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Authors	Tannehill, Deborah; Romar, Jan-Erik; O'Sullivan, Mary; England, Kathy; Rosenberg, Daniel
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Attitudes Toward Physical Education: Their Impact on How Physical Education Teachers Make Sense of Their Work

Deborah Tannehill, Jan-Erik Romar, Mary O'Sullivan
The Ohio State University

Kathy England
Western Illinois University

Daniel Rosenberg
The Ohio State University

The past several decades have seen a marked change in state and local laws requiring physical education within children's schooling. Typically, the trend has progressed from daily required physical education for all children to our current status of a limited number of hours per week or credits per year in physical education, generally with no minimum standards. Mitchell and Earls (1987) suggest that perceptions about the worth of physical education are determinants influencing the amount of time and resources allocated to our programs. In order to impact these attitudes and perceptions, physical educators must take an active role in developing sound programs and promoting them to students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

If physical education is to be accepted as worthwhile subject matter, it must demonstrate concrete outcomes that result from participating in physical education (Siedentop, Mand, & Taggart, 1986). This might be reflected in students having improved fitness levels, being able to play volleyball with more success, demonstrating fair play in a variety of sport settings, or what Mager (1973) referred to as displaying subject matter approach tendencies. In physical education, such approach tendencies would include wanting to participate regularly in physical activity. Several studies have suggested that young people are more likely to participate in programs that are perceived as "fun" and that meet their needs and interests (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987; Simons-Morton, O'Hara, Simons-Morton, & Parcel, 1987; Soudan & Everett, 1981). A second outcome draws from a critical pedagogy and relates to socially relevant goals in which critical reflection and self-awareness are encouraged: "The basic premise of proposals for critical pedagogy in physical education is that teachers and students should examine social issues related to sport and physical education and question taken-for-granted assumptions and practices" (Kirk & Tinning, 1990, p. 37).

Adolescence is a difficult time for many young people, marked by rapid changes in physical and social development. A number of developmental theories have been advanced to explain this period in a young person's life. While no

theory can fully explain the changes and behaviors that occur during adolescence, it should be kept in mind that adolescence differs among cultures, as well as among economic and social classes. Physical education programs must meet the needs of youth within a changing environment while discovering ways to motivate them to develop life-long exercise habits. Before this goal can be achieved physical educators must be conscious of how young people and their families perceive physical education and sport. Literature related to student and parent attitudes toward physical education and physical activity was reviewed.

Numerous studies focused on student attitudes have reported differing views of physical activity based on gender (Alderman, 1970; Kenyon, 1968; Petrie, 1971; Spreiter & Snyder, 1975) and level of education (Soudan & Everett, 1981; Weick, 1975). There are a limited number of studies focused on school-age students' attitudes toward physical education (Carlson, 1994; Earl & Stennett, 1987; Figley, 1985; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Rice, 1988; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993).

Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1993) reported that middle and high school students from different ethnic groups believed that physical education was important and fun and that it should improve their fitness levels. Though differences by gender, ethnic group, and school level were not remarkable, several were highlighted. A large number of students reported negative experiences in physical education related to fitness, although high school youth were most receptive to fitness activities, boys more frequently reported a belief in their own ability to perform in physical education, and African-American youth expressed the importance of teamwork in sport settings.

In a recent study, Carlson (1994) examined high school students' attitudes toward physical education, factors that influenced development of these attitudes, and the link between behavior and attitude. Factors found to impact attitude development were cultural (gender, idolizing elite sports figures, and body and mind distinctions), societal (family, media, sport and physical education experiences, skill level and perceptions of fitness, and peers), and school (teachers). Luke and Sinclair (1991) examined potential determinants of adolescent attitudes toward physical education. They identified five main factors that can be controlled by the teacher: curriculum content, teacher behavior, class atmosphere, student self-perceptions, and facilities.

Parental attitudes toward their children's education in general, and physical education in particular, can be viewed from three perspectives: broad-based surveys that elicit responses related to the quality and success parents perceive schools to achieve (Bingham, Haubrich, & White, 1989; Gallup, 1988; Gillam, 1986; Zakrajsek & Tannehill, 1993), school-parent relationships and the resulting effects on parental attitudes (Cattermole & Robinson, 1985; Epstein, 1986; Lareau, 1987; Wilson, Pentecoste, & Nelms, 1983), and developing positive parent attitudes toward physical education by actively promoting, communicating, and involving parents in school physical education programs (Buturusis, 1984; Wilcox, 1988).

