento y exclusión que tensionan el sentido formativo de la asignatura. A partir del diálogo entre literatura especializada, antecedentes del contexto chileno y estudios recientes sobre evaluación y vivencias estudiantiles, el ensayo plantea la necesidad de avanzar hacia una Educación Física y Salud más inclusiva, formativa y coherente con sus propósitos curriculares.

Palabras clave: Actividad física; educación física; evaluación educativa; motivación; prácticas docentes



Entre a promessa curricular e a experiência escolar: práticas avaliativas e motivação na Educação Física e saúde

Resumo

No Chile, a Educação Física e Saúde tem caráter obrigatório ao longo da trajetória escolar e apresenta-se curricularmente como uma disciplina orientada à promoção da atividade física e de estilos de vida saudáveis. No entanto, essa promessa convive com baixos níveis de prática física e com experiências estudantis que nem sempre fortalecem uma relação positiva com o movimento. Nesse contexto, o presente ensaio analisa criticamente o papel de determinadas práticas avaliativas na motivação e nas experiências do estudantado em Educação Física e Saúde, situando o aumento do tempo de tela como parte do contexto sociocultural contemporâneo, mais do que como uma explicação suficiente para o problema. Argumenta-se que, embora a promoção de hábitos ativos não possa recair exclusivamente sobre a escola nem sobre essa disciplina, sua obrigatoriedade, a tendência à atribuição de notas altas e sua ênfase discursiva na saúde não asseguram, por si só, adesão, aprendizagem significativa nem sentido formativo. Pelo contrário, determinadas práticas avaliativas podem enfraquecer a competência percebida, a autonomia e a experiência relacional dos estudantes, reforçando lógicas de rendimento e exclusão que tensionam o sentido formativo da disciplina. A partir do diálogo entre a literatura especializada, antecedentes do contexto chileno e estudos recentes sobre avaliação e vivências estudantis, o ensaio propõe a necessidade de avançar para uma Educação Física e Saúde mais inclusiva, formativa e coerente com seus propósitos curriculares.

Palavras-chave: Atividade física; educação física; avaliação educacional; motivação; práticas docentes.



Introduction

In recent decades, the decline in physical activity levels and the increase in sedentary behaviors have become major public health and educational concerns, particularly during childhood and adolescence (Guthold et al., 2020; WHO, 2022). In this scenario, screen time constitutes an inescapable sociocultural framework for understanding the transformations in daily habits, leisure forms, and the use of free time among children and young people (Aguilar-Farías et al., 2020; Stiglic & Viner, 2019). However, attributing contemporary physical inactivity exclusively to increased screen exposure is insufficient, as it is a complex phenomenon that also involves broader family, school, cultural, and social conditions (Chile, 2016; WHO, 2022).

In the Chilean case, this discussion acquires special relevance, since the subject of Physical Education and Health (PEH) is a compulsory part of a substantive portion of the school trajectory and is explicitly oriented toward the promotion of movement, well-being, and healthy lifestyles (Chile, 2015). From this perspective, one would expect its sustained presence in the school curriculum to contribute to strengthening a positive and lasting relationship between the student body and physical activity. Nonetheless, this assumption is strained when contrasted with a national scenario in which insufficient levels of physical practice persist. The 2016–2017 National Health Survey indicates that 86.7% of the adult population presents insufficient levels of physical activity, while more recent data show that only 26.4% of children and adolescents meet the minimum physical activity recommendations, rendering evident the magnitude of the problem in the country (Chile, 2017, 2024).

This tension becomes even more significant when considering that PEH is usually associated with high pass rates and favorable grades. Thus, a paradox emerges that is difficult to ignore: a compulsory subject, curricularly oriented toward the promotion of health and movement, does not seem to necessarily translate into greater student adherence to physical practice or into a solid



pedagogical bond with bodily activity. In other words, the curricular coverage and the formal performance of the subject are not enough, on their own, to guarantee school experiences capable of promoting stable dispositions toward physical activity. In this regard, several studies have shown that evaluative practices in Physical Education (PE) tend to focus on grading and observable performance rather than on meaningful learning, which contributes to straining the formative sense of the subject (Castillo-Retamal et al., 2022; López Pastor, 2005; López Pastor et al., 2006; Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025b, 2025c).

