Immigrant Girls’ Experiences with Physical Activity: A Focus on Female Only Fitness Classes

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This research is part of a larger intersectional study that was designed to provide information for creating physical activity programming that is culturally relevant and inclusive for immigrant girls. This article addresses immigrant girls’ experiences in a female only fitness class that was offered as an option in physical education. Following the qualitative methodology of interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four high school participants who identified as both an immigrant and as a female in Central Canada. The findings demonstrate that inclusive physical education spaces require more than just gender segregation for immigrant girls’ meaningful participation in physical activity.

Keywords: immigrant, gender, physical activity, physical education, phenomenology, qualitative

With increased immigration, there is more focus on the successful, culturally relevant and inclusive settlement of newcomers to Canada. The settlement process has also been a focal point for understanding how immigrant youth adapt to their new environments. Positive settlement experiences have been linked to successful integration in a new culture, for example, by reducing the likelihood of poor health. Sport and physical activity (PA) have been demonstrated to have positive effects on the integration of newcomers (Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Hertting & Karelofors, 2013; Zacheaus, 2010). School and physical education classes have often been considered as providing opportunities for immigrant youth to engage with physical activity. In this
research, we examine four culturally diverse girls’ experience(s) in female only physical education class in Canada.

In this paper, we first review the literature on culturally diverse girls’ experiences in physical education. We then introduce our participants before detailing our interview method. After describing the themes that emerged from the interviews, we discuss the findings before concluding remarks.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historically, the research on immigrants’ physical activity participation has focused on the positive effects of sport and recreation (Doherty & Taylor, 2007). For example, a sense of psycho-social wellbeing, improved physical, social, and emotional well-being have been associated with PA participation (Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Doherty, 2005). It is also widely accepted that sport can help immigrants improve skills outside of sports such as opportunities to develop and learn the language or familiarize themselves with some aspects of the culture, such as values, rules, and norms of the new society (Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Doherty, 2005; Zacheaus, 2010).

Previous research has also demonstrated that immigrants’ participation in physical activity (PA) and sport is influenced by constraints involving language and money. Particularly, immigrants characterized as visible or ethnic minorities often face barriers and challenges that limit their access to educational, social, cultural, and economic opportunities including PA (Taylor & Doherty, 2005). Consequently, not all sport participation has been positive for immigrant peoples. For example, immigrant girls have experienced social exclusion as they have been left out from physical activities by their peers. In addition, language difficulties and physical activities that are unfamiliar to participants who do not understand rules or are unable to communicate their struggles, have contributed to negative experiences of physical activity. Lack of fluency in English language and prejudice related to cultural difference has increased negative feelings towards physical activity (Doherty & Taylor, 2005). Consequently, advocating physical activity participation entirely as a facilitator for successful settlement, particularly integration to new culture, is more complex and controversial than originally acknowledged.

Some researchers find the concept of integration through sport controversial (Agergaard, 2018; Smith, Spaaij & McDonald, 2019; Walseth, 2006). While PA and
sport can improve immigrants’ lives, this does not happen automatically, or as simply as has been previously suggested (Zacheaus, 2010). Consequently, Walseth (2006) adopted the concept of belonging to account for the multiple subjective experience of integration more closely. Caxaj and Berman (2010) described belonging as a multidimensional phenomenon, that, influenced by personal and/or environmental factors, is mutually interactive with identity. Based on this definition, Zacheaus (2010) found that participation in sport increased immigrants’ feelings of belonging due to improved social connectedness and an overall acceptance of their new situation in a strange culture. However, not all immigrants have gained feelings of belongingness through sport participation. As noted above, immigrant girls’ physical activity participation is more effected by feelings of exclusion and more constrained and challenged by unfamiliarity and language difficulty. Therefore, research is needed to recognize gendered concerns regarding perceptions and responses to social exclusion, language difficulty, and unfamiliarity with culture in general (Taylor & Doherty, 2005).

