

## When We Were Clumsy: Some Memories of Adults who were Low Skilled in Physical Education at School

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### Abstract

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One of the least commented and hidden aspect in Physical Education and Sport (PE&S) is the presence of low skilled students who are not able to learn satisfactorily the skills of their programs. The study of motor clumsiness has been confined to the therapeutic field. Thus, physical education teachers have accepted that problems of low motor competence were a matter of lack of motivation. This study presents the memories of adults who were low skilled in physical education classes when they were schoolchildren. The study included ten adults aged 25 to 56 who openly declared themselves as clumsy in the PE classes. They responded voluntarily to an interview related to their experiences, feelings and cognitions in these classes. The results showed that for these adults PE&S classes were experienced negatively, generating feelings of humiliation, indifference or rejection. Their teachers and classmates did not help to solve this problem, on the contrary they were part of the problem being a source of anxiety and difficulty. It can be said that these students were ignored by their teachers as well as that were mistreated by them and their peers. As a conclusion, PE&S subject should assume the presence of these students in their classes and to offer a teaching approach that help them to overcome their lack of competence with enriching experiences, adapting tasks and specific teacher's methodologies.

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**Keywords:** Low motor competence; Life Experiences; Adults; Physical Education; Learning.

### 1. Introduction

Physical Education and Sport learning are achievement contexts where coordination and competence are their main expressions. Children strive to show their competence controlling the ball, running, chasing or making a complex stunt on the mat. Being proficient in P.E. and Sport (PE&S) means to show the capacity to adjust their movement patterns to the changing environmental conditions (Salvesberg, Davids, Van der Kamp and Benett, 2003). However, sometimes some children within the PE&S classes, some continued attempts to be competent are failed when they try to throw a ball, because they don't have the accuracy to send it to the hands of their classmates, they are not able to share the materials with other children in a coordinated way, and many times they are chosen the last ones during a game or are the first of being eliminated (Cairney, 2015).

Physical Education teachers describe these low skilled children as clumsy, poorly coordinated, low competent or with motor development problems. These children have difficulties acquiring and performing fundamental motor skills such as running, jumping, catching or throwing. Specifically, there are children with these problems in all PE&S classes and many of them have learned that they will never improve this condition by practice, effort or feedback/instructions (Carlson, 1995). Low skilled children often abdicate responsibility of their performance becoming increasingly frequent feelings of learned helplessness (Walling and Martinek, 1995).

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In fact, the available research has shown that between 30% and 87% of children who reported these difficulties continued with them during the adulthood (Williams, Thomas and Kirby, 2015). To be low skilled in physical education is a circumstance in which educational benefits begin to stagger. For these students to go to PE&S classes become a reason for the hopeless, and many times for humiliation, since they are not considered good performers that cannot coordinate their movements.

It is scarce the scientific research focused on low motor competence children in PE&S classes, their difficulties to learn motor and sport skills in children and its influence in the future life of these students (Ramón and Ruiz, 2015; Ruiz, and Palomo, 2017]. There are few first-person reports that account for the experience of low motor competence described by its protagonists. Therefore, there is a need to analyze how these clumsy students lived these problems in their classes and how this condition affected on their lives (Fitzpatrick and Watkinson, 2003; Williams, Thomas and Kirby, 2015; Kirby, Williams, Thomas and Hill, 2013). Defining motor incompetence in adulthood remains a challenge and this study will present memories of a group of adults who analyzed their experiences of clumsiness in PE&S classes when they were schoolchildren.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This is a qualitative and deductive research. From the bibliographic review of the problems of motor learning and development in physical education, the criteria for the selection of the participants and the interviewing aspects of the interview were established (Valles, 2002). The main objective was to be able to explore the experience of clumsiness and low motor competence experienced by these adults, in the PE & S classes during their school stage, as well as its meaning. This qualitative approach allows us to investigate participants' subjective experiences (phenomena) and to better understand their personal experience and the nature of low competence in the school ages, all expressed verbally, through language, which implied the construction of a narration.

### 2.1. Participants

Given the type of study, the sample of participants was intentional and available. To participate in this study, they should state that at school age they had problems of motor development and of low motor competence in physical education classes. For this, they had to respond to a questionnaire developed for this purpose. This questionnaire was composed of 10 items, which can be considered keys to detect this problem, and were selected from the review of the studies of different specialists (Kirby and Roseunblum, 2008; Wall, 1982; Wilson, Kaplan, Crawford, Campbell and Dewey, 2000). Examples of these items were: *Did you avoid going to classes?*, *Did you consider clumsy in Physical Education?*, *Were you chosen last to be part of the teams?*, *Did your classmates laugh at you for your clumsiness?*, *Did you have difficulties to carry out the exercises in the classes?* or *Do you think you do not serve for sports?*.

