

Recognizing How Cultural Differences Impact Student Behavior in PE

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Physical Education teachers have been using the concept of “personal or self space” since the early 1970s as a way for young children to find their own space in the gym to practice a movement or motor skill. How important or different is space when communicating to students from other cultures? For example, Lambert and Meyers (1994) identify the “typical Americans” use of space according to four categories:

Intimate- From actual contact to about 18 inches (family and close friends)

Personal- From 18 inches to about 4 feet (friends, acquaintances, receptions, parties)

Social – From 4 feet to 7 feet (impersonal conversations and business transactions)

Public- From 12 feet or more (teaching, coaching, training, presentations in front of groups)

However, in other cultures the extent of contact or distance can be very different. For example, many Italian males when participating in sports or in casual conversations greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks, hold hands, put their arms around each other, and stand much closer when conversing. Urban schools are a global melting pot (i.e. Syracuse city schools—large refugee populations from Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Cuba, Rwanda and the Congo). How might we as educators address the impact of culture on student behavior in physical education?

Task: In groups of 4 or 5 please identify at least three other forms of body language, gestures, dress, customs or forms of non-verbal communication that are common to another culture/group.

Culture/group	Body language	Gestures	Dress	Customs	Non-verbal communication

How might differences affect the student’s participation in physical education?

What might we do differently as a teacher to embrace these differences?