We Hate Gym: Student Alienation From Physical Education

Teresa B. Carlson
The University of Queensland

Although student attitudes toward physical education vary, the majority (usually 80% or more) of students enjoy the subject (Butcher, 1982; Carlson, 1993, 1994; Coe, 1984; Rice, 1988; Williams & Nelson, 1983). Any student apathy in physical education, however, may seem surprising if one considers that the subject includes sports, games, and physical activities, all of which hold an important place in the lives of many children and adolescents. Further, unlike many subjects taught in school, physical education often includes a substantial component of active play, which, in its individual and social forms, holds a powerful attraction for young people. Considering these factors, research suggesting that up to 20% of children are not enjoying the subject is disturbing. In addition, there are indications that a growing percentage of students find physical education less relevant and less enjoyable (Tinning & Fitzclarance, 1992). This study investigated the feelings and actions of students identified as alienated from physical education.

Following the definition of alienation commonly used in the social sciences, the persistent negative feelings experienced by students may be seen as having their origins in one or several of three affective states: meaninglessness, powerlessness, and isolation (Calabrese, 1984; Dean, 1961; Seeman, 1959). Although such psychological constructs do not always transfer readily across all social contexts, it is possible to identify at least some aspects of physical education class to which they apply. For instance, some students see no purpose for the subject in their lives (meaninglessness). This aspect will be referred to as "lack of personal meaning." Other students feel that they have no control over what will happen in the gymnasium (powerlessness). This dimension will be called "lack of control." Others feel alone, they withdraw, and feel isolated from their peers in physical education class, either socially or emotionally. The traditional word "isolation" has been retained to describe this feeling.

Drawing on these constructs, and for the purpose of this paper, alienation is defined as the persistent negative feelings some students associate with actively aversive or insufficiently meaningful situations (which students often label with the all-purpose adjective boring) in the gymnasium setting. If students believe they cannot control or change the situation, the circumstances may lead them to withdraw emotionally, mentally, or physically from physical education class—and in that sense they can be said to be alienated.

According to the literature, several factors may contribute to alienation from physical education. For instance, boredom, repetition, and lack of meaningful work (Fox & Biddle, 1988; Rice, 1988; Wilson, 1968) have been cited as being instrumental in producing dislike of the subject. Teacher behaviors, also, may contribute to student alienation (Allison, Pissanos, & Sakola, 1990; Carlson, 1994; Figley, 1985; Luke & Sinclair, 1991). In addition,
studies suggest that the competitive class environment results in some students disliking physical education—or some aspects of it (Portman, 1992; Robinson, 1990). Further, problems related to the interaction between self-concept, self-esteem, and the social context of physical education classes have been cited as yet another factor in student dislike of physical education (Carlson, 1994; Figley, 1985; Fox, 1988; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Macintosh & Albinson, 1982).

Most of these alienated students would rather be anywhere other than physical education class. Their noninvolvement and lack of interest are often sources of frustration to teachers who frequently expend disproportional amounts of time to involve these alienated students—often unsuccessfully. The major purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of alienated students to learn the reasons these students give for their alienation. Further, evidence was sought to support or reject the hypothesis that the three dimensions of alienation proposed for this setting (that is, lack of personal meaning, lack of control, and isolation) are experienced by some students. Finally, the relationship between student behavior and student alienation from physical education class was investigated.

Methods

Phases of the Study

The study involved four phases: phenomenological interviews, teacher interviews, a survey, and student interviews. Each phase will be examined in turn.

Phase 1: Phenomenological in-depth interviews. The first phase consisted of the phenomenological in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 1991) of two junior high students who identified themselves as disliking physical education. These interviews focused on the participants’ feelings and beliefs about the subject. This technique has rarely been used on adolescents, and I adopted this method to obtain a comprehensive story from the participants about their experiences. This information assisted greatly in the design of the structured student interviews (Phase 4).

Phase 2: Teacher interviews. The second phase consisted of structured, open-ended interviews with four experienced middle and high school teachers (two male and two female teachers with an average of 23 years teaching experience). The interview script concentrated on how these teachers recognized, coped with, and felt about students they perceived as alienated from their classes.

Phase 3: Survey. During Phase 3, a survey was designed (see Appendix A), making use of information gathered from the first two phases. The survey contained a series of questions that related to each of the three hypothesized dimensions (lack of personal meaning, lack of control, and isolation). For instance, an example of an item designed to examine the feeling of isolation stated, “I don’t feel part of gym class.” A Likert scale was used, with a range of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A test–retest method was used with one class (21 students) with a correlation of .81.