The affirmative answer to 7 or more of the items allowed us to consider that person as a candidate for the study. Ten people were selected, of which 7 were women and 3 men, aged between 25 and 56 years with different professions. The participants stated that he/ she was neither diagnosed with motor ability disorders nor other learning difficulties. All previously received information about the study objectives and voluntarily agreed to participate. They also agreed that their experiences and statements could be used for the development of the report, although they were guaranteed anonymity when such statements served as an example of the issues discussed. A sample of 10 participants is habitual to establish the degree of theoretical saturation that is obtained with the analysis of the interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Strauss, 1987). In this study, it was found that no more participants would be necessary, since it was considered that the narratives of the participants were very similar. This research was carried out considering the revised Helsinki Declaration, international ethical guidelines on the study of human beings, and Spanish Law 15/1999, of 13th December, about the Protection of Personal Data. None of them agreed to be paid for their collaboration even though they were offered money to cover travel expenses. The interviews were carried out in the facilities of the research institution or in their private residences.

### 2.2. Procedure

To carry out this study, an interview was developed to obtain a comprehensive information about life experiences of the participants in their PE&S classes. The process was organized so that it lasted no longer than 40-45 minutes, although in several cases, the interview lasted for more than one hour, given the interest that the participants showed in detailing their experiences.

The interview was constituted by several aspects of interest like their own feelings, their behavior during the PE class, or the behavior of their teachers and peers. Participants were encouraged to express themselves freely. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To solve any problems that might arise, an initial interview was conducted to check the duration of the interview, and if there were difficulties in understanding what was asked of them, when they were asked to retrospectively recall their experiences of difficulty in their PE&S classes. Once it was verified that there were no problems of interest and that the duration was reasonable, the rest were carried out. This first interview was added to the study.

### 2.3. Analysis of Interviews

The conceptual structure of the interviews was established considering the main sections of the interview. As they were performed, verbal data were transcribed verbatim and read in detail several times by the research group before beginning their analysis. The qualitative analysis allowed to establish several of the most relevant aspects that emerged from the interviews. This analysis consisted in summarizing, synthesizing and gathering under a word or short expression what was the main categories and subjects narrated by the participants (Charmaz, 2006). The analyses were carried out with the Atlas Ti 8 qualitative analysis program. The issues were discussed until agreement was reached between the members of the research group.

## 3. Results

Various themes of interest emerged from the analysis of the transcripts of the participant's interviews.

### 3.1. Not all children must be athletes in physical education classes.

The knowledge about how they felt, how they were considered and how they lived their low motor competence, is the key to understand everything else. All participants recognized to be low skilled during PE&S classes. Some more emphatically acknowledge that their problems manifested itself in everything that was proposed, while for others their awkwardness was concretized in different types of tasks:

*"I remember being clumsy, my feeling was clumsy, not doing things right."*

*"It depends on the activities ... but in some yes, for example, in the gymnastics stunts. I have not made a hand-stand in my life, I have not done a stunt in my life ... is that I was not able, then when they were this type of tests, yes..."*

During these scenarios, the circumstances of exigency clearly exceeded their possibilities of facing them successfully. Then, the participants remembered them with high number of details, and with a great emotional load:

*"I did not like it and always did it wrong, playing soccer was a jerk".*

*"I will never forget once, a lot more, about 13-14 years and finishing my Primary School, it was the first time they asked us to jump gymnastics apparatus, and I do not remember giving a class before jumping these kind of apparatus... and (the teacher) forced me to jump screaming, using a derogatory language to me for at least 5 minutes, I refused, and I remember to respond badly, I was suspended and expelled from class".*

### 3.2. Physical education classes worried me a lot

PE&S classes are the learning environment in which physical and motor skills are learned and improved, and in which children must develop and establish a complex network of personal relationships with their peers and their teachers. Our participants considered that these classes had a negative influence on their lives. These influences were the reasons that influenced the later adoption of a non-active lifestyle, favoring the lack of motivation towards physical and sports activities. Classes were a hostile space to learn, and they wanted to flee from them. Most participants considered that PE&S classes were not as beneficial as they might have been. Some participants referred to a feeling of *humiliation* in these classes, caused by the content of the sessions:

