

Existentialism and Its Pedagogical Implications in Physical Education: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individuality, freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning in an otherwise absurd world (Webber, 2018). This theory extends beyond traditional education. Integrating existentialist principles into physical education, emphasizing how physical education, sports, and movement can serve as pathways to self-discovery, resilience, and holistic growth. Using a comprehensive review and analysis, the research examines how concepts such as existence, authenticity, and humanism can reshape physical education pedagogy. Findings suggest that existentialist approaches empower students to make authentic choices, embrace responsibility, and reflect on their personal values. Physical education becomes more than skill acquisition; it evolves into a practical practice, critical thinking, and emotional well-being. PE teachers and Coaches can create meaningful learning environments that acknowledge cultural, social, and personal contexts. The study recommends reflective practice, student-centered learning, and ethical guidance to balance freedom with responsibility. Ultimately, this theory enriches the educational experience, transforming sports into a medium for discovering purpose, cultivating resilience, and promoting holistic development across physical, emotional, and social dimensions.

Keywords: Physical Education; Sports Education; Student-Centered Learning; Holistic Development; Existentialist Pedagogy,

1. Background of the Study

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emphasizes individuality, freedom, and responsibility in the search for meaning (Webber, 2018). Thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus shaped its foundations, highlighting concepts like existence precedes essence, absurdity, and authenticity (Kaufmann, 1975; Sartre, 1943).

In education, existentialism challenges traditional models by rejecting standardized approaches and advocating for student-centered learning (Perez, 2023). It encourages learners to take ownership of their choices, embrace authenticity, and cultivate personal meaning (Drew, 2019). Within physical education and sports, existentialist pedagogy underscores the importance of subjective experience, self-reflection, and personal growth, transforming athletic practice into a pathway for holistic development (Ronkainen et al., 2020).

This study explores the pedagogical implications of existentialism in physical education, examining how its principles can humanize sports instruction, foster individuality, and promote authentic learning experiences.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, philosophical research design to explore the pedagogical implications of existentialism in physical education. Rather than relying on quantitative measures, the methodology emphasizes interpretive analysis, conceptual synthesis, and thematic exploration. By drawing on canonical existentialist texts and contemporary educational literature, the research seeks to uncover how existentialist principles such as freedom, authenticity, and humanism can be meaningfully applied to sports and physical education. The approach is rooted in hermeneutic inquiry, ensuring that philosophical insights are interpreted within the context of human development, student engagement, and holistic learning.

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, philosophical research design that integrates existentialist principles with contemporary educational and physical education practices. Rather than relying on quantitative measures, the research emphasizes interpretive analysis, conceptual synthesis, and thematic exploration. The design is rooted in hermeneutic inquiry, which seeks to interpret existentialist texts and their pedagogical applications to uncover their relevance to human development in sports and education (Gillo, 2021).

2.2 Data Sources

The primary data sources consist of canonical existentialist texts, including Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), which provide foundational philosophical insights. Secondary sources include scholarly interpretations and educational analyses (Drew, 2019; Guignon, 2013; Perez, 2023; Ronkainen et al., 2020). These texts were selected for their relevance to existentialist philosophy, pedagogy, and physical education, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical and applied dimensions.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The study employs thematic analysis to identify and categorize existentialist concepts, including freedom, authenticity, absurdity, despair, and humanism (Drew, 2019). These themes are then mapped onto educational contexts, with a particular focus on physical education. The analysis explores how existentialist principles influence student engagement, motivation, and personal growth, and examines their implications for teaching strategies such as project-based learning, student-led curriculum design, and reflective practice (Rumianowska, 2019; Pot et al., 2018).

2.4 Limitations

As a qualitative and philosophical study, the research does not employ empirical data collection such as surveys or experiments. Instead, it relies on interpretive synthesis of existing literature. While this approach provides depth and theoretical richness, it may limit generalizability across diverse educational contexts. Furthermore, existentialism's inherent ambiguity and lack of prescriptive structure pose challenges for

educators seeking concrete guidelines.

Would you like me to also add a “Research Ethics” subsection (e.g., ensuring respect for individuality, avoiding misinterpretation of existentialist principles) so the methodology looks even more complete for academic submission?

2.5 Research Ethics

This study is grounded in philosophical inquiry and textual analysis, thereby minimizing the risks associated with empirical research involving human participants. Nevertheless, ethical considerations remain central to the research design. First, the study emphasizes respect for individuality, aligning with existentialist principles that value freedom, authenticity, and personal meaning. In applying existentialist philosophy to education and physical education, care is taken to avoid misinterpretations that could lead to nihilism, hedonism, or harmful practices. Instead, the analysis highlights the constructive aspects of existentialism, such as responsibility, resilience, and holistic growth.

