Sport and Education

Tribute to Martin Lee
Motivation in physical education: 
the differentiated effect of gender, age and sport’s involvement

1. Introduction

Motivation is probably one of the most studied topics in the context of sports (Edmunds, Ntoumanis & Duda, 2006), particularly in Portugal. However, research in this domain can be characterized, to some extent, by a lack of focus which limits understanding about the relationship between motivation and participation in sport and exercise. This situation is due, on one hand, to the lack of a clear definition for motivation, and on the other hand, the multitude of theories trying to explain it. Further, much of the published research has been based on physically active groups which represent a very small percentage of the population. In the case of Portugal, only about 12% of the population is active (Fernandes, Lazaro & Vasconcelos-Raposo, 2005).

The study of motivation for sport participation has been a major research topic in sport psychology since the early 1980’s (Frederick & Ryan, 1993, 1995; Harwood & Biddle, 2002; Vasconcelos-Raposo, 1996). However, much of the theory guiding this research emerged from the field of education, specifically cognitive activities (Vasconcelos-Raposo, 1996). Consequently, the results may not be clear because the nature of the motivation to participate in cognitive activities may not be the same as that to participate in physical activities.

The need to develop efficient strategies to motivate children to participate in physical activities and sports is widely recognized (World Health Organization, 1995; Strong et al., 2005). Positive experiences in the context of physical education are generally assumed to influence children and youth to adopt healthy lifestyles in adulthood (Sallis & McKenzie, 1991; Shephard & Trudeau, 2000). It is also believed that such practice may promote and improve public health. Accordingly, it is suggested that programs of sport and physical activity should be specifically designed and implemented for children and young people in order to avoid the eventual development of attitudes of indifference towards physical activity at older ages (Fox, 1991).

Evaluation of the association of a variety of demographic, biological, psychological, behavioral, social and/or contextual variables with physical activity levels of children and youth shows that perceptions of competence, intention to practice sport and enjoyment