Girls' Participation Patterns
in a Middle School Team Sports Unit

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The purpose of the study was to identify girls' participation patterns in a middle school team sport unit. Through class observations, formal interviews, and informal discussions with the physical education teachers, six styles of participation were identified. These were (a) athlete, (b) JV player, (c) cheerleader, (d) femme fatale, (e) lost soul, (f) system beater. A description of behavior, characteristic of the majority of the girls observed, outlined four kinds of nonassertive behavior: (a) giving up, (b) giving away, (c) hanging back, and (d) acquiescing. Several contextual factors were identified as potentially contributing to the participation patterns identified. These were: availability of out-of-school team sport programs, community racial and socioeconomic status, the age group studied, and interactions with teachers and other students in the class.

Title IX prohibits the assigning of students to physical education classes by sex. The rationale for this federal regulation is that sex-integrated classes are more equitable since girls and boys have the same opportunity for participation and instruction in different activities. However, there is reason to believe that inequity continues in sex-integrated classes (Allard, 1979; Bischoff, 1982; Griffin, 1981, 1983; Solomons, 1980; Wang 1978). These studies suggest that teachers and students bring the same stereotyped attitudes and actions to the gym, whether the classes are sex integrated or separate. Further, some teachers would argue that coed gym is even more inequitable than sex-separate classes; they feel that boys must hold back and that the physical education program has become watered down because of the girls. Other teachers say that boys "hog the ball" in games and that there has been less teaching and more "throwing out the ball" since they were forced to go coed (Miller, 1982).

Before condemning sex-integrated classes and joining the clamor for a return to the days of all girls on one side of the gym and all boys on the other, physical educators need to take a closer look at what happens in these classes. Are there identifiable participation patterns among students? Are participation patterns different for girls and boys? How does student participation change in different activity units? All of these questions must be answered if we are to have an accurate picture of how students participate in coed physical education classes. This report focuses on one aspect of student participation in sex-integrated classes: girls' participation in team sport activities.
North Ridge Middle School is located in a small New England town. The community is predominantly white and middle class. The sixth, seventh, and eighth graders attending North Ridge are required to take two 45-minute periods of physical education each week. The two full-time physical education teachers, a man and a woman, were assisted during the semester under study by a male student teacher from a nearby state university. All physical education classes at North Ridge had equal numbers of girls and boys and averaged from 20 to 25 students. Only flag football, which was offered as an elective, had more boys in the classes than girls.

Data Collection and Analysis

The female participation patterns reported are a portion of the data gathered during a 3-month case study of sex equity in a middle school physical education program. The participation patterns were identified during 34 team sport class observations over an 8-week period (13 seventh-grade soccer, 8 sixth-grade speedball, 4 eighth-grade field hockey, 4 seventh-grade flag football, and 5 seventh-grade elimination dodgeball classes). One full school day each week from mid-September to mid-December was spent with the physical education staff. Informal between-class discussions with teachers during each school visit and formal audiotaped interviews with each teacher at the end of the study served to confirm, disconfirm, or provide different perspectives on the observation data collected.

At the outset, the teachers were told that the study would focus on what was happening in sex-integrated classes. It was important to be able to talk to teachers directly about their perceptions of sex-integrated classes in order to check the validity of observations and to better understand the rationale behind the actions taken by teachers in classes. A careful record of incidents of teacher reactivity was kept during the study. Teachers seldom looked at or spoke to the observer. Even if some teachers initially might have been self-conscious, the day-to-day routinized complexities of dealing with hundreds of middle-school students quickly eroded any facades. However, the presence of an observer probably had some effect on teacher behavior. The students did not know the purpose of the observations but, as with the teachers, an observer's presence undoubtedly had some effect on student behavior.

The data collected consisted of field notes from observations and informal discussions with teachers, and transcripts from formal interviews with teachers. Between each school visit, field notes were reviewed and analyzed to identify patterns of participation among students (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The patterns identified formed the focus for succeeding observations and informal discussion with teachers. As patterns were refined, negative cases were sought: incidents of participation that did not fit the participation typology emerging (Patton, 1980). This intentional search for disconfirmation served as a cross-check on the analysis. The patterns of participation reported are the final product of this process. Reliability, validity, and objectivity in data collection and analysis were addressed in the following ways:

1. The students did not know the focus of the study. Though their behavior was probably affected somewhat by the presence of an observer, there was no evidence that their participation in class was self-conscious or inauthentic.
2. The teachers did know the focus of the study. Though this knowledge probably affected their behavior somewhat, their perceptions were essential in accurately describing student behavior.