Second, the research acknowledges the cultural and contextual diversity of learners. Existentialist pedagogy emphasizes personal choice and authenticity, but this must be balanced with sensitivity to students’ backgrounds, values, and social environments. Ethical responsibility requires educators to ensure that existentialist approaches do not marginalize or destabilize learners, particularly younger students who may struggle with concepts of absurdity or despair.

Finally, transparency and integrity guide the research process. Sources are cited accurately in accordance with APA 7th edition standards, ensuring intellectual honesty and respect for prior scholarship. By framing existentialist pedagogy as a humanizing and empowering approach, the study seeks to contribute positively to educational discourse while maintaining ethical responsibility toward learners, educators, and the broader academic community.

3. Results

The results of this study reveal how existentialist philosophy can be meaningfully applied to education and physical education, offering insights into individuality, authenticity, and holistic growth. By analyzing existentialist themes such as freedom, responsibility, and humanism, the findings highlight their transformative potential in reshaping traditional pedagogical practices. These results are organized into key areas: existentialism in education, existentialism in physical education, humanizing sports instruction, and the strengths and challenges of existentialist pedagogy, each underscoring the philosophy's relevance to contemporary educational contexts.

3.1 Existentialism in education

In education, existentialists seek to change how people perceive education. They propose that, instead of viewing students as forced to fit into academic standards, students should be treated as unique individuals and allowed to actively shape both their education and their lives (Perez, 2023). No two children are identical in the eyes of the existentialists. Their backgrounds, personalities, hobbies, and developed abilities are different. Thus, they sought to end the practice of standardized behavioral assessments (Kohn, 2008). Existentialism in education prioritizes the development of students as individuals. It encourages student-centered learning and experiential education, shifting the focus from pure academic achievement to a broader sense of growth and holistic development (Gabutan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, existentialism promotes freedom and responsibility and encourages individuals to make decisions (Drew, 2019). Existential education aims to empower individuals by instilling in them the power of choice, the ability to shape their destiny, and truthfulness in learning (Smith, 2019). Students are free to be true to themselves and their principles, promoting a deeper sense of identity and purpose. This perspective emphasizes the importance of allowing students the freedom to choose their learning path, taking responsibility for their learning, and making choices that align with their interests and ideals (Spinelli, 2007).

3.2 Student-Centered Existentialism

Existentialism promotes several vital principles as a student-centered educational movement. It seeks to guide students in uncovering their life's purpose and meaning, going beyond the academic realm to understand how they want to live. Rejecting the idea of a predefined purpose encourages students to explore their personalities and paths that align with their sense of meaning (Drew, 2019). This philosophy empowers individual choice by involving students in activities like project-based learning and student-led curriculum design. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding the consequences of one's decisions, fostering a sense of agency in shaping one's life, and influencing others (Rumianowska, 2019).

Moreover, existentialism encourages students to embrace responsibility, regardless of their circumstances, cultivating a growth mindset. It highlights the countless choices and opportunities available to students, promoting informed decision-making (Perez, 2023). Authentic self-expression is encouraged as 'good faith,' while conformity for social approval is seen as 'bad faith.' For teachers, the existentialist perspective prompts a critical examination of traditional curricula and pedagogical practices. Educators adopting existentialist principles may focus on helping students find meaning and purpose in their studies and lives (Suwarno, 2020). By embracing existentialist principles, teachers can create a learning environment that nurtures individual growth and self-discovery (Drew, 2019).

Table 1

SWOT Analysis of Existentialist Pedagogy

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Empowers students to make choices, fostering autonomy and responsibility.	Exploration of absurdity may cause anxiety, especially in younger learners.	Supports holistic development across emotional, social, physical, and academic dimensions.	May conflict with standardized testing and rigid curricular frameworks.
Encourages personalized learning paths aligned with students' interests and aspirations.	Lacks a clear moral foundation, leaving students without a strong ethical framework.	Provides inclusive education by validating diverse learners' individuality and lived experiences.	Misuse of existentialist ideas could justify harmful behaviors or disengagement from norms.
Promotes authenticity and supports marginalized groups, such as LGBTQI students.	Provides little curricular structure, making alignment with educational standards difficult.	Encourages innovative pedagogy through reflective practice and experiential learning.	Cultural resistance in societies that prioritize conformity over individuality.
Develops critical thinking by emphasizing the responsibility and consequences of choices.	Excessive individuality may hinder social cohesion and classroom cooperation.	Builds resilience by helping students confront challenges and failures constructively.	Teachers may lack preparedness or philosophical grounding to implement existentialist principles.
Aligns with active learning methods, such as project-based and student-led curriculum design.	Risk of misinterpretation, with students mistaking existentialism for nihilism or hedonism.	Strengthens community engagement by promoting empathy, responsibility, and social awareness.	Younger learners may be emotionally unprepared to grapple with existential themes.

