RESEARCH NOTE

Student Attitudes Towards Physical Education: A Multicultural Study

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If physical education is going to be responsive to the needs of each child, it should reflect the culture in which it is practiced. Students come to our classrooms with various backgrounds, reflecting differences in social, ethnic, and economic environments; individual and family values; demands and responsibilities placed on them; and exposure to physical education and sports programs. Children learn and respond to different values about the place of sport in society and their own role within that setting (Greendorfer, 1983).

While learners experience these personal changes, so do our schools. Our communities are marked for major changes in the coming century (Smith, 1991) as American society becomes more culturally diverse with an ever-increasing ethnic population. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 1995 the school age population will be composed of 30% ethnic minorities (Cooper, 1988).

Physical education programs are challenged by the needs of youth in a changing environment. Traditional curricula must integrate social change while discovering ways to motivate youth to develop life-long physical activity habits. Before this goal can be achieved we, as physical educators, must be conscious of how young people within various cultures perceive physical education and sport. This study was conducted to provide some insight into the attitudes of middle and high school youth toward physical education and sport from a multicultural perspective.

Procedures

Students in physical education classes in three urban communities known to have a high minority student population were surveyed in autumn of 1991. A 22-item questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete, was administered during physical education class by teachers.

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Items measuring attitude toward physical education were developed specifically for this study and were field tested on students of the same age and within the same grade level as the sample. Survey questions focused on student attitudes toward the goals of physical education, likes/dislikes about physical education, the importance of physical education to their overall education, values developed through physical education, and positive/negative experiences in physical education. A Likert-type scale with 5 responses ranging from definitely yes to definitely no was used for nine questions directed toward the goals of physical education and five questions identifying likes/dislikes of physical education. From a list of 12 activities frequently included in physical education curricula and 8 values developed through physical education, students were asked to identify those they felt were most and least important. Open-ended questions asked students to identify their favorite activity and positive/negative experiences they had encountered in physical education.

Both male and female teachers volunteered to survey their students, but several of the classes represented sex segregated classrooms skewing the sample toward girls. Surveys were analyzed for 366 students (80 boys, 286 girls), ranging in age from 11 to 19 years and Grades 6 through 12. Ethnic populations included 30 Asian Americans (3 boys, 27 girls), 35 African Americans (7 boys, 28 girls), 179 Hispanic Americans (45 boys, 134 girls), 113 Anglo-Americans (23 boys, 90 girls), and 6 students of mixed ethnic background (1 boy, 5 girls). Middle school youth represented 59% of the sample with 215 respondents; 151 respondents were from the high school level.

Subjects’ responses were tabulated according to means, ranges, frequencies, and percentages and were reported as a function of ethnic group, gender, and grade level. Open-ended questions were grouped and categorized by content.

**Results and Discussion**

Of the 366 subjects, 192 (52%) indicated that they participated in competitive sports with 79 (41%) being involved in school athletics (Table 1). An in-depth examination of the outlet for this competition revealed 57% of the African American students competed in church leagues, whereas 25% or less of the other ethnic groups participated through this outlet. Middle school students (64%) took part in competitive sports more frequently than their high school peers (46%), with the biggest difference being that middle school students tended to participate in school intramurals more often. Sixty-six percent of the boys and 48% of the girls reported competing in sports, with more males involved with city recreation leagues and private clubs.

One series of questions focused on what physical education should do for youth: improve fitness, teach team sport skills, playing team sports, individual sport skills, playing individual sports, dance skills, or recreational games. Over 50% of students surveyed indicated that physical education should teach fitness, sport skills, team and individual sports, and recreational games. Asian American students (71%) and boys (72%) most opposed learning dance skills. Fitness, as a learning goal, elicited a positive response from over 70% of the Asian, Hispanic, and Anglo-American youth, whereas only 60% of the African American youth agreed. Over 80% of the African American youth favored learning to play team sports.
Table 1 Percentage of Students Competing in Sports Based on Ethnic Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Hispanic American</th>
<th>Anglo-American</th>
<th>Mixed American</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School athletics</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School intramurals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City recreation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church league</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private club</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two noticeable ethnic differences surfaced when students indicated the most important reasons for liking physical education: 75% of Anglo-American youth indicated "being with friends" was a reason for liking physical education, yet only 57% of Asian American youth identified this motivation, and 73% of Hispanic American students were motivated by "becoming more fit."

