

Original article

Children's expectancy beliefs and subjective task values through two years of school-based program and associated links to physical education enjoyment and physical activity

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Abstract

Purpose: The present study examined the patterns of children's expectancy beliefs and subjective task values through the Physical Activity as Civil Skill Program and associated links to physical education enjoyment and total physical activity.

Methods: The sample comprised 401 children aged 9–13 years from 3 small towns located in North-East Finland. All children received school-based activities across 2-year program from Grades 5 to 7. The present data were collected using questionnaires across 3 measurement phases during 2012–2014.

Results: The levels of expectancy beliefs and subjective task values indicated to be relatively high and the development was stable through the program, especially in terms of expectancy beliefs, attainment value, and cost. In contrast, interest value and utility value decreased over the particular period of time. Boys believed they are physically more competent when compared to other students and valued physical education classes more important than girls. In addition, the higher the physical activity level the children reported, the higher the physical education enjoyment they perceived.

Conclusion: The current program including actions to increase physical activity through manipulation of psychological and physical school environment modifications indicated to be an effective strategy to prohibit declining levels of children's expectancy beliefs and task values.

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Keywords: Exercise motivation; Expectancy beliefs; Expectancy-value theory; Physical activity; Physical education enjoyment; Task values

1. Introduction

Physical inactivity (PA) levels are rising with major implication for general health and well-being of the population worldwide.¹ For instance, less than 40% of school-age children in Australia, Canada, Columbia, Finland, South-Africa, and the US meet the current PA guidelines.² Compared to other continents, Asian school-age youth show even lower physical activity levels.³ A considerable proportion of daily PA for children can be provided through school physical education (PE) to meet the current recommendations at minimal additional cost to the community.⁴ However, the objectives of PE⁵ are challenging to achieve, if children are not motivated to participate actively in their PE classes.⁶ Previous research has consistently shown that PE enjoyment is an essential element underlying exercise moti-

vation for children and youth so as to maintain positive engagement in total PA^{7–9} and physically active participation in PE.^{10–12} To address this, the Physical Activity as Civil Skill Program 2010–2014 was implemented to prevent long-term effects of inactivity on children's well-being and health using PE as a means to increase their PE motivation and PA.¹³ The expectancy-value approach provides a useful framework to envisage the link between children's PE motivation and achievement related behavior, such as PA engagement.^{14–16} The present study examined the patterns of children's expectancy beliefs and subjective task values through the particular program, and associated links to PE enjoyment and total PA.

The expectancy-value theory addresses whether or not children desire to participate in an activity and how much effort they are prepared to put into the activity.^{17,18} Thus, the theory consists of 2 major components, expectancy beliefs and subjective task values.¹⁹ Precisely, the level of persistence and performance in

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the activity is determined by their beliefs about how well they will perform the activity and values they attach to the activity. Beliefs about ability are defined as an individual's beliefs about competence in performing or learning different achievement tasks and probability for success at a specific task. Subjective task values are defined as individuals' incentives for doing different tasks. Eccles et al.¹⁷ have demonstrated that subjective task values are a function of 4 distinct components: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost. Attainment value is defined as the importance to do well on a given task, and it incorporates identity issues as tasks are important when individuals view them as central to their own sense of themselves, and allow them to express or confirm important aspects of themselves.¹⁷ Intrinsic value is similar to the self-determination theory's²⁰ intrinsic motivation, since enjoyment is gained from doing the task. When individuals value an activity intrinsically, they often become deeply engaged in it and can persist at it for a long time.^{17,20} Utility value or usefulness refers to how a task fits into an individual's future plans, for instance, taking a PE class to fulfill a need for social interaction.¹⁷ Thus, utility value is similar to the self-determination theory's²⁰ identified regulation, because doing an activity out of utility value, the activity is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Utility value is also connected to personal goals and sense of self, and so has also some ties to intrinsic motivation.²⁰ Cost refers to what the individual has to give up to do a task, as well as the anticipated effort one will need to put into task completion.¹⁷