If the term ‘integration’ is controversial, so is the term immigrant. Relevant to our study, researchers of girls’ experiences with physical activity have used various terms such as immigrant, migrant, ethnic minority, and religiosity to discuss their participants’ experiences. Often these terms are used interchangeably. We have used the term immigrant if that has been the researchers’ choice. In our research, nevertheless, we have chosen to use the term ethically diverse to discuss physical activity research that addresses various ethno-cultural experiences. In the next section, we highlight how gender impacts sport and recreation participation of culturally diverse students (Taylor & Doherty, 2005).

**Girls’ Culturally Diverse Experiences in Physical Activity**

Current research has primarily focused on the low level of participation amongst ethnic minority girls and women in sport, especially within the European context (Walseth, 2006). However, Muslim girls have been the primary ethnic minority group that has been at the forefront of research in the physical health context (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). Consequently, a large part of our discussion here also concerns Muslim women experiences with physical activity participation mainly in the United States and Europe.

Hamzeh and Oliver (2010) studied the physical activity pursuits of four self-identifying Muslim girls in the Southwest U.S. Their study focused on how opportunities to take part in activities such as wall climbing, basketball, and swimming were negotiated
by the participants. The researchers addressed how the girls negotiated their participation regarding particularly the use of hijab. The parents’ interpretation of the hijab had a significant impact on the girls’ PA participation choices. The girls described certain PA, such as swimming that required wearing a swimsuit in a public pool; playing basketball with boys; or wall-climbing classes with instructors as ‘veiled-off activities,’ activities that were unsuitable for Muslim girls. However, the girls uncovered alternative ways of being physically active that were more accepted by their parents. They were also able to negotiate veiled-off physical activities, especially after becoming comfortable in an activity center that had a high presence of girls. There they had a chance to independently select the activities they were interested in, such as a spin class. As the study progressed, the girls also began participating in basketball and swimming even with the presence of boys and men. This, the researchers concluded, illustrated how the girls negotiated both their parents’ interpretation as well as their own multiple interpretations of the hijab. Hamzeh and Oliver (2010) emphasized that future research needs to consider Muslim girls as active agents similar to other girls who are challenged by systems of power and privilege with gendering and racial attitudes surrounding PA experiences. Furthermore, Hamzeh and Oliver (2010) acknowledged that the lives of Muslim girls were diverse including multiple interpretations of how the hijab was negotiated in their lives.

Also located in the United States, Thul and LaVoi (2011) explored the voices of 19 Islamic East African girls, who ranged in age from 12 to 18, to better understand how to create more culturally relevant settings for physical activity programming. All participants were practicing Muslims who were either first or second generation immigrants. Some of the facilitators for physical activity participation for the participants were having female only private spaces, having fun and staying healthy, and desire to develop new skills. For example, the girls suggested female-only programming to maintain cultural and religious privacy and modesty. They also indicated that lack of time, family support, and gender stereotypes the barriers for their physical activity participation.

Walseth (2015) interviewed 21 Muslim girls, who were second generation immigrants aged between 16 and 25, in Norway. All the participants were involved in physical education, some in gender segregated PE, but mostly in mixed gender classes. Generally, the participants had positive attitudes towards PE: it was considered a site where they could get to know their classmates, learn to cooperate and play as a team, and be physically active. However, the girls’ attitudes towards PE turned more negative when...
they entered secondary school where the PE curricula focused on testing of physical skills. The participants did not enjoy the added pressure and judgment to perform. The participants, nevertheless, had positive attitudes towards PE, if the teaching was less about testing of physical skills, less male dominated, and more sensitive to embodied faith. Walseth (2015) further found that religiosity had little impact on Muslim girls’ experiences in PE except when swimming and showering facilities were involved. Therefore, the role of religion and culture in low participation levels of Muslim girls and women continues to be debated (Walseth, 2006).

Expanding beyond the experiences by Muslim girls, Barker et al. (2014) presented a case study focused on three adolescent immigrant youth within Switzerland. The participants who were from Turkey, Iraq, and Germany, and now resided in Switzerland found PE only tolerable. One participant stated that sport in general was aggressive and violent. Others indicated that PE as a space supported hierarchy based on physical ability. Finally, they found PE held limited personal value because they had to adhere to rules created and activities chosen by others. The researchers concluded that youth experienced the effects of migration in many different ways that both supported and resisted the educational discourses in PE.