Along these lines, specialized literature has pointed out that the school experience in PE is not neutral, but depends largely on the pedagogical practices, teaching styles, and forms of evaluation that structure the class. In particular, it has been warned that certain approaches can foster or limit student motivation, depending on the degree to which they promote autonomy, participation, and the perception of competence (Abós et al., 2021; Fierro-Suero et al., 2023; Sánchez-Oliva et al., 2014). Similarly, the type of class organization, the use of pedagogical time, and the nature of the proposed activities directly impact the real opportunities for involvement, learning, and enjoyment (Azlan et al., 2021; Kinder, Gaudreault, & Simonton, 2020).

Consequently, rather than exclusively attributing to the school the responsibility of reversing physical inactivity, it is pertinent to critically examine what type of bond with movement is currently being promoted by the school experience in PEH, considering the pedagogical and evaluative mediations that shape said experience.

Consistent with the above, the objective of this essay is to reflect critically on the role of certain evaluative practices on student motivation and experiences in PEH, situating the screen context as a sociocultural framework of the problem in the Chilean case.



Physical Education and Health in the Chilean Curriculum: A Formative Promise Around Health and Physical Activity

In a contemporary scenario marked by declining physical activity levels, increasing sedentary behaviors, and the expansion of screen time in the daily lives of children and adolescents, the school continues to occupy a strategic place as a space for formation, socialization, and pedagogical intervention (Guthold et al., 2020; WHO, 2022). In the Chilean case, this discussion acquires special relevance, since the subject of Physical Education and Health is a compulsory part of a substantive portion of the school trajectory and because the national curriculum explicitly attributes to it the task of promoting movement, well-being, self-care, and healthy lifestyles (Chile, 2015). In other words, it is not a marginal or accessory subject, but a legitimized curricular space to contribute to the comprehensive formation of the student body through physical activity and health education.

This curricular centrality is clearly observed in the Curricular Bases of Physical Education and Health for 7th grade to 2nd year of high school (*7° básico a 2° medio*), where it is stated that:

Its main purpose consists of providing opportunities to all students to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that allow them to improve, through habitual physical activity, their quality of life and that of others. In other words, the subject is oriented toward making the habits of an active and healthy life and the regular practice of physical activity a central part of the lives of young people, both inside and outside of school (Chile, 2015, p. 256).

The previous formulation is especially significant, as it makes explicit that the horizon of the subject is not restricted to the development of motor skills, physical performance, or the fulfillment of specific school tasks. On the contrary, it proposes a broader formative purpose: to contribute to making physical activity and active life habits become relevant components of the daily life of the student body, both inside and outside of school. From this perspective, PEH is configured in the Chilean curriculum as a subject bearing



a strong formative promise, as it articulates objectives linked to bodily and motor development, self-care, participation in diverse motor practices, and health promotion (Chile, 2015). This horizon also dialogues with contemporary perspectives that recognize PE as a space with the potential to favor physical, psychological, social, and relational dimensions of human development, as well as to strengthen positive links with bodily practice throughout life (Sevil-Serrano et al., 2020; Vilchez-Conesa & Ruiz-Juan, 2016).

In the Chilean context, this promise acquires even greater density if one considers that the school constitutes one of the few institutional spaces capable of guaranteeing systematic movement experiences for broad groups of the school population. In a society where opportunities for physical practice are unevenly distributed and where times and spaces destined for play, active commuting, and bodily recreation have been progressively strained by cultural, technological, and urban transformations, the sustained presence of PEH in the curriculum acquires a unique value (Aguilar-Farías et al., 2020; WHO, 2022; Stiglic & Viner, 2019). Under this logic, one would expect a compulsory subject, explicitly oriented toward the promotion of health and physical activity, to contribute to the development of positive dispositions, meaningful experiences, and lasting bonds of the student body with movement.

However, recognizing the normative and formative density of the subject is not equivalent to assuming that its purposes are automatically realized in school practice. Between the prescribed curriculum and the experience effectively lived by the student body, processes of interpretation, selection, translation, and pedagogical mediation intervene, redefining, in each context, the meaning of what is taught. In other words, the formative value of a subject depends not only on what curricular documents state, but also on the way in which those purposes are materialized in the organization of the class, the selection of content, the use of pedagogical time, the forms of participation, social interactions, and modes of evaluation. This issue is especially relevant in PE, since it is a subject in which learning is constructed through the body,



movement, the public exposure of one's own capabilities, and the relationship with others, so that its effects cannot be understood apart from the subjective experience it produces.