When examining favorite and least favorite activities taught in physical education, no grade-level preferences surfaced. Volleyball was the only activity that reflected a gender preference with 84 of the 87 favored responses coming from girls. Asian American students report a greater liking for volleyball than other ethnic groups, with 47% of our Asian American sample indicating that it was their favorite activity, compared to less than 20% reported by the other ethnic groups. The activity most frequently disliked was running with 60 of the 366 (17%) students responding negatively. Ethnic differences revealed small, yet distinct differences: 17% of the Asian American students and 12% of the Anglo-American students disliked basketball, whereas no African American students disliked this activity; 12% of the African American students suggested that they did not like golf; and no Asian American students responded negatively to volleyball.

How important do these students perceive physical education relative to their total education? Of the 366 students, 211 (57%) reported physical education to be important, whereas 145 (43%) indicated it was of little or no importance. Data did not reveal any differences by gender or grade level on how this sample viewed overall importance. Hispanic American students (66%) attached more importance to physical education than their Anglo-American (54%), Asian American (48%), or African American (48%) counterparts.

How these students ranked 11 groupings of activities for their importance in physical education revealed interesting results (Table 2). Although no striking differences existed between boys and girls, high school youth ranked fitness
activities higher than the younger students (58% for high school and 27% for middle school). All ethnic groups reported fitness and team sports as the most important activities, yet several differences can be gleaned from the data. Students were asked to indicate the importance of attitudes, values, and character development outcomes frequently included in physical education program goals. Ethnic differences reported in Table 3 include over 50% of the Asian, Hispanic, and Anglo-American youth ranking the importance of sportsmanship; African American youth more frequently suggested the importance of teamwork; and Asian American youth did not consider competition with self or others to be important.
The final two questions on the survey asked students to share an experience they had in physical education that they liked/disliked or that made them feel good/bad. Responses were reviewed and categorized by content. Positive experiences spread across 16 categories including winning, success, performing well, being included, teamwork, participating, and having fun. Negative experiences resulted more frequently from specific aspects of the program. Having to participate in fitness exercises was noted by 74% of the respondents, and sport-related injuries resulting from participation ranked second (49%). Although no apparent gender differences appeared, 30% of the high school students indicated poor experiences with fitness exercises. Analysis by ethnic background revealed several distinct differences: 22% of the African American youth credited winning with their enjoyment of physical education; 22% of the Asian American students indicated that nothing happened in physical education that they really liked or that made them feel good, yet 25% of this group suggested that nothing happened to make them feel bad or dislike physical education either; more Hispanic Americans (18%) blamed injuries on their dislike of class; and 29% of the African American youth indicated that losing or having a poor performance was responsible for dislike or bad feelings about physical education.

Conclusions

Two limitations of this study should be noted: the sample did not reflect an even distribution among either ethnic groups or gender, with a high percentage of Hispanic Americans and girls. Despite this sampling problem, there is information to be gleaned from the data that may begin to draw our attention to the impact physical education programs have on our culturally diverse student population.

One conclusion we drew is that these students do believe that physical education is important to their overall education. This implies a desire to be actively involved in some type of exercise or activity program. Ferguson, Yesalis, Pomrehn, and Kirkpatrick (1989) suggested that physical education programs that develop students’ belief in their own ability and that encourage participation could influence their long-term exercise behaviors and the amount of enjoyment they derive from that participation. Our sample reflects more boys believing in their ability to perform when they ranked being “good at” physical education one reason for liking physical education. Hopefully, this is a trend that we are beginning to see change as girls and women are encouraged to participate and excel in sports. Our physical education curricula and programs must be designed to reflect the needs and interests of all adolescents to ensure that both boys and girls have opportunities to be successful in motor performance and thus develop a belief in their own ability.