The research findings from physical education are of particular relevance to our research, because although we focus on a female only setting, it, nevertheless, was an option for ‘regular’ physical education class. A major focus of Walseth’s (2015) study was to further understand if Muslim girls preferred gender-segregated PE lessons, because past research has emphasized gender segregated PE as essential for maximizing participation for Muslim parents and students (Benn & Dagkas, 2006). Historically, PE has taken different approaches to gender segregated and co-educational spaces, which has been influenced to some extent by the recognition or lack thereof, of cultural diversity within PE spaces (Lines & Stidder, 2004). Schools themselves have been described as institutions that produce racialized, gendered, and classist discourses, especially through PE and sports (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005). As a part of schooling, PE is also a major social structure to observe ethnically diverse girls’ experiences with PA. However, there continues to be little attention to immigrant adolescent girls’ experiences with physical education in the Canadian context. In this study, our purpose is to examine how ethnically diverse girls found female only physical education classes that were offered as an option for regular physical education classes. We were particularly interested if the female-only setting inspired the girls to maintain physical activity participation. We looked to answer the following research question: How do immigrant
high school girls in central Canada, interpret their lived experiences with physical activity? To examine their lived experiences, we used qualitative interviews that we detail in the next section.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research presented in this paper is a part of a larger intersectional study that was designed to provide more information for creating physical activity programming that is culturally relevant and inclusive for immigrant girls. By exploring the voices of Canadian immigrant girls, we aimed to better understand their interpretations of physical activity. We now focus on the method used to examine the girls’ lived experiences in a female only fitness class.

Given our concern with the girls’ lived experiences, we used interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology as our qualitative methodology (Dowling, 2007). Interpretive phenomenology suggests that all human activity provides a field of interpretation (Stewart, 1974), and that phenomenology is an interpretive process that emphasizes the importance of understanding over description (Racher & Robinson, 2003). From this perspective, individuals’ reality is shaped and influenced by the world in which they live and therefore, their meanings also derive from this context (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Following this premise, our interviewing technique looked to identify first the participants’ lived experiences to then create an understanding of how their subjective experiences were undeniably connected to the influence of cultural, societal, and political contexts (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Participants

The participants were recruited from English Secondary Language (ESL) classes that ranged from grade nine to twelve from two high schools in central Canada. The two selected high schools were multicultural and diverse with a large immigrant student population. For the purpose of this research, we identified an immigrant as someone who was originally from another country but currently resided in Canada. As ESL classes have shown to be a forum for new arrivals to Canada (Taylor & Doherty, 2005), they provided an opportunity to access this specific population.
The ESL teachers were contacted to help set up an initial recruitment meeting where the girls who met the sampling criteria were invited to partake in an interview conducted fully in English. In this meeting, we shared a short presentation on the details of the project. As a result, four participants who ranged in age from 15 to 18 years old and grade levels ten to twelve, took part in the study. The amount of time that the girls had spent in Canada varied from 7 months to 3 years. They represented a total of four countries, three languages, and two religions amongst the 4 participants. It is important to note that this research recognized the differences as well as the similarities that each participant brought to the study.

The project was approved by the University Research Ethics Board. All participants were provided a pseudonym in order to protect their anonymity. The four pseudonyms that were selected were: Ayah, Femi, Reem, and Yeva.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

All data were collected by the first author using personal in-depth semi-structured interviews that engaged the participants in an open-ended conversation to extract ideas and interpretations (Bassil & Zabkiewicz, 2014). The interview guide was constructed using an interpretive phenomenological interviewing technique to implement a series of three interviews for each participant (Seidman, 2013). Each interview, nevertheless, focused on allowing the participants to describe the meanings of their lived experiences with physical activity. The first author probed for further details and clarity throughout the interview to stay as close to the lived experiences as possible (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The series of 3 interviews took between 45-60 minutes each and were all conducted with approximately a week in between.