3. Researcher observations recorded in field notes were descriptive. Any researcher conjecture, feelings, or other subjective reactions to the happenings in class were clearly labeled as a separate category of the field notes.

4. To confirm or refute emerging patterns, observation and interview data were cross-checked with teacher perceptions during informal discussions or formal interviews. This strategy was particularly important because only one researcher was collecting and analyzing data.

5. Analysis of the data was inductive and cyclical. The patterns identified emerged from descriptive observations rather than imposing preconceived categories on observations. The cycle of observation-analysis-observation-analysis allowed patterns to be refined progressively throughout the study.

6. Though the effects of researcher values and perceptions cannot be completely eliminated in any study, the purposeful search for negative cases and rival explanations during data collection and analysis minimized the possibility of misrepresenting data.

7. Information about the particular physical education setting under study was included so that the reader can compare and contrast the patterns identified and the context characteristics to his or her own professional context.

Female Participation Patterns in Team Sports

Six styles of female participation in team sport activities were identified: (a) athletes, (b) JV players, (c) cheerleaders, (d) lost souls, (e) femme fatales, and (f) system beaters. The teachers used the labels lost souls, system beaters, and athletes to describe girls in those categories. The other labels were generated by the researcher. Brief descriptions and vignettes from field notes illustrate each style.

Athletes

High visibility and involvement characterized the athletes' participation. They were well skilled in the activities. Other boys and girls acknowledged them as good players by commenting on their skill and including them in game interactions. They were assertive in their play—moving to the ball, taking shots on goal, calling for passes, and asking to play high interaction positions. Athletes were also assertive in their interactions with boys—resisting poaches and defending themselves when teased or criticized.

A girl is running a post pattern. Her quarterback (another girl) is delayed getting the pass off. The girl pass receiver stops and waves her arms. Two boys are covering her. The ball is passed. All three jump for it. The girl pulls the ball to her chest and crashes to the grass on her back. First down.

During a speedball game a boy asks a high skilled girl in the class to play goalie: "Patty, be goalie for my team, please. Look, Gallagher [a boy] is goalie. You're better than he is."
JV Players

Mixed involvement characterized the JV players' participation. They were average or low skilled in the activities. They were sometimes assertive in their play and sometimes passive, calling for the ball one moment and hanging back the next if it came to them. They appeared to enjoy the game and expressed excitement about playing. JV players were often overlooked by teammates even if they were open for a pass and called for the ball.

During a speedball game, a boy says to another boy about a girl standing with them, "I want to pass to you 'cause Dumbo here [indicates the girl with his thumb] can't catch. She gives him a disgusted look. She runs up and down the field with the flow of the game, waving her arms, calling for the ball. She cheers her teammates and protests an officiating call. She kicks an imaginary ball. After several minutes of not receiving any passes, though she was open, she says, "It's boring." She stops and stands with her arms folded across her chest watching the play. "I want to quit. I never get the ball." She sees that the boy who called her Dumbo has the ball. She holds her hands out and calls for a pass. He passes it over her head to the other boy, ignoring her. She drops her hands to her sides and rolls her eyes upward. "Jimmy, can I please have the ball?"

During a soccer game a girl calls for a pass. She is open and near the goal. The ball rebounds off an opponent's leg and rolls toward her. She starts toward the ball after a slight hesitation. However, a quicker male teammate reaches the ball first and kicks the ball at the goal.

Cheerleaders

The cheerleaders were characterized by vicarious involvement. They were usually low skilled players, but they seemed to enjoy the game. They cheered and clapped for their teammates and were excited when their team scored. However, they acted as if they didn't want to handle the ball themselves—passing the ball quickly if they received it and hesitating before going after a ball near them. Cheerleaders appeared to accept their low skill status by laughing at their mistakes, saying, "I can't," or asking for more boys on their teams. They often volunteered to be a substitute if there were extra players. Other students frequently avoided passing the ball to them or sometimes played their positions for them.