Gillam (1986) noted that over 90% of respondents believed physical education to be relevant and useful in later life and that there was a need for physical education in school curricula. Data from a study examining parental views of physical education from a multicultural perspective revealed similar findings (Zakrajsek & Tannehill, 1993). Respondents believed that physical education

should be included in children's curriculum, should emphasize physical fitness, and should contribute to children's confidence and self-esteem through membership, cooperation, and teamwork. Further, the evidence suggests that the more actively involved parents are with teachers and administrators and the more links that are established between parents and school personnel, the more favorable parental attitudes become toward the quality of their children's education (Epstein, 1986; Lareau, 1987).

Purpose and Research Questions

The intent of this aspect of the high school study was to examine the attitudes of students and their parents toward the physical education programs in which they were involved. Though these data might serve to guide teachers in developing programs to meet the changing needs of the youth they serve, it was also hoped that understanding these attitudes might provide insight into yet another factor affecting how these teachers make sense of their work.

Research questions guiding the student questionnaire dealt with attitudes toward physical education related to what students think physical education should and actually does include, and their reactions to it; what students think the goals of physical education should be, and how important it is to their total education; and what experiences students had in physical education that influenced their attitudes toward the subject matter.

Parents were asked to share their attitudes toward their own physical education experiences, current exercise and activity levels, and perceptions related to their child's physical education program. Perceptions of their child's physical education program was subdivided to include (a) whether physical education should be required, (b) whether physical education should be graded or pass/fail, (c) the importance of physical education to a child's total education, (d) parental awareness of their child's physical education class, and (e) goals and outcomes of physical education. Parents were also queried about whether they might answer differently depending upon the gender of their child.

Subjects

Both 10th- and 11th-grade students who had taken or were currently taking a physical education class and their parents were the intended subjects.

A total of 314 questionnaires were completed by 125 boys (40%) and 189 girls (60%). This represented the entire student population, as students completed the questionnaire while the data collection team was present. Anglo-American youth represented 70% (219) of the sample, with 15% (47) African American, 8% (24) Asian American, and 1% (3) Hispanic American. Forty-seven percent (147) of our sample were 10th-grade students, 139 (45%) were 11th-grade students, and 73% (229) were 15 or 16 years of age. Over half of the students (56%) participate in after-school sports, with the most popular being cheerleading (16%); football and baseball (11% each); volleyball, basketball, and track and field (9% each); and soccer (8%).

Of the 314 parental questionnaires distributed, 139 were returned, representing a 44% return rate. Seventy-five percent (104) of the respondents were mothers and 25% (35) fathers. Most parents (65%) were in the 35-44 year age group.

Ethnic backgrounds represented were 80% (110) Anglo-American, 8% (11) African American, and 7% (10) Asian American. Fifty-seven percent of these parents had daughters in high school, 38% sons, and 6% a son and a daughter.

Procedures

The data-collection teams were asked to identify one 10th- and one 11th-grade classroom teacher who was willing to allow us to come into his or her class and have students complete the 30-minute student survey and distribute and collect the parent survey. This was done to allow students to reflect on physical education away from the gymnasium environment and the physical education teacher. After students completed their surveys, parent questionnaires were distributed to students and were to be returned the following week. In an attempt to encourage students to return the parent survey, we developed an incentive program that allowed every student who returned his or her parent survey to be eligible for a drawing at their school for two free passes to a local movie theater.

Instrument Development

Student Survey

A 42-item questionnaire (see technical manual), derived from theoretical attitude constructs (Byrd & Ross, 1991; Goodlad, 1984; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Rice, 1988; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993), was designed to provide information about student attitudes toward physical education. The constructs were used to organize sections of the questionnaire related to (a) demographics; (b) goals, aims, and values of physical education; (c) likes, dislikes, and importance of physical education; (d) importance of physical education for self relative to other subject areas; and (e) most and least important skills and activities in the physical education curriculum.

Demographic information included personal attributes of each student: gender, ethnic background, grade level, and age. In addition, students were asked to indicate if they participated on school athletic teams and the sport of choice.