The first interview focused on establishing the context of the participants’ experiences with their life history and personal biographies. They were asked to reconstruct their experiences with immigration and what that process was like for them and their families. The second interview focused more specifically on the participants’ lived experiences with physical activity participation. During this interview, the participants reconstructed the details of their physical activity experiences within the context in which it occurred (Seidman, 2013). The third interview focused on the “meaning making” component of interpretive phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2013, p. 19). This interview encouraged the participants to reflect on the meanings of their experiences, the value of physical activity, and the intellectual and emotional connections they drew upon when participating in physical activity (Seidman, 2013).
All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2004). While committed to understanding the world from the participants’ perspectives, IPA also recognizes the researcher’s interpretive work (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Consequently, we carefully followed the guidelines for IPA that enable the researchers to acknowledge their impact on the analysis, but at the same, provide an interpretation of the participants’ meanings. We will now present the findings that resulted from analysis, under the major theme of Physical Activity and Physical Education Experiences.

FINDINGS

In this section, we detail Ayah, Femi, Reem, and Yeva’s experiences in their female only fitness class. We first present their experiences in physical activity and physical education and then focus more specifically on the female only fitness class. We have divided this discussion into two themes: Gender Exclusive Environment and Gendered Expectations.

Physical Activity and Physical Education Experiences

The participants spoke about their physical experiences, both within and outside of high school physical education. When the girls were asked how they would define physical activity, it was often associated with working out. For them this was not enjoyable. As Femi described in PE class, “Sometimes we have to really hard work, and I’m tired. Sometimes I don’t like to take heavy dumb bells.” Reem added:

I do like when we play games. I like to play games, even if they have some kind of physical stuff, but I don’t like to be in the weight room. It’s not that bad, but just working out and I try out female fitness class, it was terrible. She makes us work so hard. I don’t like to work really hard.

The girls also discussed various components that facilitated and supported their participation in physical activity in physical education. When the participants were presented with choices, they expressed a greater desire to engage with physical education. Reem explained that “in the regular gym class, how you just choose to do stuff. They give you choices, you either play or go to the weight room. First you run, squats... for 50 minutes, and after this 50 minutes, we choose what to do after.” Yeva emphasized that in PE the choices made physical activity “more fun, because sometimes we got to choose
what we want to do. The teacher says we can choose to go to the wellness center, or badminton or dodgeball. You have options, so that makes it fun.”

Having choices also supported greater participation outside of physical education class creating pathways to pursue different forms of physical activity outside of the school context. As Reem explained: “The fun stuff you get to do outside the school. If you were in regular gym class, you don’t get to do. I get more options to [be physically active]. You have more options of skating, playing outside, hiking.” The girls spoke of the multiple meaningful ways that they experienced physical activity outside of school after their immigration. This was often due to trying some new opportunities for both themselves and their families to participate in physical activities. Reem described two such opportunities. The first was a camp that providing her with an exposure to a variety of activities:

I went to a camp and for almost two days, or three...They had so many options. You could play hockey. They have a gym. It was winter. They had hockey, they have a big gym, everything, even climbing. Then there’s outside options. One day they would be like, let’s go to the gym. Other day, let’s do outside. There’s fishing. Today we’re going for fishing, ice fishing. Then the other day, skiing, and skating.

I did try skating and skating, and the one where you wear long stuff on your feet.

The second new opportunity was an access to a local wellness center where Reem learned to swim with her entire family: “Yes, I love swimming. It’s kind of hard to do it, because I just learned a few months ago, but I like to play. The [wellness center] has classes, and we had the whole family was signed up. Everybody almost was learning.” The Canadian Leisure Guide was a resource that gave Yeva and her family members an opportunity to try and learn tennis and continue taking lessons together:

I go to tennis with my mom. Just started [playing tennis when I came to Canada]. I just thought tennis was like badminton, because I went to badminton too, so I decided to try tennis.