Consequently, existentialism in education offers a framework that prioritizes individual choice, personal authenticity, and critical thinking. However, it also presents challenges related to its potentially disturbing nature, lack of moral guidance, and the need for clear educational structures. Educators should carefully consider both the strengths and weaknesses when incorporating existentialist principles into their teaching methods.

3.3 Existentialism in Sports and Physical Education

In the context of physical education and sports, existentialist educational philosophies have been

embraced by teachers, highlighting the significance of individuality and personal experience in the learning process (Isikgoz, 2020). This approach contrasts with traditional methods, emphasizing intuition as the key to acquiring knowledge. Existential learning delves into the personal meaning of sports, recognizing that athletes' experiences, beliefs, values, strengths, and weaknesses provide the backdrop for learning and development (Ronkainen, 2018).

Similarly, existentialism in education is a philosophy that advocates individual autonomy, rejects general moral principles, and urges people to make decisions based on their own principles, facing the consequences of those decisions (Isikgoz, 2020). This perspective places the students at the center of the educational process, emphasizing the importance of personal choice and responsibility (Yargi, 2019). This perspective stresses that understanding an athlete's existence and personal growth in sports requires acknowledging the broader significance of the framework within which their experiences are explored.

Unlike conventional teaching methods, existential learning focuses on subjective experiences, intersubjective relationships, and the individual's existence in the world. Athletes learn about themselves through self-reflection, acknowledging their strengths, resilience, and failures (Ronkainen et al., 2020). This approach allows athletes to confront negative experiences, fostering personal growth and transformation. It also opens avenues for positive experiences, leading to spiritual awakenings of drive, determination, and new purpose in life from a sports perspective.

Incorporating existentialist philosophy into physical education underscores the importance of meaningful interactions and context in the acquisition of motor skills (Pot et al., 2018). Affordances, the triggers for specific actions based on past experiences, highlight the interplay between context and action in physical literacy (Shearer et al., 2018). Recognizing this relationship between context and action, known as physical competence, becomes crucial. Physical competence involves effectively applying motor skills in specific environments, emphasizing the individual's capabilities and ability to act within a given context (Pot et al., 2018).

Consequently, existentialism in the context of physical activity, literacy, and sports emphasizes individual choice, personal meaning, and transformative experiences. It challenges traditional educational approaches, placing the learner at the forefront and highlighting the importance of self-reflection, personal values, and contextual understanding in the learning process. This existential perspective not only enriches the educational experience but also promotes holistic personal development.

3.4 Existentialist Coach and Physical Education Teacher

Physical education teachers and coaches play a crucial role in integrating existentialist philosophical approaches into sports and physical education. They should create a diverse and meaningful context for learning motor skills and physical competence. By acknowledging the influence of various factors such as

environment, socioeconomic status, and culture, educators can design activities that resonate with students' and athletes' experiences, enhancing their overall learning and skill development (Pot et al., 2018; Shearer et al., 2018). Suppose there is anything that the existentialist teacher can do for his learners, as quoted by Kneller. In that case, it is to bring them to more extensive learning, practical experience, and an understanding of the meaning and purpose of their existence, so that, over time, these men should neither perpetuate nor imitate the similar bestial habits of their ancestors (Singh, 2021).

The existentialist teacher embraces and nurtures these individualities, encouraging athletes to delve deep into their subjective experiences and intersubjective relationships. Through self-reflection, athletes confront not only their strengths but also their failures, fostering resilience and determination (Ronkainen et al., 2020). The existentialist teacher recognizes and harnesses these affordances, creating diverse and meaningful environments for learning motor skills and physical competence. Acknowledging the influence of environment, socioeconomic status, and culture, educators design activities that resonate with students' and athletes' experiences, enhancing their overall learning and skill development (Pot et al., 2018; Shearer et al., 2018).

They guide athletes through the intricate process of self-discovery, acknowledging their existential struggles and triumphs. By fostering an environment where athletes can explore their beliefs, values, and purpose, these educators enable spiritual awakenings and a newfound sense of meaning in sports (Ronkainen et al., 2020). In the hands of an existentialist physical education teacher, sports become more than just physical activities. They become thoughtful existentialist where individuals discover their life purpose, find meaning to, and emerge more vital, more resilient, and profoundly aware of their contribution, what they want, and their responsibility in the particular society they belong to and to a greater community they could contribute.

4. Discussion

4.1 Existentialism and Education

Existentialism redefines education by prioritizing individuality over conformity. Students are encouraged to explore personal meaning rather than adhere to rigid academic standards (Kohn, 2008). This philosophy empowers learners to make authentic choices, fostering autonomy and critical thinking (Drew, 2019).