The second section addressed the goals, aims, and values of the physical education program. Questions queried students on what physical education should do, actually does, and what they liked and disliked. A 5-point Likert scale forced students to respond from *definitely yes* (1) to *definitely no* (5) on 8 items in each of the four categories described above. An item analysis was performed on the 32 items (4 categories \times 8 questions). A series of closed-ended questions were designed to collect information about student perceptions on the importance of attitudes, values, and character development outcomes generally included within physical education curricula. Students were asked to select two most and least important affective outcomes of physical education.

The third part of the questionnaire elicited information about students' likes and dislikes in physical education through open-ended questions, such as favorite and least favorite physical activity offerings, whether they would elect physical education, and personal experiences in physical education class that were positive or negative.

In a fourth section, students were asked how important and how much they liked physical education in relation to other subjects on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *a lot more important* (1) to *a lot less important* (5). The final section of the questionnaire asked students to indicate the three most important and least important skills and activities taught in their physical education programs.

Parent Survey

A 36-item questionnaire (see technical manual), derived from theoretical attitude constructs (Bingham et al., 1989; Elam, 1990; Gallup, 1988; Gillam, 1986; Stewart & Green, 1987; Zakrajsek & Tannehill, 1992), was designed to provide information about parent attitudes toward secondary school physical education. The constructs were used to organize seven sets of questions.

The first set of questions collected demographic information about gender, education, age, ethnicity, type of employment, and number of children. This was followed by a set of questions designed to query parents about their own physical education experience and was composed of closed-ended and checklist-type questions. In addition, a 5-point Likert scale elicited information about things parents liked and disliked about the classes they had taken. The third set used a forced-choice checklist to provide a view of parental attitudes about their child's physical education experience in relation to program aims and goals. Parents were also asked to compare the importance of physical education to other school subjects by using a checklist ranging from *more important* (1) to *less important* (3).

To provide parental attitudes about the main purpose of physical education, overall attitudes toward the program, components they viewed as strengths or weaknesses, and contextual issues that impacted these programs (facilities and equipment), parents were asked to complete both a forced-choice and open-ended set of statements. Parents were asked to indicate the three most and least important activities that should be taught and to determine, from their viewpoint, the most important benefit of physical education. The final set of questions examined parents' views of the following: student involvement in after-school sports, the importance and benefits of school athletics, knowledge of practice sessions, perceptions of coaching practices, emphasis placed on winning, and their support for the coach and the child.

Validation of Surveys

Content validity of student and parent questionnaire items was established by including variables previously validated as important components of student attitudes toward physical education (Goodlad, 1984; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993) and of parental attitudes about physical education (Elam, 1990; Gallup, 1988; Stewart & Green, 1987; Zakrajsek & Tannehill, 1992). A panel of pedagogy experts reviewed the questionnaires for construct validity, and pilot tests were conducted using similar populations ($N = 60$ students and 6 parents) for clarity of language, meaning, and reliability. A test-retest procedure was used with an established minimum reliability percentage of 80%. Items were either reworded or eliminated if they had low reliability scores.

While self-report data are frequently used to collect attitude data, Baronowski (1985) cautions researchers about possible errors. Some of the issues that need

to be considered include participant inaccuracy in reporting, misinterpretation due to a lack of questionnaire clarity, subject distraction, and confounding social influences. See the technical manual for more detailed information on data collection protocols.

Data Analysis

Closed-Ended and Likert Scale Questions

StatView SE Graphics was used to analyze student and parent responses to closed-ended and Likert scale questions. Data were tabulated and analyzed by frequencies and percentages and were reported as a function of gender, those electing physical education, and participation in after-school sports for students, and as a total group for parents.

Open-Ended Questions

Two open-ended questions on the student survey queried students on positive and negative events that influenced their attitude toward themselves and physical education. Two of the researchers independently read and reread all student responses to these questions and inductively determined a set of categories that would best represent the issues from the students perspective. These categories were then discussed with the researchers, settling on seven: relationships, content, context, outcomes, nothing viewed as positive or negative, no response, and other. Definitions for these categories may be found in the technical manual. One school and one question were selected with both researchers coding each response from the 64 students at the school. A reliability check revealed only 64% agreement. Category definitions were reviewed, discussed, and clarified with the researchers, adding one more category, injury, to aid in coding clarity. Another school was selected, and the 46 student responses were coded independently, with reliability reached at 89%. Having exceeded an acceptable criterion measure (80%), the researchers each coded one of the questions for the remaining students surveyed. These category data were also tabulated and analyzed by frequency and percentage for each question.