A simple scoring system was devised to provide a single quantitative score for the degree of alienation felt by students. Student responses were coded as either indicative of alienation and given a score of 1, or as not indicative of alienation and given a score of 0. The total score was an indication of the relative degree to which students gave answers across the three dimensions that might reasonably be thought to correspond to a feeling of alienation. This instrument was completed by students in six different grade levels in the same combined middle and secondary school (N = 105). I coded all responses.

Phase 4: Student interviews. The fourth phase utilized the results from the survey to identify 6 more students as alienated from physical education classes. These students
were individually interviewed using a structured, open-ended format. Unfortunately, only one boy placed in the alienation category agreed to be interviewed, so most of the interview data are presented from the girls’ perspectives. The interview data were transcribed and coded. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), units were included or rejected and categories or themes identified.

Participants

Participants from two schools were involved in this study. The students phenomenologically interviewed in Phase 1 were students at Forest Junior High School. (Pseudonyms are used for the schools and all participants.) Two of the interviewed teachers taught at this large suburban junior high school (population = 1,000) situated in New England. The physical education program consisted of traditional sports and games. At the time of the interviews, the students were involved in a games unit.

The 105 surveyed students and the 6 participants in the structured interviews attended River Regional, a combined middle and high school (population = 740). Two teachers from this site were also interviewed. The physical education program for the high school students at River included electives and offered many nontraditional activities such as low and high adventure, biking, cross-country skiing, walking, and African dance. The middle school program at River was more traditional in terms of content and operation. At the time of the survey, students were involved in a variety of units, including folk dance (Grade 8), volleyball (Grades 7 and 10–12), and yoga (Grades 10–12). Class size varied depending on the activity. The elective system resulted in very few whole classes in the upper grades being surveyed. Sixty-eight percent of the students surveyed were in 7th to 9th grade.

All of the interviewed participants were of average weight and height, and most were involved with at least one physical activity outside of school. Further, the brief profiles of interviewed students (see Appendix B) indicate that several of the participants reported they possessed average or higher skill level.

Results

Survey Results

The survey results were taken from the 105 usable surveys forms (38 males, 67 females). The discrepancy between male and female numbers was the result of the electives being taught at the time and availability of conducting research with certain classes. Twenty-two students (21% of the total population) indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the first statement, “I enjoy gym class.” These students will be referred to as the alienated group. Of the 22 students in the this group, 7 were male (18% of total males), and 15 were female (22% of total females). Half of the 22 alienated students indicated they enjoyed school. In comparison, nearly three quarters of the total sample made that positive assessment. These figures suggest that some of those alienated in the gymnasium also were alienated from school in general. Finally, 66% (14) of the alienated students indicated that they were average or below average in physical skill, as opposed to 44% from the full sample who categorized themselves that way.

Lack of Personal Meaning

Eight survey statements were designed to test whether physical education was of any personal importance to the students. Statistically, the aggregated mean of the alienated group was significantly different from that of the total group ($p < .01$). This result was supported by the qualitative data from interviews. When all the interview data were
examined, the category that contained student comments classified as indicating “no personal meaning” contained the largest number of units in any of the analytic categories. One example included Kathy retorting sarcastically,

I don’t understand why you think it [physical education] will make a difference later in your life ’cause what am I going to do? I am in the office, and I can shoot a wad a paper into the waste basket. It is not going to do me any good later on.

Renee, when asked what she had learned in physical education class, thought for a while and said, “Nothing that I can think of. Basically I have learned plenty of games, but that is not beneficial.” The words of these two participants were echoed in various ways by virtually all of the alienated students.

Lack of Control

Analysis of the 10 survey responses dealing with lack of control revealed no significant difference between the aggregated mean of the alienated students and that of the full sample. The survey results suggest that all students would like to be given more control and more choice. For instance, despite the elective system at River Regional, 81% of those surveyed felt that they would like to have more choice of the activities in which they participate. (This percentage should be considered in conjunction with the fact that 68% of the surveyed students were in seventh to ninth grade.)

Although the survey results indicate that no significant difference between the two groups exists, it may be useful to examine the reasons the alienated students gave for their feelings of lack of control. As only the alienated group were interviewed, there is no comparative interview data with nonalienated students.