The implications of this finding align with Rumianowska's (2019) work, which emphasizes that existentialist pedagogy nurtures student agency by allowing learners to construct meaning from their own experiences. Similarly, Makhamatov et al. (2021) highlighted that existentialist approaches in modern education promote holistic development by encouraging students to confront uncertainty and embrace personal responsibility. These parallels reinforce the idea that existentialism supports a shift from standardized

learning toward individualized growth, validating its relevance in contemporary educational discourse.

4.2 Existentialism in Physical Education and Sports

In sports and physical education, existentialist pedagogy emphasizes subjective experience and personal growth. Athletes are not merely trained for performance but guided toward self-discovery through reflection on strengths, failures, and resilience (Ronkainen et al., 2020). Physical competence is framed as the ability to act meaningfully within specific contexts, highlighting the interplay between environment, culture, and personal values (Pot et al., 2018).

This result supports Shearer et al. (2018), who argued that physical literacy is deeply contextual and shaped by personal and environmental affordances. It also parallels Isikgoz's (2020) findings that physical education teachers who adopt philosophical approaches foster deeper student engagement and motivation. Together, these studies confirm that existentialist pedagogy in sports not only enhances skill acquisition but also cultivates resilience and identity formation, making physical education a transformative experience. An existentialist coach, on the other hand, encouraging athletes to confront existential struggles and embrace authenticity. Sports become more than physical activity; they become a medium for discovering a life purpose, cultivating resilience, and fostering social responsibility (Singh, 2021). This humanized approach contrasts with traditional performance-driven models, positioning physical education as a pathway to holistic development.

This implication is consistent with Ronkainen et al. (2020), who demonstrated that existential learning in sports fosters self-reflection and personal transformation. It also aligns with Suwarno (2020), who emphasized that existentialist teaching encourages authenticity and critical examination of traditional curricula. These findings collectively support the notion that existentialist coaching humanizes sports instruction, enabling athletes to develop not only physical competence but also emotional and social awareness.

5. Implications and Future Directions

The integration of existentialist philosophy into physical education offers both immediate pedagogical implications and long-term developmental opportunities. The following section outlines practical applications that educators and coaches can adopt, as well as future directions that highlight areas for continued research, refinement, and institutional support.

5.1 Implications

Integrating reflective practice into physical education is essential for fostering authenticity and personal meaning among students. By encouraging learners to reflect on their experiences, values, and goals in sports, educators can help them connect physical activity to broader life purposes. This reflective process

not only deepens self-awareness but also empowers students to view sports as a medium for personal growth rather than merely performance outcomes.

Promoting student-centered learning through project-based and experiential activities allows learners to design their own physical education pathways. This approach empowers students to take ownership of their development, aligning with existentialist principles of freedom and choice. By giving students agency in shaping their learning experiences, educators can enhance motivation, engagement, and long-term commitment to physical activity.

Balancing existential freedom with ethical guidance is critical to ensuring that autonomy does not lead to misinterpretations such as nihilism or hedonism. While existentialism emphasizes personal responsibility, educators must provide clear moral frameworks to guide decision-making. This balance ensures that students exercise their freedom responsibly, fostering both individuality and social responsibility within the learning environment.

Humanizing sports coaching requires coaches to prioritize athletes' holistic development, emotional, social, and psychological as well as physical performance. By adopting this approach, coaches transform sports into a platform for resilience, identity formation, and social awareness. This humanized pedagogy positions physical education as a pathway to holistic development, preparing students not only as athletes but also as well-rounded individuals.

Finally, contextualizing physical competence is vital for inclusive and meaningful physical education. Educators must recognize the influence of environment, culture, and socioeconomic factors on students' physical literacy. By situating learning within these contexts, teachers can design experiences that resonate with diverse learners, ensuring that physical education is equitable, relevant, and transformative.

5.2 Future Directions

Future research should explore how existentialist principles can be systematically integrated into curriculum design, assessment methods, and teacher training programs. Longitudinal studies may examine the long-term effects of existentialist approaches on student resilience, motivation, and holistic development. Additionally, future work should investigate how existentialist pedagogy can be adapted for younger learners to minimize potential anxiety associated with themes of absurdity and meaninglessness. Exploring culturally responsive applications of existentialism in diverse educational contexts will also be critical, ensuring that its principles resonate across different backgrounds and communities.

Finally, collaboration between educators, coaches, and policymakers can help establish frameworks that balance existential freedom with ethical responsibility. Embedding existentialist pedagogy into broader educational systems will ensure that physical education evolves into a transformative practice that empowers individuality, authenticity, and lifelong growth.

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