To gain a broader understanding of the attitudes and perceptions that parents held toward their children's high school physical education program, three open-ended questions were designed to elicit value statements concerning these programs. Again, two of the researchers read and reread all parent responses to these questions independently and determined a set of categories that would best represent the issues from the parents' perspectives. These categories were then discussed with the researchers, settling on 10: health and fitness, curriculum and content, social interaction, affective responses, competition, contextual factors, instructor, policies, no response, and other. Definitions for these categories may be found in the technical manual. Responses to each of the three questions were grouped into the three categories by the two researchers. Intercoder agreement was achieved at 82% for Question 1, 92% for Question 2, and 94% for question 3. These data were again tabulated and analyzed by frequency and percentage for each question.

Results

Students

When asked their perceptions of what physical education should do and what it actually does, these students suggested that teaching team sport skills (71%) should be the most important focus, followed by how to play team sports (70%) and improve fitness (68%). These findings are consistent with Rice (1988), who reported that 73% of the females and 78% of the males in her study preferred team sports to individual sports. No gender differences were revealed, with the exception of boys indicating dance should not be included in physical education and girls being less sure whether it should be taught. When identifying what physical education actually does teach them, 59% of the students indicated that they are taught how to play team sports, and 52% indicated that they learn the team sport skills necessary to be successful. Another 50% reported being taught how to play recreational games. Both boys and girls indicated fitness was not emphasized in their programs.

When examining the data related to student likes and dislikes about physical education, it was noted that both boys and girls reported liking it because it was coeducational (69%) and provided a variety of activities (68%). Again, these data support previous research by Rice (1988) who found 81% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they liked physical education for the variety of activities it offered, and 77% because it was coeducational. The major gender difference noted was that boys more frequently indicated they liked physical education because of perceived excellence in the activities, which was consistent with Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1993). Students involved in after-school sports indicated enjoying physical education for the same reasons identified above: It is coeducational, has variety, and is fun.

When asked how important physical education is to their high school education, 94 (31%) of these 314 students indicated physical education was very important/important. This is considerably lower than Tannehill and Zakrajsek's (1993) report of over 57% suggesting that physical education was very important/important to high school education. Over 50% of the students ranked physical education as less important than all other subjects: math (77%), science (71%), English (75%), history (71%), foreign language (64%), and vocational education (55%). Art was the only content area that was ranked as less important than (21%) or just as important as (34%) physical education. Boys in this sample ranked physical education as more important than music, whereas girls ranked music more important. Students who indicated they would elect physical education if it were not required also suggested that it was less important than other subjects, whereas students who would not elect it indicated it was a lot less important.

Over 40% of these students indicated that they liked physical education less than math (42%), science (41%), English (43%), history (44%), and foreign language (40%). Though not a negative report for physical education, these data certainly indicate that a large group of youth do not like physical education. These results are in direct contrast to those reported by Goodlad (1984), whose subjects found art, physical education, and vocational education to be more satisfying than other subject areas. Rice (1988) also reported stronger positive

feelings toward physical education, with 85% of her sample indicating they enjoy physical education.

When examining student responses for the two most and least important affective outcomes of physical education, students in this sample indicated that fun and enjoyment (49%) and teamwork (39%) (which included being a member of a group, belonging, cooperating, sharing, and getting along) were most valued. This is consistent with data reported by Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1993). Students who would elect physical education were more inclined to rank fair play, respect for rules, and challenging oneself as important program aspects whereas those not electing physical education felt that relieving stress was important. Competing against others as an outcome was considered least important by these students (45%).

Students were asked to identify the three most and least important skills and activities taught in physical education. Data revealed that the skills and activities most valued in their physical education program were team sports (61%), fitness activities (46%), individual sports (41%), low-level games (33%), and adventure/risk activities (31%). These results are similar to those reported by Tannehill and Zakrajsek (1993) relative to team sports and fitness activities, yet this sample ranked individual sports, low-level games, and adventure/risk activities higher. Dance (58%) and gymnastics (44%) were cited as the least important content taught in physical education. No major discrepancies were revealed between the major subgroups analyzed. Previous experience with or exposure to an activity may have an influence on these data. If students have not had a chance to participate in a particular activity, they may not see it as important.