Specialized literature has insisted precisely on this point: the educational potential of PE does not reside solely in its formal presence in the curriculum, but in the pedagogical quality of the experiences it offers. Although the subject can contribute to comprehensive development, well-being, and the promotion of physical activity, such effects do not derive linearly from its mere existence in the study plan (Beltrán-Carrillo & Devís-Devís, 2019; Sevil-Serrano et al., 2020). On the contrary, various investigations show that school experiences in PE are lived and interpreted in diverse ways by the student body and that the same didactic proposal does not necessarily produce the same meanings for everyone. Previous bodily trajectories, perceived competence, family experiences with physical activity, socialization processes, gender identities, and school histories decisively influence the way each student lives, values, or resists the class (Beltrán-Carrillo & Devís-Devís, 2019; Eizaguirre-Sagastibeltza, Fernandez-Lasa, & Usabiaga, 2024).

From this perspective, it is necessary to partially shift attention from the declarative function of the curriculum toward the didactic and pedagogical mediations that make possible (or limit) the materialization of its purposes. A proposal centered on physical challenge, demand, or performance can be experienced as stimulating by certain students, but it can also translate into discomfort, distancing, or a lack of meaning for others. Similarly, proposals that incorporate a variety of experiences, active participation, pedagogical support, recognition of diversity, and opportunities for perceived achievement tend to favor more positive links with the subject, although their effects are neither homogeneous nor universal (Cañadas & Espada, 2023; Corrales-Perea & Espada, 2022; Fierro-Suero et al., 2020; Fierro-Suero et al., 2023).

In that same direction, self-determination theory offers a relevant framework for understanding how certain pedagogical experiences can favor



(or weaken) the relationship of the student body with physical activity. Ryan and Deci (2019, 2020) state that highest quality motivation is sustained by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, understood as the possibility of participating with a certain margin of decision-making; competence, associated with the perception of capability and achievement; and relatedness, linked to the feeling of belonging and support within the educational context. In PEH, this implies that the promotion of physically active lifestyles does not depend solely on the compulsory nature of the subject, but also on pedagogical experiences that strengthen these dimensions. Conversely, contexts that are poorly sensitive to these needs tend to compromise motivation, adherence, and the positive bond with physical practice (Ryan & Deci, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Sánchez-Oliva et al., 2014).

At this point, it is worth specifying that the distance between the prescribed curriculum and the school experience cannot be attributed exclusively to an individual interpretation by the teaching staff, as if it were solely a technical problem of curricular application. Rather, this mediation is traversed by pedagogical traditions that have historically placed a strong centrality of performance, measurement, and grading within PE, often in tension with its broader formative purposes (López Pastor, 2005; Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025a; Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025b). The teaching staff acts within these cultural and institutional frameworks, so strengthening their training is necessary, though insufficient if the pedagogical and evaluative approaches that underpin the teaching of the subject are not also revised.

Thus, the strategic place that PEH occupies in the Chilean curriculum should not be interpreted only as evidence of its normative importance, but also as an invitation to reflect on the concrete conditions that allow its formative promise to acquire meaning in the school experience. The compulsory nature of the subject, the curricular legitimacy of its purposes, and its orientation toward health promotion undoubtedly constitute relevant elements; however, they are not enough on their own to guarantee pedagogical experiences capable of



strengthening a positive, autonomous, and lasting relationship with movement. In the tension between curricular promise and lived school experience lies, precisely, one of the central cores of this essay. Before critically examining certain pedagogical and evaluative practices, it is worth recognizing that the transforming potential attributed to the subject depends, to a large extent, on the quality, meaning, and justice of the experiences it effectively produces in daily school life.