*"(My physical education classes were) of the worst, I always was the last one in the races or I did not finish them because I drowned, I stumbled with my teammates in the ball games, sometimes I fell when jumping over the balance benches, or jump over the gymnastics apparatus, I was not a good athlete ... it was a disaster ..."*

For others, it was the space of *marginalization*, feeling in many cases completely alien to them:

*"Some classmates ignored me and others did not mind playing with me and passed me the ball, although they knew I would lose it. There were times when they did not count on me during games, for example, in soccer matches, they did not pass the ball, even if I was next to them".*

Many classroom activities provoked feelings of *resignation and contempt*, even with peers who they considered their friends:

*“(How did you feel in class?) As something surplus, like not with me, I preferred any excuse to miss the PE&S class”.*

Teaching behaviors such as the formation of the teams by the students themselves, favored a feeling of *exclusion* of the group, and caused *sadness and bitterness* and that, somehow, in some of the participants, it has been able to leave a mark forever:

*“They ignored me, they did not call me regularly, and when I could not do an activity they did not make me a participant, and if I did it wrong, they did not support or encourage me to keep trying”.*

It is worth to note the psychological influence that PE&S classes could have on low skilled participants, and the anxiety that caused to them when trying to perform certain activities such as jumping gymnastic apparatus. Although there are some participants who indicated that these classes did not affect to them from this psychological point of view, others showed certain considerations to the type of sessions that were responsible for their lack of motivation, their lack of enjoyment in classes, etc... Some of them showed a deeper and more serious influence:

*“It depends on the error that I made, if it was a mistake that everyone did not give much importance, but if the error was more striking, for example, if I fell, I always heard in the background some giggle that I did not like anything, I was annoyed a lot.”*

*“When I was a child I was very shy. Then of course I had a lot of pressure, so when I did it wrong I was more frustrated, because I did not have many opportunities to say, to see if I did it right”.*

### **3.3. “If I was unable, why nobody understood me and helped?”**

Physical education is a psychosocial environment in which numerous communication networks are established, that should tend to favor the development of motor development and learning of schoolchildren. One of the essential figures in this context is the Teacher. From the point of view of these participants, their teachers were unable of improving their motor competence. The majority perceived that their teachers were not interested in their problem, maintained pedagogical routines that affected directly the dynamics of the classes and were not favorable to the group of these low skilled students.

But sometimes I felt somewhat detached, a sense of *loneliness* or as being out of touch with the group. I did not like being chosen the last.

*“... My teacher did not help me, he criticized me, exposed me to others as the clumsy of the class, and made me feel bad. It made me feel the duck of the class and he did not help me to love the sport”.*

The overall image that translates from the statements of the participants is that of a teacher who did not take care about them, who did not teach them how to overcome the tasks, who ignored them in the classroom, who did not help them to do exercises and who taught hateful classes.

*“It was a martyrdom. To do something forced, that you do not like beforehand and above that makes you feel bad, incompetent, inferior to the rest, uff!!!”*

Other important actors in this context were their peers, those who welcome or reject, help or hinder, recognize or despise low competent classmates. School dynamics are very difficult for all those who are considered different, and students with low motor competence suffer harassment and disinterest of their classmates. The behavior of their peers was considered negative. Laughter in class, contempt, humiliation, mistreatment, exclusion or humiliating treatment, especially in very specific situations of the class, such as in the formation of teams, groups and playing games. Sometimes they did it very subtly, their looks, whispers. Murmurs when the teacher told me something, indifference when I failed in a group activity, let's not nice.

### **3. 4. The emotional portrait of low skilled children in Physical Education**

Motor competence is very important for social status and peer's acceptance (Piekand Rigoli, 2015). The motor competence of these children is always subject to the social examination of their classes, and it may happen that they do not reach the standards established by the teacher. Therefore, when they do not show the resources to be able to solve the tasks, it favors that their classmates call them clumsy or awkward.

These circumstances make the PE&S classes an unbeatable environment, where the climate of exigency outweighs the possibilities of less able students, and where a whole set of emotional responses emerge from these low skilled students.

An analysis of interviews allows us to highlight more than twenty emotional states that, alone or combined, these adults showed when they remember their experiences in PE&S classes when they were children. *Anxiety, choking, resignation, humiliation, hate, torture, boredom, frustration, opposition, amotivation, phobias, bitterness, martyrdom, bewilderment, disorientation, alienation, anguish, agony, contempt, rejection, outcast, exclusion, sadness...*

For the participants in this study, much would have changed if their teachers and classmates had been different. All of them agree in their solitude, isolation and incomprehension. They emphasize how for their teachers their problems were their lack of motivation and not their difficulties to coordinate their movements. All assume that very few peers understood their difficulties and that the teachers did nothing to change the attitude of their peers.