Student descriptions of one positive and one negative aspect of physical education were grouped around issues that emerged from their answers and are reported in Table 1. The largest number of students (33%) identified a specific outcome that occurred in class as something they liked the most about physical education. Responses were bimodal: those who linked outcomes to skill acquisition and those who identified positive outcomes in terms of winning in a competitive situation. Typical of the former were "When I finally got the volleyball over the net on my first serve," "I made a basketball go through the hoop,"

Table 1 Positive and Negative Aspects of Physical Education

Category	Positive	Negative
Relationships	21	25
Content	19	17
Context	0	11
Outcomes	33	7
Nothing	8	12
Blank	14	15
Other	4	5
Injury	0	7

and "When I was the goalie in soccer and I blocked a kick [with my head]." The more competitively oriented remarks tended to be the more dominant in this category. Positive physical education experiences that students liked were reflected in such comments as "I won the badminton championship," "When our team won a soccer gym tournament," "Scoring in a flag football game causing an overtime win," and "I scored the most points for my team in sideline basketball."

A small number of girls added that it was particularly satisfying coming out ahead in a coeducational competitive situation. One girl remarked, "We played flag football together [coed], and I kept scoring touchdowns on the guys. I loved that I was quicker than some of them." Another added, "I outran all the boys in the class."

A number of positive responses focused on the content of physical education (19%) and interpersonal relationships (21%). The majority of comments in these two categories were made by girls who found learning a new activity both fun and rewarding. One girl remarked that "I made new friends and got acquainted with old ones. I learned to shoot a bow and arrow, and I'm pretty good at it." Another added the following:

I liked being able to get outdoors. I liked being able to move around because after sitting in class after class, I got pretty bored. I'm not very athletic, but my gym teacher stresses effort and a winning attitude. That's the reason I enjoy it.

There were also comments made that reflected sensitivity to and understanding of individual feelings, participation, and acquiring new skills. As the following girls stated, "Everyone participated, and no one was made fun of," "I learned how to play lots of sports I didn't know anything about," and "I always liked it when the teachers say to you how well you are coming along and tell you to keep up the good work."

There were fewer comments made by boys in both the relationship and content areas, and when they did discuss learning content, boys mentioned specific successful outcomes as most meaningful. When mentioning interpersonal contact, boys tended to identify competitive or physically confronting incidents, such as "We got to beat up someone we hated every day" and "I was playing indoor soccer, and the bleachers were up, and I crunched a kid into the bleachers."

Examining comments made by students relative to negative experiences in the gymnasium suggests that many students do not feel comfortable or safe learning and practicing physical skills. Although the majority of comments dealing with interpersonal relationships were made by girls, 25% of this sample indicated that their single most negative incident was linked to this category. Some of the more typical responses included "I'm not good at basketball, and I hate playing in front of the guys," "Playing kickball inside with a bunch of guys. They made me feel stupid because they were by far more athletic," "My teacher discriminated against people who looked different or people who were not athletic," and "We were playing a baseball game. I was up to bat, and I struck out, and everyone, including the teacher, laughed at me because I couldn't hit the ball."

Parent Survey

In an attempt to gain a perspective on environmental factors that may have formed these parental attitudes toward physical education, we asked questions related to parents' personal experiences. Over 50% had been taught by an elementary physical education specialist, 75% during middle/junior high, and 90% in high school. Over 90% indicated physical education was required at all three levels. When asked to rate these programs as *poor*, *satisfactory*, or *excellent*, the majority of our sample indicated the programs were satisfactory.

Forty-five percent of these parents reported participating in competitive sports; 100% in school intramurals, athletics, and youth sports; and an additional 80% with church leagues and city recreation programs. A small number (6) indicated they continue to participate through church or city recreation. This is in contrast to Zakrajsek and Tannehill (1993), whose results showed that 39% of their sample participate in exercise or physical activity on a regular basis.