The blue team has just scored another goal. The teacher calls out, "Let's go, red team, you've got to score." A girl on the red forward line says, "Can we change positions?" The teacher answers, "What's wrong with the positions?" She replies, "We only have one boy, you know" (on the forward line). The teacher replies, "You don't need a boy down there [in front of the goal], you need guts."

During a soccer game a girl playing wing has not contacted the ball at all. She runs up and down the field with her team, but whenever the ball comes near her, she moves toward it so slowly or hesitantly that someone else beats her there. The teacher says to a boy on her team, "Michael, I asked you to pass the ball to Susan." Michael replies, "I did and she just stands there."

Lost Souls

Invisible noninvolvement characterized the participation of lost souls. They were low skilled. Most of their few contacts with the ball resulted in failure. They appeared
to be confused by the game and panicked at the prospect of handling the ball. Lost souls rarely spoke to other students or the teacher. They always chose peripheral positions where there was the least chance of being involved in game play or contacting the ball. Teammates and opponents assisted with the lost souls’ attempt to be visible by ignoring them in game play.

The objective of elimination dodgeball is to hit the players on the other team with the ball so that they are out of the game. The gym is a sea of motion and noise. Students dart in all directions, chasing or dodging the ball. There are squeals, yells, laughter, pounding sneakers and balls rebounding off walls and bodies. Several girls on each team huddle on their respective endlines as far from the action as possible. A loose ball rolls into one of these groups. A girl bends down and picks it up. She stands holding it. A boy runs up to her, holds his hands out, and yells at her, “Give it here.” She tosses him the ball and returns to the huddle.

The right fullback on the pinney team spent the entire class alone. She came out to the field by herself. The teacher assigned her to play fullback. She stood in approximately the same spot on the field all period; holding her stick in her right hand. The rest of the students played around her as if she was a part of the field. No one, student or teacher, spoke to her after the game began. At the end of the class, she walked back to the building alone, dragging her stick behind her.

**Femme Fatales**

Blatant noninvolvement characterized the participation of femme fatales. They were low, average, or high skilled players, but their interest in the game was consistently low. They frequently presented discipline problems by not dressing or by being off task. They played as if they thought the game, the teacher, and physical education were all a waste of time—laughing and making fun of other students and saying “This is stupid.” Femme fatales were very concerned about their physical appearance and the impressions they were making on the boys.

Two girls enter the gym late. They are dressed in street clothes. The rest of the class is sitting on the bleachers for attendance. The teacher stops taking attendance and stares at them. He says, “You’re late. Where’s your uniform?” “I forgot it,” replies one. “Me too,” says the other. The teacher says, “I’ll see you both after school.” Both girls stare silently at the teacher. All during class they sit on the sidelines comparing makeup and laughing at boys in the class. They tease a short overweight boy as he waits to sub into a game, “I love you. Will you marry me?” They giggle.

The class is playing a soccer game. The score is close and it’s near the end of the period. Most students are involved in the game; yelling for their team and following the play. The ball has been in one end of the field for quite awhile. The two fullbacks on the attacking team stand idly on their 25-yard line. They take turns mimicking their classmates’ enthusiastic involvement and laughing at each other’s imitations. “Look at John. He goes...” (she imitates a teammate who fell going after the ball). Her friend laughs. One of them calls to the teacher, “Isn’t it time to go in yet?”

**System Beaters**

The teachers added this style to the list when reacting to the five researcher-identified styles. System beaters were usually absent. They always seemed to find a “legal” way to get out of physical education class with notes from parents, doctors, the school
nurse, other teachers, or with special programs outside the gym that required their presence during physical education class. One teacher said,

Those are the ones that really get me. They always manage to find a way to get out of class that’s legal. You can’t do anything about it. It’s a note from home, or the doctor, or special programming. There’s nothing I can do.

During informal discussions with the teachers between classes, they all verified the styles of participation as an accurate representation of different girls in their team sport classes. For instance, “I have a swimming class full of femme fatales. I can’t get any of them in the water. They don’t want their hair wet.” One teacher was able to read his roll book for one team sport class and label each girl in the class according to the participation typology. Most of the girls in the class were JV players, cheerleaders, or lost souls. There were fewer athletes, femme fatales, or system beaters.