Not surprisingly, ability appeared to play a part in increasing some students’ feelings of alienation. Eight students in the alienated group (36%) indicated that they were below average in sporting ability, while seven indicated they were average (32%). When questioned, however, several of the latter admitted feeling uncomfortable in many ball sports. Most of the students who indicated that they were low skilled believed they had little or no control over this belief. They believed that if they were “good in sports” they would enjoy physical education class more. They were resigned, however, to a condition described as “not good at sports,” which could not be influenced by practice, effort, or instruction. For them, being competent in physical education was something one simply had or did not have as a personal characteristic. Rilla’s words illustrated this: “I am not that great with gym because I don’t develop the ability to do better in sports.”

A further aspect over which students reported experiencing a clearly painful lack of control was the fact that many classes in the gymnasium required that they be “on display.” Softball was almost universally disliked for that reason. May described her experience: “I hate softball. . . . I didn’t like batting . . . because . . . everyone is waiting for you . . . and everyone is watching you.”

The competitive nature of the class was often identified as a deterrent to participation and enjoyment by the interviewed students. Rilla illustrated this when she said, “The teachers always seem to make you compete against other people. It just doesn’t make me feel good. I just want to cooperate with people.” From ninth grade onwards, River Regional did offer an elective system, and this was mentioned favorably by many students. Less competitive activities, such as aerobics, yoga, walking, coordination, and adventure activities were seen by most participants as more enjoyable and less stressful than the more traditional sports-based curriculum. In fact, some of the interviewed participants in upper grades at River suggested that the increased choice of activities did reduce their negative feelings towards physical education.
Isolation

The student responses to the 10 survey questions dealing with feelings of isolation revealed no significant difference between the aggregated mean of the scores for the alienated students and that of the full sample. On close scrutiny of individual surveys, however, it became apparent that a subgroup of 7 students from the alienated group had reported a strong sense of separation from their peers. This aspect of alienation appeared almost universally among the students who identified themselves as lower skilled. A similar finding emerged when the interview transcripts of these students were analyzed.

Kathy explained how she felt in team sports: "If I was better at the sport I would participate more because I wouldn’t be afraid to do it. . . . I am afraid that I am going to mess up and that everyone is going to laugh at me." May summed up this feeling of isolation in direct, poignant terms: "I guess because I don’t feel that I am a part of gym. I feel left out, not really a part of that team feeling."

As reported, the survey results showed no significant differences between the alienated group and the whole group in the lack of control and isolation dimensions. The interview data suggest that lack of control was a concern held by most surveyed students. In future research, the inclusion of interviews with nonalienated students would be useful to try to ascertain if student concerns with respect to the dimension of lack of control were similar, regardless of students’ affiliation to the subject.

The small sample of students from the alienated group who responded that they felt isolation also indicated that they considered themselves low skilled. A hypothesis arising from these data is that, given a larger survey pool, a correlation between these two variables may exist. At present, however, only the dimension "lack of meaning" has been demonstrated as statistically different for the identified alienation students.

Action Strategies

The 8 interviewed students reported certain strategies they used as responses to the aversive experiences in physical education. I have titled these (a) hiding disillusions, (b) being a spectator, (c) becoming wallflowers, (d) faking, and (e) self-banishment.

Hiding Disillusions. The students who used the strategy of hiding their disillusions believed they participated in class without any noticeable decline in external displays of enthusiasm. In the interviews, however, they made clear that they would prefer to withdraw from physical education—if they were free to do so without penalty. An example of this includes a statement by Kathy: "I normally get As and Bs. . . . My teacher would say, 'she is a good kid.' . . . They probably think that [I like gym] but they don’t know the real me."

Students in this category find the consequences for nonparticipation too high, or the rewards for faking willing participation too great, to reveal their true feeling about physical education. For instance, Renee stated,

I never just skipped it [physical education class]. I felt like it at times because it was such a pain. It wasn’t like we were really learning something, and we just had to change and get all hot, but I wanted to be on the honor roll.

This quotation suggests the complexity of some alienation by referring to aversive class factors such as changing, dissatisfaction with the content of the curriculum, and the extrinsic reward—the honor roll—that encourages Renee to continue to hide how she really feels.

Being a Spectator. The second identified behavior is the student who does not participate. One teacher described them as follows: "They will be spectators. They arrive
on a daily basis and sit, wherever that place might be." Marie described her actions for many physical education classes: "You'd see me sitting on the bench. I don't change."

Becoming Wallflowers. The wallflower strategy is described by a teacher at Forest Junior High:

There is also a category of people who are a little bit more difficult to identify. These are the ones that dress daily, but do not participate or their participation is, at the most, minimum. . . . In other words they come dressed and prepared, but when the action begins, their level of activity is almost negligible.

