

# Female Students' Perceptions About Gender-Role Stereotypes and Their Influence on Attitude Toward Physical Education

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## **Abstract**

*Why girls' participation in physical education (PE) dramatically changes once girls reach middle school has been of interest to many researchers. Studying how middle school girls perceive things at this age helps ensure a greater understanding of how to better meet girls' needs. The purpose of this study was to determine how middle school girls perceive their PE teachers' gender-role expectations and how these perceptions affect the girls' participation in and attitudes toward physical education. Qualitative data collection methods were utilized for the study, including observations and formal and informal interviews. This study conducted in-depth interviews with twenty 7th- and 8th-grade girls in a midsize suburban middle school. The girls were observed twice during their 45-minute PE class along with their PE teachers, who were informally interviewed directly after each observation. To develop themes and commonalities, the data from the interviews and observation field notes were analyzed.*

*The themes that emerged from the participants' responses and the observations are that (a) the teachers' primary expectations for girls and boys were to increase effort and participation in PE, (b) girls hold gender-role stereotypes, and (c) a competitive atmosphere and peers' behavior influence girls' participation in and attitude toward physical education. Furthermore, the girls participating in the study perceived themselves as*

*athletically equal to their male peers and called themselves "athletic" and "competitive." However, the primary factors impacting the girls' participation in and attitude toward PE and competitive sports were the girls' perceptions of what constitutes a safe environment and what constitutes a safe sport.*

*Key Words: Gender-role stereotypes, teachers' expectations, female students' perceptions.*

Many Americans believe that gender bias is a notion of the past and that gender bias had existed only against girls (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005; Zittleman, 2006). Those holding such beliefs argue that girls have equal opportunities to achieve, just like anyone else. In addition, many believe that the pre-Title IX barriers to girls' participation in physical education and sports have been removed and that what is perceived as inequality is really only a matter of girls' choice, motivation, and enthusiasm (Kirk, 2003).

Clearly, some real progress has been made. Title IX gave girls the right to equal educational opportunities, including the right to participate equally in physical education and sports. According to the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (2002), 40% of athletes were girls. Gurian and Stevens, (2005) and Sommers, (2000) have advanced the notion that girls "rule" in schools. Similar trends in girls' achievements have been reported in England

(Warrington & Younger, 2000) and Australia (Yates, 1997). Most girls, however, still feel alienated from “male” subjects. For the most part, career aspirations are still highly gendered and girls still find themselves in classroom environments where boys dominate attention and monopolize teachers’ time (Warrington & Younger, 2000).

According to Kirk (2003), gender is a “socially constructed pattern behavior” for both genders and, therefore, may be responding to societal changes. However, changing a “socially constructed pattern behavior” is a long process, and the results of changing such behavior could differ for each social and economic group. The process of learning gender roles and gender-role expectations begins in early childhood. By the age of five or six, most children have a clear understanding of what is expected of their gender, and they behave accordingly (Kirk, 2003). Many PE teachers are likely to already have certain perceptions about and expectations of what boys and girls are capable of doing in physical education (Lirgg, 1993; Treanor, Graber, Housner, & Wiegand, 1998).

Some studies conducted in coeducational settings (Lirgg, 1993; Napper-Owen, Kovar, Ermler, & Mehrhof, 1999; Papaioannou, 1998; Treanor et al., 1998) suggest that stereotypical gender-role expectations, attitudes, and behaviors among both teachers and students appear to be more intense in a coeducational PE setting. In the past, many teachers used organizational patterns and teaching strategies that sent condescending messages that might have limited girls’ potential for success (Chepyator-Thomson & Ennis, 1997; Griffin, 1985). As girls were bombarded with stereotypic expectations, girls became marginalized and alienated in PE classes. They avoided participation and, thus, failed to see the connection between practice and success (Ennis, 1999; Griffin, 1984, 1985, 1993; Hastie, 1998; Nilges, 1998). Research on attitude toward physical education, suggests that achievement and success

may lead to the development of positive attitude (Silverman & Subramaniam, 1999; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002). In turn, positive attitude influences students’ participation in physical activities in school and out-of-school programs (Carlson, 1995; Morey & Goc Karp, 1998; Portman, 1995; Tannehill, Romar, O’Sullivan, England, & Rosenberg, 1994). Furthermore, research in this area identifies curriculum content, classroom environment, and teacher behavior as the primary determinants of negative and positive attitudes toward physical education (Cothran & Ennis, 1997; Figley, 1985; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Napper-Owen, Kovar, Ermler, & Mehrhof, 1999; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2000).