When provided with opportunities to try many different new and alternative forms, the girls felt positive about physical activity. Above they described trying swimming, skating, skiing, fishing, hockey, and tennis. These choices were offered outside of their school physical education and made physical activity outside of school more fun. The participants, nevertheless, had a choice in their school physical education class to opt for a ‘female only fitness class.’ The following section will provide an in-depth analysis regarding the participants’ experiences arising from participation in this class.

Movement Matters Volume 2: 3-22 (2023) Body, Movement, and Culture Research Group
Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation, University of Alberta
have divided these in two themes: gender exclusive environment and gendered expectations.

**Gender Exclusive Environment**

The participants often spoke about their experiences in what they termed a ‘female only fitness class.’ The female only fitness classes were offered as an option for students to enroll in instead of co-ed physical education classes in their high schools. The female only fitness classes were often structured to include circuits with various stations that the girls would move through with allotted time at each station. These stations, described by the girls as ‘working out,’ consisted of such exercises as burpees, Russian twists, and planks. At its core, therefore, the female only fitness classes focused on exercise rather than playing games or sports. The participants often spoke negatively about aspects of these circuit-based classes. Female fitness classes, from their perspectives, constituted ‘working out’ which the participants found difficult and also somewhat boring. Ayah felt that “female fitness” was “a little harder because it’s always a work out.”

While Reem liked working out with friends, the female fitness class was harder, way harder and boring. It was in the same place. I’d like to have more space. It was all of us in one room. It was space of two rooms but because we were doing the physical stuff. It was boring...I really can enjoy working out with some friends. I don’t enjoy female fitness. We didn’t get to play games, we just do work out. But I like yoga class, that’s about it.

It was interesting to note that Reem found this type of exercise hard and boring, but did enjoy a different type of approach to exercise, yoga. Reem also liked to exercise with friends, but found the female only fitness classes too crowded to have sufficient space to enjoy the ‘work outs.’ The participants, indeed, often described these fitness classes as ‘workouts’ that they found unenjoyable.

However, the girls did appreciate the gender exclusive environment that the all-female fitness classes provided. An environment that was encompassed entirely by students and teachers who were girls and women, provided the girls with a safe space in which they felt they could dress comfortably and avoid what the girls described as the male gaze on their bodies and their ways of being active:

> It’s females, so I can wear tight pants and short shirts. Because boys love girls. Let’s say you’re going to work out, you going to wear a cut short, and a short t-shirt. You going to feel like somebody is looking at you, or they trying to contact with you. Maybe some people don’t like it, they feel weird about it. They will
prefer a girl space. (Ayah)

Although Reem found the circuit type class boring, Femi enjoyed its female only environment that enabled her to engage in many different exercises because of the absence of boys:

My teacher asked me [if a wanted to choose] female fitness or regular gym. I didn’t know anything about it so I just said female fitness, but I found it fun. We are females, there is no...I don’t know how to say it. There is no boys, you can do whatever you want.

Reem also provided a counter narrative to other participants’ desire for gender exclusive environment when she described the female fitness classes as being boring because girls “all do the same stuff” and “would be just sitting all around and talking.” Boys, instead, “would be people whose playing with basketball, people whose playing with different stuff.” At the same, Reem continued,

It’s always boys versus boys, girls versus girls. Everybody knows the reason, because they are probably not as strong as the boys. You always play with who is in your size or your power. [Boys] are more active that’s it. They have more energy. They’ll be running and shooting balls in the basket.

In summary, problematic barriers exist within the gender exclusive physical education classes. While some participants enjoyed exercising in the female only environment that freed them from any male gaze, others found the circuit modality boring and hard work which precipitated their disengagement with physical activity. A gender exclusive environment, therefore, allowed for a safer space for the girls to be active in, and a generated in some cases, a preference for a gendered space.