Julie confirmed this analysis perfectly: "Sometimes I just stood around. . . . I would just blend into the background and let everybody else get the ball." This behavior is similar to that displayed by the "competent bystander" identified by Tousignant (1982).

Faking. When faking, students reported taking some initiative to avoid unpleasant situations. Faking could include pretending to participate or faking illness or injuries. Pretending to participate is illustrated by Marie who stated, "I just throw the ball anywhere just to get away to the end of the line from where we have to shoot." She admitted that she could do better, but she sacrificed potential success to get to the end of the line quickly. Griffin (1984) identified students she called cheerleaders who adopted some similar behaviors.

Marie talked about how she sometimes gets out of class: "I lie. I tell them that I forget my clothes or I am sick. "Cause if I say that I don't feel like playing, then I am afraid that they will hate me or something." Nancy explained how she used illness to avoid participation:

So the teacher went to check with the nurse and asked her about my asthma, and she said, "It says that you can." And I said that I really can't, I just can't because of my asthma, and so she just let me sit out [laughs].

Pretending to be busy is another faking strategy, one identified by a male participant, Calvin, who explained:

Just make yourself look busy even if you are not doing anything. . . . I worked for construction this summer, and that is one of the things you learn how to do . . . even if it is taking this pile of dirt over here and then push it back the other way. . . . Same thing in gym, sometimes.

Self-Banishment. The final category of response identified by alienated students was nonattendance or self-banishment. A similar category, the system beaters, was identified by Griffin (1984). Kathy was the only student to admit to missing gym entirely. In elementary school she used illness to avoid coming to school: "Whenever I was sick it was like 'Is it gym day?' and if it wasn't I would go to school so I could be sick the day it was gym." Although I did not interview any student who admitted to "cutting" physical education class, this action was alluded to by teachers and students at the middle school. Renee stated, "The only way to fail gym is if you don't go. I know a lot of people who don't but I always went. My sister won't go to gym, so she would get zeros every day."

Physical Education Alienation–Nonalienation Model

Based on the foregoing analysis of the data from this exploratory study, a model was constructed to help explain the alienation process in the gymnasium (Figure 1). This model was adapted from Finn’s (1989) participation–identification model.
The extrinsic and intrinsic factors listed at the top of the model are factors that are known to have some impact on students' feelings towards physical education. The four extrinsic factors listed include teacher personalities and behaviors, the curriculum, class environment, and out-of-school influences. For example, Julie, generally an A student, explained how her parents (an extrinsic influence) affect her outlook by describing what happened when she got a C for physical education:

My mother looked at it and said gym is a waste of time and that she didn’t care what I get in it as long as I pass. My dad doesn’t care as long as I concentrate on academic subjects.

Words of the same effect were repeated during interviews by many of the alienated students.

The intrinsic factors include physical ability, self-esteem, and the student’s belief about what physical education should be. The last item appeared to involve beliefs that, in some instances, were absorbed from family members and peers and in other instances, were reflections of a student’s own vision of a benign physical education. Renee’s words illustrate how her values created expectations for physical education—which she came to feel were violated:
I thought the games were boring and monotonous, and they didn’t really seem like a gym class. I would have liked to exercise more and stuff, and we didn’t learn anything about eating right and dieting and stuff. I was just really disappointed. I didn’t really expect gym at junior high to be that great, but I just thought it should be.

Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors combine to yield the meaning classes have for students. This meaning leads down one of two paths. If physical education class makes sense to students (i.e., if the subject is perceived as having positive value for them personally), they take the nonalienation path. The alternate path is taken when students find physical education does not fill a need in their lives. A quotation from May confirms that the cycle, for her at least, begins with personal meaning:

Sometimes I might change and just mope around and not really do what they want me to do, or I might just sit down and say, “Don’t bug me, I don’t want to do this. It is not worth it,” and I get this really negative attitude. . . . Sometimes I get really mad at myself that I don’t try harder, but then I think about it, and I think what is important to me? Being good at basketball and softball, is that important to me? And no it is not!

A quotation from Julie illustrates the reciprocal relationship between meaning and response: “If I was better at gym, I might like it more, but then I would have to be more interested in gym to get better at it. I would have to want to get better.” Julie points out that her success in physical education is dependent on the interest and desire to get better. She believes that “it is great for people who are into sports and things like that,” just not for her.