The question then is, do girls behave based on perceived stereotypical gender-role expectations of teachers, and do these expectations influence girls’ attitude toward physical education? The purpose of this study was to determine how middle school girls perceive their PE teachers’ gender-role expectations and how these perceptions affect the girls’ participation in and attitudes toward physical education.

## Method

### *Setting and Participants*

A U.S. suburban public middle school (7th-8th grades) was chosen for the study for its homogeneous population. Because of the geographic location of the school, the student body consisted primarily of Caucasians (98%), with the remaining students being African-American or Asian-American. This homogenous student body ruled out racial differences in gender-role stereotypes that might have influenced students’ perceptions. The investigators purposely avoided informing the participants of the specific focus of the study in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Goetz & LeCompte, 1993) and to keep the research environment as “natural” as possible. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the academic institution.

All 7th- and 8th-grade girls and their PE teachers were informed about the study procedures and were encouraged to participate. Eight girls from the male teacher's classes and 12 girls from the female teacher's classes voluntarily brought in the consent letter signed by themselves and their parents. Both teachers voluntarily agreed to participate. Twenty girls and two PE teachers comprised the final sample for this study. Since the only criterion for participating in this study was a signed consent letter, this sample was a convenience sample (Patton, 2002).

The girls' athletic skills ranged from low level to varsity level. Each girl's skill level was determined based on her, her teacher's, and the investigators' perceptions of the girl's skills. During the formal interview, girls were asked to identify their own skill level. The purpose of this procedure was to discover how girls perceive their own skill level. Similarly, teachers' perceptions of girls' skill level were obtained during informal individual interviews. The primary investigator observed the girls during their PE classes in order to determine their skill level.

About 90% of the girls had been attending this school since kindergarten. The female teacher had 19 years of experience, 15 of which she had spent teaching the 7th and 8th graders in this school. The male teacher had 5 years of experience. At the time of this study, he had been teaching 7th and 8th graders at this school for less than a year. The female teacher had developed the PE curriculum before the male teacher arrived. The curriculum taught was traditional with basic activities such as volleyball, basketball, soccer, frisbee, etc.

The primary investigator observed the school setting four times before the study began. These preliminary observations had two purposes. The first purpose was for the investigator to experience the school's everyday customs and procedures and to get a sense of the school's atmosphere. The second was to accustom the participants to seeing the investigator around the school and minimize some of the initial change of

behavior that people exhibit when an unfamiliar face enters their environment. For the first three visits, three 45-minute PE classes were observed and informal conversations were conducted with the PE teachers. The fourth visit consisted of spending the whole day in the school observing classes and interacting with the teachers and students in and out of the gymnasium.

A preliminary interview guide was developed consisting of open-ended questions based on a review of the literature in three primary areas: (a) teacher expectations, (b) gender-role stereotypes, and (c) students' attitude toward physical education. This was done in order to solicit participants' thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes in an organized manner. Pilot interviews with 7th and 8th graders were conducted three times before finalizing the interview questions. The preliminary interview questions were originally revised based on suggestions obtained from PE teachers, doctoral students and professors in the field. A second major revision was done after analyzing the first pilot study. The last two pilot studies took place in the same school where the study was conducted with minor changes to the interview questions. None of the data collected during these pilot studies is included in the final study.

#### *Data Collection*

As Maxwell (1996) suggested, data were collected from multiple sources: formal interviews with the girls, observations (field notes), and informal interviews with the teachers. The data collection proceeded in two phases. In phase I, each girl was formally interviewed for about 30 minutes in a quiet room during a study hall or free period. When needed, prompts, such as, "What do you mean by that? Give me an example?" were used to encourage the girls to elaborate on their thoughts and comments. The interview also included questions designed to develop rapport. In order to ensure accurate data collection, all formal interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed by a professional.