Gendered Expectations

While the participants found some aspects of gender exclusive physical education positive, their experiences were also impacted by various gendered norms and expectations that were continuously reinforced by all the participants throughout the interviews. Based on these gendered norms, all the participants felt that girls and boys are involved in physical activity in different ways. These differences were further characterized by boys being more receptive to being involved in physical activity in comparison to girls. Ayah noted that “[b]oys play, play sports every day. They go to the gym, play soccer a lot or hockey for Canada. Not a lot of girls play.” Reem who already found boys ‘having more energy” than girls now elaborated that “[i]f you were in class,
you’ll see boys are doing more active stuff, then girls will be talking. Even if the [girls] are just out walking or playing, they are more talking.”

The girls also discussed how the environment of being physically active was disrupted or changed when males were present. In the previous section, the girls voiced their preference for an all-girl space as a safe environment to dress freely in the clothing they wanted and felt comfortable in to avoid the male gaze. They also emphasized gendered stereotype of boys being stronger to observe that it can be dangerous for girls to play with them. Femi believed that while the boys may not mean to hurt the girls it is likely to happen: “If you are playing game, sports, with boys in it, maybe he doesn’t mean but he is stronger than the girls. He can run and hit me by accident, harder, like he is stronger. The hit will be bad.” This caused Yeva to be afraid if the boys were involved:

It’s not really fun with guys playing. I think they are stronger, so they hit the ball stronger. It’s fun for them, but not for girls. When I’m playing there’s the fear...I’m against a guy. He might hurt me, or he might hit stronger. That’s in my mind.

It was obvious that the gendered norms impacted strongly on the girls’ physical activity experiences. Peppered throughout their interviews are depictions of the ways in which girls believed that males are stronger, better, and more active than their female counterparts. Yeva, however, questioned this norm when she explained that “[f]or example, in a game, in my country, we think that guys are better, they’re stronger. They have to be better, that might in my thinking. Although sometimes it’s not really right, girls can be much better than guys sometimes.”

If participants felt that being a girl impacted their choices to be physically active, this was especially apparent when they discussed issues regarding body image and the gendered stereotypes in relation to girls’ and boys’ bodies. When the girls spoke to their motivation to partake in physical activity, they described it exclusively connected to improved physical appearance. Ayah explained: “When you want everybody to pay attention for you, you should be in a nice shape, and this is why I want to make that friend to say, ‘let’s go to the gym’” and Femi remembered that “I took female fitness first semester and this semester I don’t want to sit, like do nothing and get fat. I wanted to work out at the gym.”

Although the girls earlier found fitness and exercise unenjoyable, interestingly enough, while working out was not considered fun, the girls valued it as improving their body shapes. Femi articulated this point:

We work harder in female fitness, more than gym. In female fitness all we do is
exercise, exercise, exercise. We don’t go play basketball. I don’t like this, but I like it for my body, but I don’t enjoy it. My stomach place, I want it to be flat, and my whole body to be not weak.

These statements reinforced problematic gendered expectations of both female and male bodies. The girls placed real value on being active, not because they necessarily enjoyed it, but because they wanted to avoid being out of shape (fat) and to look good. In addition, there were gendered expectations that also impacted what constituted a ‘good looking’ female body compared to a male body:

I don’t like my body... my arm to be muscled. I see that women, girls without muscle in their arm are better. Look better. They look beautiful. Maybe the stomach it can be a little bit, but not too muscular. Legs the same. For guys, they have to be muscular. You don’t need to, but I see girls’ body will better if she is not very muscular. (Femi)

The girls often spoke about social and gendered expectations when comparing the male and female bodies. Gendered body expectations seemed to be a motivating factor for the girls’ desire to participate and be involved in physical activity even when their strongly voiced their dislike for it. Second, they clearly distinguished between the ideal feminine and masculine bodies and these ideals impacted their physically active choices.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that immigrant girls had a spectrum of positive and negative experiences with physical activity. They spoke fondly of engaging with new seasonal physical activities such as skating and skiing available for them in Canada. For example, Reem attended a camp that she described as a perfect forum to take part in a myriad of different, and in some cases uniquely Canadian, activities (i.e., ice fishing, skating and skiing). In this sense, their experiences aligned with Doherty and Taylor’s (2007) research that suggested newcomer youth found sport and physical recreation an opportunity to learn more about Canadian culture and to try ‘Canadian’ sports. In addition, recreation leisure guides and wellness centers were valuable resources and spaces that provided the girls multiple opportunities to attempt to and to learn different activities, such as tennis and swimming, with their extended families. Aligned with Barker et al.’s (2014) findings, PE was an unenjoyable subject that provided limited personal value and was considered
a space in which the girls, while having some choice, had to adhere to rules and activities chosen by their physical educator(s).