As illustrated in the quotations from May and Julie, students who do not see the use for physical education may find themselves alienated by the requirement that they participate. Some students in this study reported that they sometimes refused to participate, while the majority indicated that they used faking strategies to avoid confrontations with teachers. Regardless of their adopted behaviors, students felt a lack of affinity with the subject. A subgroup, particularly the lower skilled students, felt isolated from their peers. Regardless of their skill level, the students in the alienation cycle felt that they did not have control over certain aspects of the class. Although most surveyed students indicated that they would have liked more control, the alienated students may feel that they lack control. This feeling, combined with the lack of personal meaning, may intensify negative aspects of the subject, and may lead students to a sense of helplessness and discouragement, and eventually alienation from the subject. For instance, some students may feel that they cannot succeed. May’s words illustrated this sentiment:

I got really frustrated. It seemed like everyone else knew how to play the game, and I didn’t. . . . I don’t have the skills and techniques that the people who have played sports have. . . . I would try, but not very hard. If I was better at the sport I would participate more, because I wouldn’t be afraid to do it. [I’m afraid] that if I screw up, people are going to get on my case about it.

Alienation, like its opposite counterpart of positive attraction, exists as a result of a complex equation. For example, students who have decided physical education has personal meaning for them might ignore certain negative aspects of particular classes and continue to feel well disposed toward the subject in general. Alternatively, students who have had aversive experiences in the past may find it hard to break away from negative perceptions, even when conditions improve. The dotted arrow that links “no success” on the nonalienation side of the model to “feeling of lack of control” on the alienation side indicates that
those who have little or no success eventually may come to believe that achievement simply is beyond their control, and they may join the other cycle.

The model is an attempt to capture the main components that contribute to alienation from physical education, and to display some of their interrelations. Improved understanding of the factors that students use in assigning meaning to their physical education experiences will allow teachers and researchers to go beyond what is obvious—that some students hate gym. What may be possible is to envision a form of physical education that includes all and alienates none.

References


Appendix A

The Physical Education Survey

Each question was followed by a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for students to code each response. The category in which each statement was placed is indicated beside each question: lack of meaning (LOM), lack of control (LOC), and isolation (I). The items in the scale that are followed by an R are reverse scored. The first statement ("I love gym") was used to identify the students in the alienated group.

1. I love gym.
2. I think gym is boring and a waste of time.
3. We learn a lot of interesting and practical things in gym, things that I can use outside of school. (R)
4. If gym was not graded, I would put in lots of effort into class anyway. (R)
5. If gym was not required, I would still take it. (R)
6. I try to think of excuses to avoid gym (for instance, pretend I am ill or injured).
7. When I don’t feel like participating in gym, I don’t.
8. I feel bored in gym: We do the same activities every year (volleyball, basketball, softball, flag football, etc.).
9. I like learning sports and games. (R)
10. Gym isn’t really learning. It is just playing games.
11. If I was better at sports and games I would like gym better.
12. I wish I had more choice in what we do in gym.
13. I enjoy gym when we play competitive sports and play hard to win. (R)
14. I dislike the lack of time allowed between classes to change clothes and go to the next class on time looking OK.
15. I don’t mind changing clothes for gym class. (R)
16. I dislike the locker room where we change clothes.
17. I don’t mind getting hot, sweaty, or dirty, as I do at times in gym. (R)
18. I get sore from some activities in gym, and I don’t like that.
19. I like fitness testing and fitness activities. (R)
20. Gym is a waste of time, because I don’t get enough time or enough coaching to really get good at any activity.
21. I prefer to sit on the bleachers during gym class.
22. Other students like having me on their team. (R)
23. I like gym because I enjoy working with other students. (R)
24. I don’t feel a part of gym class.
25. I am glad when no one passes me the ball or includes me in the game; I don’t want to be involved.
26. I feel happy in gym. I get to play on teams with my friends. (R)
27. I feel frustrated in gym because the teacher never talks to me or gives me help to get better.
28. I don’t like gym because other students laugh at me or give me a hard time.
29. I like my gym teacher. (R)
30. The gym teacher spends as much time with me, as she/he does with any other student. (R)

Appendix B

Brief Profile of Participants Identified as Alienated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Sports ability</th>
<th>Attitude toward school</th>
<th>Grades in PE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Average to good</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>A or B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Forest)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>D or F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Forest)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(River)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rilla</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(River)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>usually positive</td>
<td>From B to F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(River)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>A or B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(River)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>B to C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(River)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>usually negative</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(River)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>