A day or two after the interview, the girl was observed during PE class. Using Patton's (2002) recommendations as a guide, extensive descriptive and interpretive field notes during this first observation were taken. Descriptive notes were kept in one column and interpretive notes in another column. The three main focuses of the observations were a) to determine if the perceptions of students about their skill level matched the teacher's and investigator's perceptions, b) to see if there were inconsistencies between the girls' perceptions of the PE environment and reality, and c) to find out whether student-student and student-teacher interactions revealed stereotypical thinking with respect to gender roles. The observations also inspired questions for the subsequent informal interview with the class's teacher. As Patton (2002) recommended, the questions posed flowed naturally from the conversation. Throughout this informal interview, the investigator kept descriptive field notes, which were also used to triangulate the collected data.

A professional transcriber transcribed all of the audiotapes verbatim. All data collected were cross-examined, triangulated, and analyzed for commonalities, inconsistencies, or lack of clarity by all three investigators. Based on the results of the preliminary data analysis, new questions for the member-check session that followed were developed.

Phase II of the data collection started with the member-check session. A second private meeting with each girl during a study hall or free period for the member-check session was arranged. The purposes of the member-check were to (a) ensure that the audiotape was accurately transcribed, (b) give the girls a chance to read the transcription carefully and decide whether their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions were accurately presented, (c) give the researcher an opportunity to explore topics that emerged from the preliminary data analysis, and (d) clarify any misunderstanding that might have been recorded in the observation notes or transcripts. Extensive notes during the member-check were kept. A day or two

after the member-check session, the girls were observed for a second time in PE class and field notes were taken. The class's teacher was also informally interviewed a second time and field notes of the session were kept and shared with him or her to ensure accuracy. This marked the end of the data collection.

In total, there were 20 formal interviews and 20 member-checks with the girls, and 40 observations of them during PE classes (two for each girl). In addition, the primary investigator conducted informal interviews with the appropriate teacher right after observing each student.

#### *Data Analysis*

Following Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) and Patton's (2002) recommendations, the data were analyzed inductively. Induction is the process of drawing themes and commonalities from all data sources, such as interviews, field notes, and informal interviews. One is better able to understand the participants' perceptions by focusing on common themes.

The overall data analysis was guided by Huberman and Mile's (1995) four-stage analysis process. Stage I was conducted during phase I of data collection, which occurred after the formal interview with the students, the first observation of them, and the first informal interview with the teachers. During this preliminary analysis, data were triangulated in order to identify recurring themes and to develop a set of questions that would be used during the member-check session to either explore the themes further or clarify uncertainties. When all of the data were collected, there were carefully organized according to three primary areas of interest: (a) teacher expectations, (b) gender-role stereotypes, and (c) student attitude toward physical education. For example, tentative themes and sub-themes emerged from the data grouped under "Teacher's Expectations."

During stage III, all data sources were cross-examined, coded, triangulated, and compressed in order to refine the themes revolving around the issues that the participants felt were important to

them. Using Patton's (2002) guidelines, alternative sub-themes that emerged from the data were also taken into consideration because the sub-themes offer considerable credibility to the final findings. At this stage of analysis, the investigators made certain that the tentative themes and sub-themes were supported by the data.

The final stage of data analysis included a peer debriefing process. Following Creswell's (2002) and Maxwell's, (1996) suggestion, a peer debriefer was enlisted in order to carefully review the data and tentative themes and sub-themes. Both the investigators and peer debriefer refined the themes and sub-themes by coming to a consensus. As a final step of data analysis, the investigators made certain that the themes were supported by the existing literature.

#### *Data Trustworthiness*

When investigating a sensitive topic like gender-role stereotypes, taking preparatory measures to ensure that the participants' behaviors and responses are not biased is critical. Thus, when trying to obtain permission to proceed with the study, the real focus of the study was never revealed to school officials or the possible participants at any time.

As LeCompte and Preissle (1993) recommended, the trustworthiness of the data was also addressed through triangulation. Since multiple data sources were used in this study, one source cross-checked the accuracy of data gathered from another source. An example of how this procedure serves to substantiate the accuracy of one data source with another is seen in the use of formal interviews and first-observation data to create questions for the member-check. Another example is the teachers' informal interviews, which were analyzed to see if their content corroborated the observation field notes and the girls' formal interview comments. The data triangulation indicated that the three types of data were consistent with each other.