Gender differences have been found in terms of expectancy beliefs^{15,21–23} and subjective task values, with boys scoring higher than girls.^{15,17,21,24,25} In contrast, gender differences in task values have not been observed in some other studies.^{22,26} For instance, according to a recent Finnish study, school-age girls were most likely to participate in gymnastics and dance classes, while boys tended to prefer ball games such as soccer, ice or floor ball.²⁷ In turn, Xiang et al.²² concluded that girls and boys did not differ in their expectancy beliefs across the running program, because they viewed running as appropriate for both genders. Several researchers suggested that differences may be result of participation in gender appropriate activities, when expectancy beliefs and values increase as a result.^{28,29} Therefore, gender differences have been found more regularly in gender preference activities, as girls and boys will often tend to value activities that they perceive as appropriate for their gender.¹⁴

Previous research has consistently revealed the decreasing pattern in school-related expectancy beliefs over time,^{25,30,31} especially when children transfer from elementary to secondary school.^{25,32} Considering the development of subjective task values, Eccles et al.³³ and Wigfield's research group³⁴ showed that children's PE related task values declined across the elementary school years. More recently, Yli-Piipari²⁵ reported that values in school PE sustained stable across Grades 6–9. In addition, Fredricks and Eccles³⁵ found that children's intrinsic value and attainment value in school sports decreased across school years from elementary to secondary school. At that age children meet remarkable changes in their lives. These changes include, for example, transitions to another school and transforms in their social and environmental networks. Based on

previous findings, the transition from elementary to secondary school seems to be the most important period in regard to the development of expectancy beliefs and values. It is still unclear whether children's perceptions of expectancy beliefs and task values can be increased by promoting PE motivation across regular PE classes. The present study extends previous research by investigating the developmental trajectories of children's expectancy beliefs and subjective task values through 2 years of school-based program.

PE classes have been considered as potential functions to increase children's daily PA, according to the expectancy-value theory related studies.^{15,16,22,26,36} For instance, Cox and Whaley²⁶ found that beliefs just as subjective task values were positively associated with students' effort and persistence in basketball classes. Additionally, the 1-mile run was strongly associated with attainment value in the elementary school running program study.²² Gråstén et al.¹⁵ found that attainment value was the strongest predictor of Finnish secondary school students' PA in PE classes. Similarly, expectancy beliefs had a positive impact on students' PA in the sample of U.S. Grade 9 students.¹⁶ Yli-Piipari²⁵ reported that Finnish children aged 11–13 years, who highly valued PE classes, became more physically active across Grades 6–9. However, Pintrich³⁷ argued in his earlier paper that many expectancy-value models have focused on the role of expectancy beliefs and subjective task values, and their relation to future performance and achievement related choices, but have not examined how these variables might be related to goals. For instance, none of the reviewed publications examined the associations of expectancy beliefs, task values, and PE enjoyment, despite the fact that enjoyment represents a direct and substantial influence on children's PA participation.³⁸ This reinforces the potential for substantial methodological variation to be introduced in the literature. The current study presents the associations of expectancy beliefs, subjective task values, PE enjoyment, and total PA.

The aim of the current study was to examine the patterns of children's expectancy beliefs and subjective task values through the Physical Activity as Civil Skill Program and associated links to PE enjoyment and total PA. First, the developmental trajectories of expectancy beliefs and subjective task values were analyzed, assuming a stability or increase across the program.^{25,30–32} Second, a structural model of expectancy beliefs, subjective task values, PE enjoyment, and PA was tested, expecting that beliefs and values would positively associate to enjoyment and PA.^{15,16,22,26,36} The covariance effects of gender and school were also examined.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The current sample comprised 401 children (211 girls, 190 boys) aged 9–13 years (11.85 ± 0.50 years, mean \pm SD). Participants were recruited from 14 elementary schools of 3 small towns located in Northeast Finland. All students were invited to participate through direct contact with the school principals. The human participants' approval statement was obtained from the Ethics Committee of University of Jyväskylä and

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