The participants tended to prefer a variety of physical activity choices. They spoke about the need to have more options, particularly in the female only fitness class, as having an assortment of choices, ultimately rendered being physically active, more fun. Having choices and a voice in physical education curriculum has been shown to be important, especially for girls in terms of their level of engagement with physical activity (Azzarito et al., 2006; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). Having access to a wide range of activities in physical education settings, continues to support girls’ engagement in physical education (Gibbons & Humbert, 2008) and this echoes the narratives of the immigrant girls in our study who also described wanting more curricular choice in their PE. Having movement options can provide a supportive base for young girls to engage in physical activity, yet these choices appeared to be offered primarily outside of school. The activity choices offered in physical education can be important vehicles to enhance meaningful physical activity engagement (Azzarito et al., 2006; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001).

The immigrant girls, nevertheless, took advantage of one choice to them, the female only fitness classes, that they were offered in physical education. Collectively, the participants found that these classes narrowly focused on circuit type workouts with a limited choice of exercises. They voiced their dismay that there were few opportunities to pursue other forms of movement activities other than ‘working out’ in this gender exclusive space. Our participants found that if the circuit training was too confining, and a form of physical activity that ultimately they did not enjoy, they looked for alternatives to this format. For example, the participants in Hamzeh and Oliver’s (2010) study enjoyed spin classes that offered a different type of exercise other than circuit training. The girls, nevertheless, felt that working out was purposeful in terms of their physical appearance that they defined through gendered norms similar to accepted western notions of the ideal feminine body as thin and toned, but not visibly muscular. However, the girls in this study seemed to lack the intrinsic motivation to participate in the prescribed workouts. Pfaeffi and Gibbons (2010) emphasized the need to provide girls input and autonomy in the activities within their own physical education classes. A specific focus on providing young girls intrinsic motivation for successful and meaningful engagement with physical activity, which involves choice and autonomy, have been found to be a significant intrinsically motivating factor for engagement (Pfaeffi & Gibbons, 2010).
Similar to previous research (Thul & LaVoi, 2011), the girls placed value on having a space exclusive for girls that they described as a safer space within which to participate in physical activity free from any concern of the male gaze. The participants also valued all-female fitness class as a space where they felt they could wear different types of clothing in the absence of boys in that space and there was a general acceptance for a variety of clothes (e.g., tight pants, and short shirts), where they expressed a sense of freedom to pursue movement and physical activity that they desired. Additionally, a gender exclusive space was also valued by the girls as it seemingly precipitated a fun environment as the power dynamics surrounding gender were diminished or eliminated in the absence of boys.

All of the participants continuously reinforced gendered norms surrounding masculinity and femininity. Gender stereotypes in westernized contexts have been described as a form of control over young girls’ participation in physical education and in their daily lives. These can function as limiters or encouragement in participation (both rates and quality) in PE classes and in physical activity across the lifespan (Azzarito et al., 2006). The participants in this study reinforced the same stereotypes and power imbalances described in the literature, especially when they discussed their beliefs that boys and girls experienced physical activity differently. These differences often resulted in variances between the girls’ and boys’ opportunities to play. In general, boys were assumed to be more physically active than girls. These narratives provide important insights for understanding the ways these gendered power dynamics were influential on shaping the participant’s experience with physical activity and physical education.