As previously mentioned, the member-check process was used to ensure the accuracy of inter-

view transcriptions and the clarity of field notes taken during observations and informal interviews, thereby further increasing the trustworthiness of the data. The final step taken to assure the trustworthiness of the data included peer debriefing, as described by Creswell (2002). In this process, two peer researchers examine and refine the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data by coming to a consensus.

### **Results**

After analyzing the data, the following themes and sub-themes emerged:

Theme I: Teachers Expect Students to Increase Their Effort and Participation in Physical Education.

Theme II: Boys Are Skillful and Aggressive and Create a Competitive Atmosphere in Physical Education class.

Theme III: A Competitive Atmosphere as a Positive Factor on Girls' Participation in and Attitude toward Physical Education

Theme IV: Peers' Behavior as a Negative Factor on Girls' Participation in and Attitude toward Physical Education

Sub-theme I: *Girls Perceive Themselves as Being Athletic and Competitive*

Sub-theme II: *Safety Is a Major Concern for Girls and Parents*

#### **Theme I: Teachers Expect Students to Increase Their Effort and Participation in Physical Education**

All data sources supported the girls' perceptions that their PE teachers have the same expectations for both genders. The students clearly stated that their PE teachers expected them to try their best and actively participate in all sports and activities that were scheduled in the school's PE curriculum. When "Dora", an 8th grader, was asked to describe her teacher's expectations to another student, she said, "Try your hardest and do your best. You have to participate. The teacher makes you participate in every sport; you can't just stand there". Both PE teachers

stated that they expect both genders to participate in all sports, despite their perceptions that the students consider some of these sports “girlish” or “boyish.” “Michelle,” a 7th grader, reported, “All the sports are not just for girls or just for boys. All the sports that we have done, girls and boys can both participate in them”.

Observations indicated that the girls were always prepared and that they actively participated side by side with the boys in all PE classes. The teachers indicated during informal interviews that they expected students to participate and do their best, and the teachers were observed emphasizing effort more than skill; therefore, all students were clear about the importance of increasing their effort and participation in PE. This is how “Sandra,” a competitive 7th grader, described her teacher’s grading system to another student:

I would tell her to try her hardest and that’s how she is going to be graded. Like she (the teacher) doesn’t grade you on how well you can play, but how well you try. And make sure you don’t get three zeros and fail the class, and try to pass it, as it is easy. She doesn’t make it hard. She explains a lot of stuff. So, if she [the student] is not athletic, she can try, and she might be able to figure it.

### **Theme II: Boys Are Skillful and Aggressive and Create a Competitive Atmosphere in Physical Education**

Stereotypes of boys as competitive were quite evident in all the girls’ comments. The girls, however, also believed that the boys, by creating a competitive atmosphere, made PE more interesting and fun:

Boys sometimes make it kind of more interesting because I think they get really into it and are really competitive. So, they make you want to get into it a lot more and stuff. I think they kind of make it more fun for you (Mandy, 8th grader).

Girls also perceived boys as being more skillful and aggressive than girls. Therefore, the girls

wanted boys on the team because the girls believed that they worked harder when teamed with boys. A group of girls felt that coed competitions gave girls a great opportunity to show off their skills in front of boys:

Girls usually have the same opinion. So, the boys come in, and they have different opinions, and some of the boys play different than the girls. Like they are aggressive and stuff. So, I think that helps us to play better (Debbie, 8th grader).

The teachers’ comments supported the notion that girls hold stereotypes about boys’ abilities. The teachers stated that, in general, the girls tried to select boys as team members because the girls believed that having boys would help the team win. Field notes indicated that the girls were quite upset if teams chosen by teachers were not equal in skill. The girls exhibited negative facial expressions and complained about not having an equal chance to win the game. As clarified by the girls during member-check, an equally matched team meant an equal number of boys on each team. If a team had fewer boys, then a fair competition required that most girls on that team be highly skilled:

When we are on their teams, some of the boys are good at the sports. So, it helps your team. And if the girls did well, they actually cheer the girls. A lot of the boys think that the boys are stronger than girls; most boys think that. If the girls do well, and the boys see it, they think more of us, maybe; it gives us girls a chance to show what we are made of! (Michelle, 7th grader).