Motivation, School Experience, and Evaluative Practices in Physical Education and Health: A Critical Reading of the Curricular Promise

If the previous section argued that PEH occupies a strategic place in the Chilean curriculum due to its formative promise around health and physical activity, it is now necessary to critically strain that promise from the perspective of the students' concrete school experience. Indeed, the existence of a compulsory subject, formally oriented toward an active and healthy life, does not by itself guarantee a positive, meaningful, and lasting relationship with movement. Between the prescribed curriculum and the lived experience, concrete practices of teaching, class organization, content selection, time use, pedagogical interaction, and evaluation intervene, which can favor motivation and future adherence to physical activity, but can also generate frustration, distancing, or disaffection (Beltrán-Carrillo & Devís-Devís, 2019; Sevil-Serrano et al., 2020).

A first critical tension appears when considering the contrast between the declared purposes of the subject and certain school outcomes that are widely visible in the Chilean context. On one hand, PEH is presented as a discipline called to contribute to the acquisition of active and healthy lifestyle habits; on the other hand, recent evidence shows a strong trend toward the concentration of excellent grades in the subject, a phenomenon that forces us to problematize the relationship between formal school success, meaningful learning, and the effective promotion of physical activity (Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025a). At this



point, the critique does not consist of questioning that students obtain good grades, but rather in warning that such grades are not sufficient to demonstrate that the long-term curricular purposes are being fulfilled. In other words, a subject can show high pass rates and, at the same time, not translate into solid motivation, pedagogical meaning, or sustained adherence to physical practice outside of school.

This paradox becomes even more suggestive when observing that, along the same lines, evaluative practices persist that continue to associate school merit in PE with visible physical performance, the ability to respond to standardized tests, or the fulfillment of expected bodily performances (Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025b; Oliver-Álvarez & Martos-García, 2023; López Pastor et al., 2006). Thus, evaluation operates not only as a technical mechanism for verifying learning, but also as a device that expresses which bodies, which skills, and which forms of participation are recognized as valuable within the class (Barba-Martín, Hortigüela, & Pérez-Pueyo, 2020; López Pastor, 2005). When the grade is disproportionately linked to performance, speed, endurance, or technical execution, the school experience can reinforce a classificatory logic that validates some students and places others in recurrent positions of insufficiency, inferiority, or failure.

From this perspective, the critique of the pedagogical practices of PEH should not be understood as a negation of demand, effort, or technical learning, but as an interrogation of the meaning that these elements acquire in the educational experience. As Tinning (2010) has warned, the persistence of a technical rationality in PE tends to privilege efficiency, control, measurement, and the application of procedures over pedagogical reflection about the *what for*, the *for whom*, and with *what effects* teaching is conducted. Under this rationality, the student's body runs the risk of being treated more as an object of verification and normalization than as a territory of learning, expression, relationship, and meaning construction. Consequently, a subject that curricularly proposes to contribute to comprehensive formation may end up reduced, in



practice, to a space where logics of performance, discipline, and comparison are reproduced.

Specialized literature has clearly shown that negative experiences in Physical Education can have lasting effects on the perception of the subject and on the willingness to participate in physical activity inside and outside of school. Beltrán-Carrillo and Devís-Devís (2019) demonstrate that inactive students interpret their school experiences in PE through discourses of performance, healthism (*salutismo*), and hegemonic masculinity, which allows us to understand why the subject can constitute, for some, a space of alignment away from rather than approach toward physical activity. In this same line, recent research developed in the Chilean context shows that the class can be perceived as unfair when there is a predominance of opacity in criteria, evaluative subjectivity, sex segregation, differentiated demands, or the association between bodily performance and school value (Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025a; Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025b; Muñoz-Sepúlveda et al., 2025c). From this point, the problem cannot be located exclusively within the student body, as if demotivation or resistance were prior individual conditions, but also in the concrete ways in which the subject organizes the pedagogical experience.

At this juncture, self-determination theory offers an especially fertile framework for understanding the relationship between teaching practices, motivation, and adherence to physical activity. Ryan and Deci (2019, 2020) state that the quality of motivation depends, to a large extent, on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness with others. Applied to the field of PE, this implies that the promotion of active lifestyles is not played out solely in the amount of practice time or the compulsory nature of the class, but also in whether the student body feels capable of learning without being negatively exposed, whether they perceive that they participate with a real margin of decision-making, and whether they experience a safe, respectful, and supportive relational climate. The available evidence is consistent on this point: the satisfaction of these psychological



needs is positively associated with self-determined motivation, the intention to practice physical activity in leisure time, and a better valuation of the class (Abós et al., 2021; Fierro-Suero et al., 2023; Sánchez-Oliva et al., 2014).