Many parents (79%) indicated knowledge of state law that requires physical education in the 9th and 10th grades and as an elective when students reach the 11th and 12th grades. Support for physical education as a requirement throughout the high school curriculum was not overwhelming: 69% for 9th grade, 63% for 10th grade, 46% for 11th grade, and 37% for 12th grade. In addition, only 48% believed passing physical education should be a requirement for graduation. Elam (1990) and Gallup (1988) reported that, over the past decade, not more than 43% of their respondents supported physical education as a requirement. These data are not nearly as supportive as those reported by Zakrajsek and Tannehill (1993) and Pritchard (1988) in which over 80% of both samples suggested physical education should be required K-12.

Although support for physical education as a requirement was not strong, these parents recognized its importance to their children's education. Fifty-one percent of the parents indicated that physical education is important to their son's or daughter's total education. However, physical education did not rank as important when compared to other subject matter taught in schools (see Table 2). Close examination of this table will reveal that art, music, and athletics are the only three areas that are ranked as equally important to physical education by over 70% of the parents, which is consistent with Goodlad (1984). All of these data are considerably lower than those found by Zakrajsek and Tannehill (1993); 77% of their parent sample ranked physical education as very important, with 87% believing it has the same importance as other school subjects.

Parents were asked if they felt it was necessary for physical education to have a textbook and for students to be assigned homework. The example of maintaining a fitness program or learning about body functions was provided, and over 70% of these parents indicated that a textbook was not necessary, that homework should not be required, and that they knew of no homework that had been assigned by physical education teachers. A majority of parents indicated that physical education should require appropriate attire (56%), that they were aware of what their child was learning in this class (63%), and that they were pleased with the existing program (81%). Some parents reported having met the physical education teacher (33%), but only 30% had attended this year's open house, and of that number only 12% had spoken with the physical education teacher. Despite a lack of personal communication with the teacher, parents

Table 2 Parents Perceptions of the Importance of Physical Education Versus Other Subjects

Subject	More important than		Equal importance		Less important than	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Math	11	8	20	15	105	72
Science	10	7	22	16	104	76
English	11	8	19	14	106	78
History	10	7	26	19	100	74
Foreign language	10	7	39	29	84	63
Computer technology	11	8	26	20	96	72
Industrial science	16	12	42	32	74	56
Work extension	22	17	43	33	65	50
Art	71	13	70	52	47	35
Music	19	14	70	53	43	33
School Athletics	14	10	77	57	43	32

appeared knowledgeable about equipment and facilities, indicating which resources were available and indicating satisfaction with the quality. Only 35% believed physical education should be measured with a letter grade, and 53% opted for pass/fail.

Parents valued teamwork (29%), fair play (28%), and enjoyment (16%); devalued physical education as a time to socialize (31%) or as a break in the day (28%); and agreed with the students that competition was not a valued aspect of the program (21%). This is consistent with data reported by Zakrajsek and Tannehill (1993) relative to all three of these aspects of physical education.

Data revealed that the skills and activities most valued in the physical education programs were fitness (26%), team sports (25%), individual sports (17%), and low-level games (12%). These data are comparable to those reported by the students in this study, as well as to those reported by parents in Zakrajsek and Tannehill's (1993) study. Both of these sets of data related to affective outcomes and skill and activity preferences of these parents are consistent with Stewart and Green's (1987) and Pritchard's (1988) studies that reported parents support fitness, skill, and social dimensions as important aspects of physical education.

Parents were asked what they considered to be the major purpose of physical education at the high school level. Examination of their responses indicated that the largest number of parents in this study (44%) believed physical education should promote health and fitness. Typical comments were "It [physical education] should establish lifelong habits of exercise for the purpose of personal fitness and well being" and "[Physical education should encourage] understanding the relationship between health, age, physical fitness, and preventative care." A number of parents (20%) indicated that developing teamwork, cooperation, and improved self-image should be the most important purposes of physical education.

This sentiment was expressed through these remarks: "Teach them to work together," "Learn sportsmanship and teamwork," and "Build self-confidence." Only 14% believed that learning new sport skills should be the major purpose of physical education.