#### 4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to describe the memories of awkwardness of a group of adults in PE&S classes. The results obtained allow us to advance that the participants in this study do not have a good opinion of their physical education and sport classes, and how these bad experiences in these classes had influenced the adoption of a sedentary style of life. This negative view is not strictly due to the fact of having problems of coordination, but because of the experiences they had in these classes due to their inability to respond to the demands of the subject, the lack of help from their teachers, peer's behavior and lack of educational support (Tal-Saban, Ornoy and Panush, 2014).

One of the most characteristic facts of the present study is that none of the participants had been diagnosed, or had any report been issued by parents, a counselor, psychologist, teacher or pediatrician about the coordination problems that they presented. The lack of recognition of motor clumsiness and coordination problems in school is very common, hence it can be said that no one cared about their awkwardness. Mainly when the scientific evidence has shown that between 30% and 87% of people who had developmental coordination problems at school age continued to maintain them as adults (Williams, Thomas and Kirby, 2015). These difficulties continue to lie on their daily activities and hobbies, as well as in the quality of life of these adults.

PE&S classes are a social event where they are exposed to the eyes of others (teachers and peers) and their appreciation, which is why the memory of their classes and the lived experience of humiliation, anxiety and contempt are so strong for most of these participants, and still nowadays, they try to avoid team activities, complex tasks or those activities in which they must undergo external regulation, such as for instance, dancing classes (Williams, Thomas and Kirby, 2015).

Their experiences with PE&S have been plagued by negative emotions and cognitions that generated a pessimistic style and traits of learned incompetence (Ruiz, 2000). The narratives offered by the participants have revealed the role that the teachers played in their experiences of awkwardness, the absence of help or advice to learn the skills and the hostile behaviors that teachers could show to them. Many teachers confused a motor coordination difficulty with a problem of attitude and motivation, something that is very similar to the results found in other studies (Cardinal, Yan and Cardinal, 2013; Barney, Prusak and Beddoes, 2016).

As in the study of Fitzpatrick and Watkinson (Fitzpatrick and Watkinson, 2003) the pedagogical practices that the participants described of their teachers, as well as the classes that they lived, showed little curricular adaptations. The scenarios of humiliation were diverse, but perhaps the most determinant and specific one related to the formation of the teams (Carlson, 1995). The routines that teachers have to organize teams for the games generate situations in which the less competent were despised, when not humiliated, by their peers with the teacher's acquiescence (Cardinal, Yan and Cardinal, 2013). As Stream (2009) indicated, PE is an environment in which it is easy to develop memories that remain forever for their emotional content, in this case negative, that accompanies them. In this study, the behaviors of our participants were colored by more than twenty negative emotional states. This emotional impact is long lasting because of the 10 participants interviewed, eight did not practice any sport or physical activity in their adult lives, principally because they do not need them in their lives.

It is necessary to study the problems of awkwardness and motor incompetence in physical education and sport. It is necessary to assume that there are schoolchildren who present real problems to learn the motor and sport skills that are part of the programs of PE, and that the problems of motivation and attitude are not the cause but the consequence of the disinterest and the lack of care of these school children. These children, boys and girls, need more attention and more patience from their teachers. They don't follow the same pace of learning than that of their classmates, and because the class environment generates feelings of failure in these children.

Low competent children often feel that they don't have control over the environment and are unable to prevent motor failure. In this situation, these children begin to develop what has been called learned helplessness. Teachers need to be aware of these circumstances and establish a pedagogical atmosphere where these children could practice without being judged by their peers. These will then ensure that their clumsiness can be kept at a minimum and provide them with tasks, motivation and confidence that permit them to achieve success (Ruiz, 2017).

These children need a learning environment that considers the difference, a warmer teaching context where peers can understand that everybody has their own process of learning (Keogh, 1968). As Ruiz and Palomo (2017) indicated if these children are not correctly identified, they are not going to receive the educational opportunities and support to alleviate the effects of their condition. Well-developed PE&S programs and methodologies, can contribute to the motor skill learning of poorly coordinated children and alleviate their social problems.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the support of the Cathedra Real Madrid and The European University of Madrid (Spain).

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