**Nonassertive Sport Behavior Among Females**

Observations revealed that nonassertiveness was typical, in varying degrees, of JV players, cheerleaders, and lost souls. Since these three participation styles characterized most of the girls observed, analysis of their nonassertive behavior can provide a more in-depth description of participation for most girls in the team sport classes. Four categories of nonassertive sport behavior were identified for girls in the observed classes: (a) giving up, (b) giving away, (c) hanging back, and (d) acquiescing. The following descriptions and vignettes from field notes illustrate each category of nonassertive sport behavior.

**Giving Up**

Examples of nonassertive behavior in this category include saying, “I can’t,” without trying, trying a skill only once and not succeeding, trying a skill half-heartedly, or laughing at one’s own mistakes. Giving up also includes never complaining about not touching the ball in a game, being ignored by teammates, or being assigned to peripheral positions. Asking for more boys to make a team stronger is also an example of giving up. Another example is never pushing physical limits by running really fast or diving or jumping for a ball.

The teacher is helping a girl learn to trap the soccer ball with her foot. She keeps saying, “I can’t.” The teacher says, “You haven’t tried.” He rolls the ball to her and she traps it. The teacher says, “See?” She says, “I can’t.”

**Giving Away**

Examples of this category include passing to boys immediately upon getting the ball, rarely taking a shot on goal when in a position to do so, or declining the opportunity to run for a touchdown, go out for a pass, or play a high interaction position. Other examples are volunteering to substitute or asking a boy to take one’s play (out of bounds, free hit, or penalty kick).

During a field hockey game the girl fullback is supposed to take a free hit. She asks the other fullback, a boy, to take the hit for her.
**Hanging Back**

This form of nonassertive behavior includes hesitant attempts to get a loose ball, guard an opponent, take a shot on goal, or run for a pass. Hanging back also includes skipping turns in a drill or team position rotation to avoid contact with the ball.

During a soccer dribbling drill a girl keeps slipping to the back of the line. She never takes a turn at the skill. No one says anything about this. Other students just cut in front of her to take their turns.

**Acquiescing**

This category includes girls’ nonassertive interactions with boys during team sport activities. Allowing boys to butt in line during drills, poach passes, take one’s out-of-bounds play, dominate high interaction positions, or ignore her when she is open for a pass are examples of acquiescing. This category also includes silently enduring boys’ teasing, poking, name calling, and criticism of game play. Finally, following boys’ orders about what positions to play, when to switch positions, and what to do in general are further examples of acquiescing.

During a speedball game, the fullbacks on one team are a boy and a girl. The boy is playing both of their positions. The teacher calls to the boy, “Dick, what side of the field are you on?” He replies, “The other side.” The teacher says, “Let Mary take those.” Dick says, “Well, she just stands there.” The teacher says, “Give her a chance.” After the teacher leaves, Dick says to Mary, “You go over to that side.” Mary goes over to the other side of the field.

These nonassertive behaviors were most characteristic of the JV players, cheerleaders, and lost souls. Athletes rarely exhibited these behaviors. The femme fatales were much more defiant in their rejection of the entire physical education context so that they appeared more nonconcerned than nonassertive. The system beaters, of course, were not in class regularly enough to be observed.

Since JV players, cheerleaders, and lost souls constituted a majority of the girls in the classes observed, and because the nonassertive behaviors were most characteristic of those girls, it is accurate to say that nonassertive sport behavior was typical for most girls in the team sport activities observed.

The teachers and researcher observed a positive relationship between a girl’s skill level in the team sport and her assertive behavior in the game. The higher her skill level, the more assertive she tended to be. The athletes were the most assertive in their game play and in their interactions with boys. Rather than give up, give away, hang back, or acquiesce, athletes would persist in chasing a ball, keep the ball to shoot on goal themselves, get into the center of game activity, or defend themselves when teased or criticized by other students.

Referring to the typology, one of the teachers said, “The common thing in all of these is skill. It’s a big factor. So many girls don’t think they can. The athletes will take care of themselves, but teachers have to deal with these other kids.” The following excerpts from field notes describe high skilled girls engaging in assertive behavior.

During a flag football game, a girl makes an incomplete pass. Her male receiver yells, “You call that a pass?” She replies, “Who do you think I am, Terry Bradshaw?”