The boys, the participants highlighted, were physically stronger, and as such, more powerful than girls. Consequently, there were also clear divisions between the boys’ and girls’ games. Games that required more strength and power like football were labeled as ‘guy games.’ Games like badminton that required less strength were considered more enjoyable for girls. While gender stereotypes can impact girls’ participation with physical activity, girls are active agents in their abilities to negotiate gendered structural barriers in society, within physical education and outside of the school context (Azzarito et al., 2006). Yeva was the only one to question the impact of gendered norms and hopefully, she can eventually transgress past gendered norms that continue to limit her physical activity choices. In fact, teachers and researchers should strive to explore the ways in which young women can disrupt gender norms and understand how to create more welcoming and encouraging physical education contexts (Azzarito et al., 2006).
CONCLUSION

This study focused on the voices of four high school immigrant girls in central Canada to highlight how they interpreted their lived experiences with physical activity. Voices like theirs are far too often left on the margins in terms of having input and from being architects of their physical activity, health, and wellness. While there is some previous research on immigrant girls’ physical activity and physical education experiences, there was and still exists, a need to expand this research particularly in the Canadian context. Therefore, in this study we asked: How do immigrant high school girls in central Canada, interpret their lived experiences with physical activity? We focused specifically on their experiences in a female only fitness class that was offered as an alternative option to physical education.

The girls described their experiences in gender exclusive physical education classes in a variety of ways. The female only fitness classes were valued for being an all-girl active space where they could comfortably dress as they preferred and move free from the gaze of boys and men. At the same time, the girls found their class that was a circuit class with several exercise stations, to be far too ‘workout based,’ devoid of games, socializing, and fun. This form of physical activity was only seen beneficial for improving bodily appearance for better looks. It was not an enjoyable form of being physically active.

Although some of the participants valued gender exclusive physical education, they required more than just an environment that is all female. For enjoyable engagement in physical activity, immigrant girls’ own experiences must be considered because their voice can help provide more supportive physical activity choices. Increasing the intrinsic motivation to engage in physical activity and physical education can foster choices and autonomy. Additionally, gendered environments should continuously emphasize a dialogue with girls and the varied components of their intersectional identities such as ethnocultural background. The immigrant girls provided distinct and meaningful narratives that were necessary in understanding the ways they experienced the supports to, and barriers of, their lived experiences with physical activity.

While the participants found the gender segregated physical education option beneficial in some form, Gibbons and Humbert (2008) argued that they are not a long term solution, because these types of classes are not necessarily what all girls want. Some of the female students simply want to show the boys that they could perform equally well. Although Yeva was the only participant who questioned the boys’ natural physical
strength over girls, it can be important to also include immigrant girls’ voices when determining the needs for gender segregated physical education.

As this paper focused on one aspect of the first author’s larger intersectional study of immigrant girls’ experiences in physical activity in Canada, not included here are discussions regarding various ethnocultural influences, such as being hijab wearing girls or narratives detailing the cultural sensitivity of public spaces like swimming pools to accommodate diverse immigrant backgrounds. These discussions, however, were part of the larger study and can be central to understanding girls’ physical activity experiences in different social contexts by providing a platform to draw on in preparing future programming and policies for more inclusive and reflective curriculum options for the growing Canadian population of immigrant girls. In order to provide immigrant girls environments where their meanings and values are fostered, physical educators, providers, stakeholders, and researchers should consciously and actively look to eliminate the structures that restrict the potentially meaningful engagement of immigrant girls in physical activity. As expressed through the narratives of the girls interviewed for this study, programming and curricula should provide girls new and alternative ways to be physically active by offering a variety of choices.

Physical education classes could encourage young women to be more physically active in meaningful ways which may require more tactical and complex approaches than by simply providing gender exclusive exercise classes. These physical activity environments should consider feedback from academic research on the experiences of young girls. However, understanding the multiple ways in which different groups of young women and girls, such as immigrants, experience physical activity participation is a step towards creating a physical education environment that is both girl friendly and ethnoculturally inclusive.

REFERENCES


Movement Matters Volume 2: 3-22 (2023) Body, Movement, and Culture Research Group Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation, University of Alberta