Conversely, when the class is organized based on controlling teaching behaviors, permanent comparisons, low student participation, or scarce sensitivity to the diversity of bodily experiences, autonomy is restricted, perceived competence deteriorates, and the sense of belonging weakens (Abós et al., 2021; Cañadas & Espada, 2023; Corrales-Perea & Espada, 2022; Fierro-Suero et al., 2020). Consequently, motivation toward physical activity cannot be understood as a simple consequence of “having PE hours,” but as a pedagogical and relational outcome dependent on the type of experiences that the subject offers.

This reading also allows us to question certain practices frequently naturalized in the school culture of the subject. For example, the excessive use of unplanned times or activities without clear pedagogical intentionality can reduce real opportunities for learning and empty the class of formative content. Although play, recreation, and methodological flexibility can have educational value when they are integrated with meaning, their indiscriminate use can end up reinforcing a residual image of the subject. In this line, research on time organization and teaching contexts shows that not every class guarantees, by itself, valuable opportunities for movement and learning (Azlan et al., 2021; Kinder, Gaudreault, & Simonton, 2020).

In this sense, the critique is not about rigidly opposing structure and pleasure, demand and play, or teaching and enjoyment. The central point is to ask what kind of bodily, social, and emotional experiences the PEH class is actually promoting. From a critical and formative perspective, the subject is called upon not only to promote physical activity, but also to contribute to the construction of more inclusive, just, and meaningful relationships around the body and movement (Fuentes, Trigueros Cervantes, & Moreno Doña, 2024).



All things considered, it is worth underlining that the responsibility for acquiring active habits does not fall exclusively on the PE class. The construction of a physically active life also depends on social, family, and community opportunities, as well as access to spaces and conditions for practice (Arriagada & Fuentes Vilugron, 2023). However, recognizing this complexity does not diminish the role of the subject; on the contrary, it makes it more demanding.

In sum, the distance between the curricular promise of PEH and the experience effectively lived by the student body does not constitute a secondary problem, but rather one of the critical cores for thinking about the current role of the subject in Chile. High grades are not enough to demonstrate the fulfillment of its formative ends; curricular obligatoriness does not ensure, by itself, the construction of active habits; and the general appeal to health loses strength when the concrete school experience is lived from frustration, comparison, exclusion, or a lack of meaning. From this perspective, the challenge consists not only in defending the importance of the subject, but in transforming it pedagogically so that its formative promise does not remain trapped in discourse and can be expressed in school experiences capable of motivating, including, and sustaining a more just, meaningful, and lasting relationship with physical activity.

Conclusion

PEH occupies a relevant place in the Chilean curriculum, as it is attributed the responsibility of contributing to the promotion of physical activity, health, and the comprehensive formation of the student body. However, this essay allows us to argue that such a curricular promise is not automatically realized by the mere fact that the subject exists, is compulsory, or presents high school grades.

The review developed shows that a tension persists between the declared formative purposes and the experiences that the student body effectively lives in the class. Within this framework, evaluative practices acquire a central role,



insofar as they can favor motivation, participation, and a more meaningful relationship with physical activity, but can also reproduce logics of performance, exclusion, gender stereotypes, bodily normativities, and injustices that weaken the formative sense of the subject. Therefore, the problem lies not solely in the curricular presence of PEH, but in the pedagogical, ethical, and relational quality of the experiences configured therein.

Likewise, it is necessary to recognize that the acquisition of active habits does not depend exclusively on the school or on this subject, but also on the family, social, and cultural environment, as well as on the public policies that condition the opportunities for practice. However, this finding does not reduce the responsibility of PEH; on the contrary, it reinforces the need for the subject to critically assume its role in the generation of pedagogical and evaluative experiences that strengthen the autonomy, perceived competence, and sense of belonging of the student body.

In short, rather than abstractly reaffirming the importance of PEH, the challenge consists of moving toward evaluative practices consistent with its formative promise and with a more inclusive and meaningful understanding of bodily learning. Only in this way will it be possible for the subject not to be reduced to a space of curricular compliance, but to effectively constitute a meaningful, inclusive, and socially just educational experience.

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