**Relevant Image**

(Hanging Back: This form of nonassertive behavior includes hesitant attempts to get a loose ball, guard an opponent, take a shot on goal, or run for a pass. Hanging back also includes skipping turns in a drill or team position rotation to avoid contact with the ball. Acquiescing: This category includes girls’ nonassertive interactions with boys during team sport activities. Allowing boys to butt in line during drills, poach passes, take one’s out-of-bounds play, dominate high interaction positions, or ignore her when she is open for a pass are examples of acquiescing. This category also includes silently enduring boys’ teasing, poking, name calling, and criticism of game play. Finally, following boys’ orders about what positions to play, when to switch positions, and what to do in general are further examples of acquiescing.)
He says, "You can't pass." She replies, "I can too. You have to get open, too."
He says, "I'm quarterback next time. I should have been today." She replies, "You're not good enough to be quarterback. You only got one touchdown."

In a soccer game the ball goes out over the sideline. The girl halfback runs to take the throw-in. A male teammate runs up to her and calls her name, motioning for her to let him take the throw-in. She shakes her head and keeps the ball. He says "OK" and moves to receive the throw-in. She throws the ball to another player.

Less skilled girls in the same or similar situations were much more likely to give up, give away, hang back, or acquiesce. Consequently, the relationship between skill in the sport and assertive behavior among girls encouraged more of the same. Girls did not play assertively unless they were skilled. Thus, lower skilled girls had fewer chances to practice skills and understand strategies. This decreased their opportunity to become more skilled, which led to more nonassertive behavior, and so on.

In summary, six categories of female participation in middle school team sports classes were identified. In addition, four types of nonassertive sport behavior characteristic of a majority of the girls in the classes were described. The relationship between skill in the team sport and assertive sport behavior among the girls was such that only high skilled girls played assertively. Consequently, low skilled girls got less practice, their skill remained low, and they continued to play nonassertively.

Discussion of Results

One should keep several contextual factors in mind when considering the participation styles identified in this study. First, the activity unit—team sports—probably affected the participation styles displayed by girls in the classes. In the community of North Ridge, there are out-of-school team sport programs in football and soccer. Only boys chose to participate in these programs. Consequently, the skill and experience that most girls have in team sports comes only from their twice-a-week, 45-minute physical education classes. This probably affected both the skill and interest exhibited by girls in the classes.

Some out-of-school gymnastics programs primarily attract girls. During the gymnastics unit the increased skill and interest displayed by more girls was readily observed (Griffin, 1983). Consequently, the participation styles identified in team sports would not necessarily apply to the same girls in other activity units.

Second, North Ridge is a white, middle-class, semirural community. The girls' participation in team sports was probably affected by these factors. If this study had been conducted in another community—a multi-racial, working-class, urban community, for example, perhaps the participation styles for girls would have been different.

Third, the age of the girls observed probably affected the participation styles identified. Sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade girls often behave in ways that are quite different from younger or older girls. In fact, the same girl might participate in one style in the sixth grade and display an entirely different style in the seventh or eighth grades. More refined differences in participation might be observable if sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade girls were contrasted.

Fourth, a girl’s participation in team sports can be affected by teachers and other students. Whether she was ignored, ridiculed, encouraged, included in game interactions, or praised by others probably had an effect on the style of participation she chose. How boys in the classes participated probably had some effect on how girls participated. Another
research report (Griffin, 1984) describes the participation styles of boys in the team sport class observed.

Conclusion

Though it is not within the scope of qualitative research to generalize findings to gyms and playing fields beyond those under study, readers can identify for themselves the girls’ participation patterns that they recognize in their own teaching situations. For teachers or teacher educators who can nod their heads as they read descriptions of athletes, JV players, cheerleaders, lost souls, femme fatales, and system beaters, this report might provide fresh insight into the nature of participation in team sport classes. Rather than assume that all girls participate in similar ways, teachers can observe the different styles of participation exhibited by girls in team sports. For teachers or teacher educators who are familiar with the nonassertive sport behavior described (giving up, giving away, hanging back, and acquiescing), this report may help clarify the relationship between this behavior and skill in team sports. This relationship reinforces the importance of teaching skills in physical education as a potential means to help nonassertive girls learn to be more assertive in team sports.

Though busy teachers often have good reason to complain that there is not time to accomplish all they would like to in their classes, observing students carefully to identify participation patterns can be an important step toward helping each student learn and enjoy more activities in physical education.

References