The second question asked parents to identify a strength and a weakness of their child's physical education program. Perhaps due to the limited interactions these parents reported with the physical education teacher or possibly their indifference to the importance of the subject, 39% of the parents chose not to identify a program strength, and 41% failed to respond to the weakness. Parental responses related to program weaknesses were evenly distributed among curriculum and content (e.g., "School program is boring"), affective dimensions (e.g., "Students pushed too far"), contextual factors (e.g., "Insufficient equipment"), policies (e.g., "Should be an elective"), and other ("Not a real important class") areas, with 10% response rates each. It is interesting to note that over 20% of the sample responded that curriculum and content dimensions (e.g., "variety in sports, activities, and options provided") and affective dimensions (e.g., "learning made fun, motivational, and self rewarding") were strengths of these physical education programs.

The final question asked what parents felt was the major contribution physical education makes to a child's total high school education. Of the 139 returned questionnaires, 39 parents (28%) chose not to respond to this question. Those responding indicated that affective dimensions (26%) of the program and the promotion of fitness and healthy lifestyles (28%) should be the main contribution of physical education program goals. Curricular and content issues (i.e., skill acquisition in specific activities) ranked a distant third.

Typical responses of parents who identified affective dimensions of the program were "to provide a sense of accomplishment," "teamwork," "learning to get along with others by being part of a team activity," and "sportsmanship." One parent's viewpoint combined a few of these issues: "To play as a team and to teach students who may have low self-esteem that they can accomplish something physical."

Discussion

As stated at the outset, the intent of this aspect of the high school study was to examine the attitudes of students and their parents toward the physical education programs in which they were involved. In addition, we might ask how student and parent attitudes impact teachers and their work and how these data might guide teachers to better serve the changing needs of the youth they teach.

Student attitudes toward physical education in this study were not overwhelmingly supportive of physical education. As a content area, physical education did not rank high in relation to other subjects, and in terms of what students learned compared to what they felt they should learn, it received only modest approval. Goodlad (1984) concluded that art, physical education, and vocational education were more valued in his study because these subjects are less textbook oriented, allow students more participation in decision making, involve greater student enthusiasm, and have less instruction time.

Although physical education is a required part of high school physical education in all of these schools, students' attitudes toward physical education

influence their choice to actively participate in the daily functioning of these programs. Carlson (1994) found teachers and teacher-controlled curricula to be the major factors determining students' attitudes toward physical education. If a positive attitude is important relative to students electing to participate, as Figley (1985) suggests, and if a teacher has some control over factors that influence a positive student attitude (Luke & Sinclair, 1991), then these teachers may have access to what is needed to improve their programs, students' attitudes toward those programs, and ultimately how they do their job.

Carlson's (1994) examination of the connection of students' attitudes to behavior in physical education speaks to this issue as well. She related the connection between attitude and behavior to the perceptions students hold relative to the value of physical education. Student perceptions suggested that physical education was not viewed as a "real" subject. Beliefs that influenced this perception were that physical education is fun, has few goals or challenges, does not involve learning, and "is" sport (Carlson, 1994). The idea that physical education is not a substantive subject may cause students to hold different expectations relative to behavior, effort, and performance. At the same time, a teacher's desire to make physical education enjoyable in an effort to influence future participation may reinforce these perceptions in the gymnasium.

Although the ability of some students to identify and articulate the value of skill acquisition relative to successful outcomes in the open-ended questions is gratifying, it is noteworthy that the majority of these focused on the concept of winning. Certainly, successful application of skills in game situations is a legitimate and important goal for physical education, yet it would be equally gratifying if students could recognize a successful and accomplished performance whether winning was the final outcome or not. There were a couple of contradictions related to this issue for which we do not have an explanation. For the most part, these students suggested that competition was the least important outcome derived from physical education, yet they indicated that teamwork and learning team sports were the most important skills taught in this class. In addition, a large number of the positive experiences highlighted by these students related directly to the outcomes of competition. Since game play and competition epitomize the nature of team sports, how do we explain these disparities?

These students highlighted the importance of learning to play team sports well and improving fitness. There were more students wanting to learn to play sports than those reporting they had learned them in their programs. In addition, both boys and girls (68%) in this study suggested that fitness was not emphasized in their programs. We are not suggesting that student interest and choice be the "key" variables in designing the curriculum, yet they certainly must be a consideration if students are going to take an active role in learning motor skills and activities.

Teachers should take note of the number of students who suggested liking physical education because it was offered in a coeducational setting. In addition, it was noteworthy that few gender differences were noted by subjects relative to activity choices or affective dimensions of the program. Several differences emerged, however, between students who would elect physical education and those who would not. Those who would not elect physical education were more critical of the emphasis placed on competition and were unsure of their ability to perform well, yet they felt that physical education should provide opportunities

to relieve stress. This suggests that teachers need to examine the needs and desires of those students less interested in physical activity.