Although not always supported, our data suggest that these students do like physical education for the fun and enjoyment they derive from it. It has been suggested that adults choose not to exercise or participate in physical activity because they did not have positive sport or physical education experiences in adolescence (Simons-Morton, O’Hara, Simons-Morton, & Parcel, 1987). If it is true that young people are more likely to participate now and in the future if they enjoy their experiences, then we would encourage physical education teachers to include “enjoyment” in their planning. We are not suggesting that fun, in and of itself, is an adequate goal for physical education, but if fun is a motivation
for participation, then it would be in our best interest to determine how to make learning in physical education more enjoyable. For example, sport skills practiced in isolation using only drills and exercises tend to become boring and tedious, suggesting that teachers might better develop realistic game-type learning experiences for skill practice and refinement.

A frequent and alarming trend noted throughout several sections of this survey were student responses reflecting a negative attitude toward fitness. Students indicated fitness and fitness activities as unimportant and among the most disliked activities. Although fitness tends to be a widely accepted goal for physical education, it is one of the most neglected aspects of the program relative to program and lesson planning. Physical education teachers must address fitness with a positive and motivational approach that demonstrates the outcomes and benefits of physical education. For example, African American youth in this study indicated a desire to learn team sports, yet did not want to become fit. They went on to suggest that their major dislike in physical education was losing or having a poor performance. Teachers need to make the connection between success in sports and individual fitness levels as a means of developing a positive attitude toward fitness. Designing fitness units, whether offered alone or in conjunction with a sport unit, should be challenging and rewarding for young people. Improved fitness and an appreciation for maintaining healthy lifestyles should be planned as an important outcome.

Middle school youth indicated more frequent involvement in competitive sports, which may be a result of the outlets available to them. The nature of school athletics in the middle school tends to be more open to participation with less cutting of players and fewer positions based on skill level. High school athletic programs involve a higher ability level and extended seasons where scheduling facilities for a wide variety of sports limit the space and time available for an intramural program. Despite this involvement in competitive sports, middle school youth tended to overlook the role of learning to perform with skill competency when they reported that they didn’t feel basic skills were important. These two factors should indicate to us that middle school youth want to play and participate in sports and that we need to design skill instruction that is more realistic yet that provides skill practice. Incorporating the sport education curriculum model (Siedentop, Mand, & Taggart, 1986) into middle school programs might be one solution. This model suggests that all youth are given the opportunity to experience the many benefits of sport competition and stresses development of knowledgeable, literate, and competent sport persons.

Although differences among subjects in this study were not remarkable, cultural differences that surfaced could provide useful information for teachers as they design instruction for different types of learners. For example, high school students are more receptive to fitness activity than middle school youth; African American youth compete most frequently with church leagues; Asian American youth and males are more opposed to dance; African American youth indicate the importance of teamwork, but not sportsmanship. Extending the sample may produce more pronounced differences and provide necessary knowledge on how to best motivate youth of all ages, grade levels, genders, and ethnic backgrounds. Curricular changes may be in order, instructional format may provide more success opportunities, and allowing learners to set their own goals on what is an appropriate challenge may be important.
Smith (1991) suggests that cultural differences influence many aspects of a child’s life, from sex-role socialization and self-concept to the rules and reasons for playing a game. She states, “Players bring expectations, goals, and norms of their cultural and social background to games; cultural differences show themselves as styles of play . . . and different game objectives such as winning or striving to play one’s best versus playing to share the fun with the rest of the team” (Smith, 1991, p. 41).

A result of these social and cultural differences are reflected in student effort, behavior, attitudes, sportsmanship, and teamwork, to name just a few. Although these factors outside the physical education setting influence attitudes toward exercise and physical activity, programs that are designed with cultural and social differences in mind could potentially influence students’ attitudes and subsequent exercise behavior. Ultimately, we owe it to all youth with whom we interact to be informed about their cultural experiences and sensitive to their self-identities that they bring with them into the gym and onto the playing field. Without this knowledge we will not adequately meet their needs relative to physical education, fitness, and sport.

References


