

Student Perceptions of School Physical Education Programs

Mens sana in corpore sano (a sound mind in a sound body)

All too often low-skilled children do not participate in sports and their home settings are not conducive to regular participation in physical activity. Thus, if they do not develop a true appreciation and enjoyment for physical activity through their physical education program, it does not seem likely that they will obtain it elsewhere.

Graham (2008).

School-based physical education (PE) programs remain controversial. Advocates for such programs are well-intentioned. Opponents continue to have concerns. What do students have to say? Some are positive; others feel negatively affected by such programs. Here's a sample of research findings on students' perceptions and a brief description of what advocates stress and schools do.

What Do Students Have to Say?

At the outset, it is important to note that all PE programs are not the same (e.g., differences arise due curriculum and instructional differences, resources differentials). And research samples vary markedly.

Positive Reports

Students expressing positive feelings about PE see it as a time to have fun, socialize with peers, and make new friends (Prusak, Davis, Pennington, & Wilkinson, 2014). Students reported feeling that PE was fun because of new and interesting games they learned to play; they said that these unique activities were those they would not have tried outside of PE. Learning how to do these activities inspired some to pursue them during recess and after school. And they said PE would be improved by introducing even more new activities. Those reporting positive experiences indicated their teachers were very motivating and efficiently taught students how to participate in activities. In a study that focused on gender differences, girls reporting positive PE experiences felt they were able to compete successfully with boys (Fisette, 2013).

Some Negatives

PE programs require peer interactions. These often are a source of problems. Concerns were raised about gender power relations. Reports from adolescent girls on their success and survival in physical education suggests that most view boys as superior and dominant in such programs (Fisette, 2013). To address this, the majority indicated trying to "blend in" and be "invisible" during PE; a few reported trying to be "noticed" by the boys by doing well in the activities (Fisette, 2013).

Students also make social comparisons in PE based on athletic abilities and physical attributes. For those who are viewed in a negative light by others and/or themselves, the impact on their emotional well-being can be harmful (Prusak et al., 2014). Some researchers suggest that when students feel inadequate about their PE performance they not only don't experience the positive outcomes of PE participation, they develop negative attitudes about self and others (including PE teachers) and manifest "learned helplessness" (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Some PE researchers see the adoption of defensive tactics (including avoidance and disengagement) as motivated by a desire to prevent "self-defeating" and embarrassing outcomes (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

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Countering the Negatives

Research suggests that key factors related to countering negative perceptions and outcomes are the degree of teacher credibility, how negative social comparisons are avoided and, more generally, enhancing students' motivation to participate. In terms of credibility, Ramos and McCullick (2015) found that students viewed teachers positively when they "looked like" a PE teacher, practiced what was preached, and were "awesome pedagogues." With respect to social comparison and motivation to participate, a robust research literature emphasizes (a) the importance of whether students define success in terms of how well a task is mastered rather than how well a student performs a task in comparison to their classmates (Lee, Carter, & Xiang, 1995; McBride, Bruene, & Yuanlong, 2007) and (b) the degree to which the activities are perceived as likely to enhance feelings of self-determination, competence, and positive relatedness to significant others as contrasted to threatening such feelings (Deci & Moller, 2005).

How do parents feel about PE for their children?

According to the 2009 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AFHG) parent survey:

- 92% think PE and health education are as important as English, math, and science
- 96% believe that physical activity can boost children's classroom performance
- 98% think their child's school should offer opportunities for physical activity throughout the day through PE, activity breaks, recess, or after school programs
- 4 out of 5 parents have undertaken one or more health-related activity or advocacy effort in their local schools

What Do Advocates Stress?

In general, the following are seen as the benefits of school-based PE programs:

- (1) PE promotes regular physical activity in students. Such activity is seen as
 - building and maintaining healthy bones and muscles
 - reducing the risk of developing obesity and chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and colon cancer
 - reducing feelings of depression and anxiety and promotes psychological well-being
 - improving students' academic performance, including achievement, behavior, concentration and attentiveness in the classroom (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).
- (2) Participating in physical activity can help with building social development by providing opportunities for self-expression, building self-confidence, social interaction, and integration (World Health Organization, 2016).
- (3) Physically active young people more readily adopt other healthy behaviors, such as avoidance of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use (World Health Organization, 2016).
- (4) PE can promote lifelong physical fitness as it can teach students what and how it means to be physically active. Research has provided evidence that youths and adolescents who are overweight are more likely to be overweight or obese as adults (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).
- (5) PE can provide unique opportunities for activity (Masurier & Corbin, 2006).
- (6) PE can help with self-management skills, which are skills that help with making

self-assessments, planning personal programs, setting goals, self-monitoring physical activity, making decisions, and solving problems, and these skills are supposed to help students overcome barriers to becoming physically active (Masurier & Corbin, 2006). PE programs that promote these self-management skills have been shown to have reduced sedentary behavior in students who have graduated high school (Dale & Corbin, 2000).

- (7) PE can expose students to a variety of activities, and in doing so, students will develop necessary motor skills and have the confidence to participate in these activities either in school or outside of school (Sherwood & Jeffery, 2000).

What Is the Current Picture of PE in the United States?

From the 2010 *Shape of the Nation Report: Status of Physical Education in the USA* by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (<http://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy/son/upload/Shape-of-the-Nation-2010-Final.pdf>):

- No federal law requires school-based PE to be provided
- There are no incentives to states or schools to offer PE programs
- States define guidelines and set requirements, but individual school districts are responsible for implementation
- School districts may choose to meet the minimum standards or may (and often do) go above and beyond basic recommendations
- A few states opt for "local control," delegating responsibility for education decisions – including health and PE – to school districts

Data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) indicates that, in 2013, less than half (48%) of high school students (64% of 9th-grade students but only 35% of 12th grade students) attended physical education classes in an average week.

According to the 2011 *Status of Physical Education in the USA* presented to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition (<http://www.fitness.gov/pdfs/status-of-pe-in-us.pdf>):

- 95% of high schools, 84% of middle schools, and 69% of elementary schools require PE
- 93% of districts for high school, 87% of districts for middle school, and 84% of districts for elementary schools require newly hired PE teachers to be certified
- 76% of states required or encouraged districts to follow standards or guidelines based on the National Standards for Physical Education
- 30.9% of high schools, 22.7% of middle schools, and 20.8% of elementary schools allowed students to be exempted from PE requirements

The Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/cspap.htm>

CSPAP is a "multi-component approach by which school districts and schools use all opportunities for students to be physically active, meet the nationally-recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day, and develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime" (CDC, 2015). It is the government's strategy for using schools to increase the physical activity levels of youth. The components of the program include staff involvement, physical activity during school (e.g. recess), physical activity before and after school (e.g. walking home and biking programs), and family and community engagement (e.g. recreational sports, family activities). PE is the core of this program. The government's recommendation is that all schools follow and understand CSPAP in order to successfully promote physical activity in its students.

Concluding Comments

Research has yet to clarify the long-term positive and negative effects of physical activity and PE programs (Hills, Dengel, & Lubans, 2015). Clearly, some students feel positive about PE, while others report negative emotional and social effects. Given immediate negative effects, greater attention needs to be paid to countering such an impact.

Schools provide a logical venue for promoting and educating students about the potential benefits of physical activity. In pursuing this agenda, PE programs must be designed in ways that ensure benefits are maximized and negatives are minimized. Enhancing intrinsic motivation for participating in physical exertion requires activities that result in students feeling self-determining, competent, and positively related to significant others as contrasted to activities that threaten such feelings.

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