### **Theme III: Competitive Atmosphere as a Positive Factor on Girls’ Participation in and Attitude toward Physical Education**

The girls attributed their participation in and attitude toward physical education to a “competitive atmosphere.” They reported being excited and motivated when participating in such an atmosphere because, as the competitive 7th grader

Faye stated, "I like to compete." Kim was so competitive that if her peers did not take competition seriously, she would get upset:

Well, some of them [Kim's classmates] don't really cooperate very well and like . . . you get upset with them. Like they are not playing as well as you want them to play, and I am very competitive, and I want them to be involved with the game, and sometimes they just don't care and just stand there and don't do anything (Kim, 8th grader).

The field notes indicated that during the soccer unit, the girls wanted to compete against the boys because, as some of the girls explained during member-check, boys consider soccer a "girlish" sport, a view that influenced the boys' performance. Therefore, the girls felt that they had a good chance of winning against the boys. Both teachers also supported the idea that when a sport is perceived as "girlish," the girls wanted to compete against boys as a group.

#### **Theme IV: Peers' Behavior as a Negative Factor on Girls' Participation in and Attitude toward Physical Education**

The girls also attributed their participation in and attitude toward physical education to "peers' behavior." They reported negative feelings toward participation in physical education when the boys' behavior created physically or emotionally unsafe learning environments:

Oh, they're obnoxious sometimes, and they don't follow the rules as well as the girls do, and like don't listen . . . just get out of line sometimes. They get too competitive, and it's not fun. They get all mad when they lose. It's not fun . . . it's just a game! You want to be competitive but not too much (Sophie, 8th grader).

Other girls stated that they were annoyed when the boys became too competitive and neglected to see physical education as a participatory and learning experience. Mandy stated,

When they [the boys] make it really competitive and they really get into a game, they get really moody and stuff. It gets really annoying after a while. So . . . I say chill. You are just in school. It is just a game (Mandy, 8th grader).

Another contributor to girls' negative feelings toward participation in physical education was the boys' tendency to put girls down. According to the girls, boys belittle girls and show very little respect for girls' abilities. Faye explained, "Sometimes they are obnoxious and put girls down. They yell out 'you stink,' but they usually won't say it to their guy friends." Such behavior was never observed during the time of the study. However, teachers indicated that should a student exhibit a rare, inappropriate behavior as described above, the educator would intervene to address it:

Some of the boys pick on us a lot. Like if we don't do something just perfect, then it's wrong! And they say bad stuff, and the gym teacher . . . like if they say something bad about us, then she'll take a point off their score. Or I don't know. Sometimes, they can be very rude too, and at the same time nice. I just don't like to be around people that are nasty! (Debbie, 8th grader).

#### *Sub-theme I—Girls Perceive Themselves as Being Athletic and Competitive.*

Many girls identified themselves as "athletic" and "competitive." They stated that they like to participate in competitive sports and that they would not be reluctant to participate in sports, such as football or wrestling, that are considered inappropriate for their gender, as long as they felt adequately prepared. Kim, reported, "I would probably try anything, even wrestling, as long as I knew what I was doing." Leyla, a 7th grader, felt the same way: "Me and my friend wanted to play football because we enjoy it and thought it would be fun."

What a girl's parents considered appropriate and safe for their daughter appeared to very much

influence her decision about what sport to participate in. The girls speculated that parents “don’t want their daughters to get hurt.” Mandy an 8th grader stated,

They (Mandy’s parents) don’t really want me to go out for football or wrestling or something like that because they don’t want me to get hurt. Because there are a lot of big boys that play these sports, and they don’t want me to get hurt or anything like that.

A few girls stated that a parent would not interfere with their decision to participate in a sport, but the parent would still be very concerned about their safety if they were to take part in any of the “boyish” sports:

My parents pretty much allow me to try any sport that I would like as long as they know that I’ll be alright in it. Like I could play hockey, like on the hockey team, or I could play football; they wouldn’t like stop me, but they would tell me to be really cautious because my father had played it, and it is a very rough sport (Mary, 8th grader).