Open-ended student responses did reflect a difference by gender, and though it is impossible to generalize by gender from the comments made, certain gender-based stereotypes were apparent. Girls in these physical education settings were less competitive, less physically aggressive, and more sensitive to the holistic goals of physical education that include skill acquisition, fitness, enjoyment, and full participation. Although many of these attitudes may reflect culturally bound masculine and feminine roles, physical educators need to continue creating environments that are safe for all students. Scraton (1990) suggests that providing "holistic programs geared to the motivation of young women to be active, fit, confident, and physically developed" (p. 35) may involve the short-term strategy of some single-sex teaching interspersed with sex-integrated programming. She suggests however that the long-term goal of coeducational teaching may provide all youth with an awareness of gender issues and challenge our traditionally held perspectives relative to gender roles and stereotypes. Carlson (1994) concluded that "cultural and societal expectations for males and females were far more influential than any biological differences among students" (p. 192). This suggests that teachers in these schools should be aware of parental and community stereotypes that undoubtedly have a direct impact on these youth. Teachers must be sensitive to the nature of specific activities and societal stereotypes and be careful not to unwittingly reinforce inequitable values.

Given its tenuous position in public schools, physical education must be increasingly sensitive to equity issues for all youth. High school physical education must reflect societal changes and must function as a change agent that helps to dispel stereotypes and influence more positive attitudes. One of the female students in this study stated it best when she commented on one of her class experiences: "When we used to do physical fitness, like sit-ups and stuff, it was sad to see those who couldn't do it. I literally saw their self-esteem go down. There should be a way to involve everyone without making them feel inadequate." One outcome for physical education that the literature suggests should be addressed in our programs is attention to social issues and self awareness related to sport (Kirk & Tinning, 1990). Social issues did not surface as a theme that was important to these students or to their parents, nor were such issues a focus of the curriculum in these programs. However, several girls reported negative experiences that they felt were detrimental to their self-concept, and building self-confidence was cited as an important dimension of physical education by many parents.

A distressing note from our analysis of parental responses indicated these parents were not active adults. The minimal number of parents who continue to participate in physical activity programs does not speak well to the linkage between physical education and lifelong activity.

Our parent sample was similar to Goodlad's (1984) in which parents viewed the main focus of schools as academics and the development of intellectual skills. While acknowledging the importance of physical education and fitness, these parents did not perceive it to be as critical as the traditional academic subjects. Forty-four percent of these parents indicated health and fitness should be the major focus of physical education, yet only 3% identified this aspect of their child's program as a strength. Equally disturbing was the large number of parents

who chose not to identify any contributions of physical education toward their child's education or any program strengths. It is impossible to judge whether these nonrespondents were parents who perceived no value in physical education, did not know what physical education does, or were indifferent toward the subject matter.

In light of recent educational reform efforts that have resulted in physical education being reduced or eliminated from many school curricula, these data must be taken seriously. There is growing concern for the status of physical education within the larger picture of education. This unwillingness to identify with physical education should send a warning to those invested in promoting the importance of physical activity instruction as part of the high school curriculum.

Today's trends, in conjunction with political, economic, and institutional changes, will have impact on the direction for education in the future. The ultimate direction will determine how physical education is defined and perceived or if it even fits within the total education curriculum. The role and place of physical education has yet to be determined. It is critical that administrators and the public recognize the potential of physical education, and it is our responsibility as physical educators to ensure that this potential is realized. Physical education might be viewed in a cyclical manner: A strong program produces well-educated young people and parents who are knowledgeable of and interested in our programs. This parental involvement produces pressure on the administration to support physical education, which in turn further challenges teachers to provide more accountability to strengthen their programs. The reverse of this cycle and its implications for physical education are obvious.

We, as physical education teachers must break the negative cycle that now exists not only so that physical education will survive but also so that more young people will benefit from our programs. We must keep in mind that the adolescents of today are the adult decision makers of tomorrow, and they will have control over public school policy and the curriculum. By educating them to be physically educated adults, we will ensure our programs are safe from elimination at times of crisis.

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