#### Sub Theme II—*Safety Is a Major Concern for Girls and Parents*

Girls who expressed an interest in football agreed that they would feel a lot safer and more comfortable if there were female teams for rough sports such as football and hockey: “I think if it was a girl’s [football] team, I would be allowed to play, because they [girls] are not as strong.” (Carol, 8th grader). Mandy added: “It’s just that . . . the boys . . . they are like stronger and . . .”

Girls who stated that they would never participate in sports such as football, wrestling and boxing gave safety as the primary reason for not doing so. Some girls perceived wrestling as very violent and dangerous and, therefore, would avoid it:

Well, I would never do wrestling because I just don’t like that contact. I don’t really like football, and I don’t like soccer, either. I tried both of them, but wrestling,

I would never do. I don’t like the whole thing, where you fighting with somebody and you could really get hurt (Kim, 8th grader).

Another reason the girls gave for avoiding rough sports was that the girls failed to see the point of trying to hurt someone or getting hurt oneself. For example, Carol, an 8th grader, said, “Wrestling is like beating someone up, and I think boxing seems like more violence. Sandra, a 7th grader, said:

Wrestling or boxing—I don’t think I would ever try them. I really would not want to get hurt trying it, and it doesn’t look like too much fun. It just looks like they are trying to beat each other up! Also boxing, I don’t see the point—not much fun for me.

Debbie an 8th grader stated that she did not want to participate in rough sports because she did not consider them suitable for girls’ personalities or abilities. She reported: “I am not looking forward in doing football . . . ‘cause I don’t like football at all. I don’t know. Some sports seem like girls’ sports and some sports seem like boys’ sports.” When Debbie was asked to elaborate on the topic, she pointed out that they were no girls on her school’s football team and that girls were incapable of making the team. According to her, “girls have to really be in shape to be able to play football because if they don’t . . . the coach is going to cut them from the team.”

#### Discussion

This study focused on middle-school girls’ perceptions about their PE teachers’ gender expectations and on how those perceptions affected the girls’ participation in and attitudes toward physical education. The finding of this study suggests that girls’ participation in and attitude toward PE is influenced by teachers’ expectations; the girls’ own gender–role stereotypes; and whether the PE environment is safe for them, emotionally and physically.

The data suggest that the girls in this study believe that their PE teachers' expectations are the same for both genders. The primary expectation girls perceived their teachers as having for them was to increase their *effort and participation*. This study points out that when students clearly understand what is expected of them they behave accordingly. Based on the field notes and interview data, the girls seemed to clearly understand their teachers' expectations because, throughout the study, the girls actively participated in PE class and attempted to do their best. Contrary to previous studies (Carlson, 1995; Ennis, 1999; Tannehill et al., 1994), none of the low-skilled girls seemed to feel alienated in their PE classes. Although this is a premature conclusion, the data suggest that emphasizing effort instead of skill may help low-skill students feel less alienated in PE classes. Similar approaches of providing positive learning opportunities for all students have been reported by girls in the Weiller and Doyle (2000) study.

Girls stereotypically believed that boys were skillful and aggressive and that they were responsible for the competitive atmosphere in PE. Although some girls called themselves "athletic" and "competitive," they seemed to doubt their abilities when it came to "masculine" sports. When a "girlish" sport like soccer was offered, girls felt more confident than the boys and wanted to compete against them as a group. This is perhaps one of the most interesting pieces of data in this study because while these girls considered soccer a "girlish" sport (and felt so confident about their soccer skills), other studies (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Williams & Bedward, 2001) found that soccer was perceived as a traditionally "masculine" sport. This difference in perceptions confirms how gender stereotypes are "socially constructed patterns of behavior" (Kirk, 2003), and how gender stereotypes may differ from context to context, and thus, how difficult it is for changes to take place.

The sub-themes that emerged from responses to interview questions designed to capture the

girls' attitude toward PE suggest that girls' perceptions about and attitudes toward competition and "masculine" sports may be changing. While previous studies reported that girls dislike competition (Carlson, 1995; Lirgg, 1991; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2000, 2002; Tannehill et al., 1994) and feel incompetent in "masculine" sports (Solmon, Lee, Belcher, Harrison, & Wells, 2003), this study suggests that some middle-school girls enjoy competition and that some of them would even participate in "masculine" sports. In fact, the girls considered themselves to be competitive players, and they looked forward to their PE classes because of the "competitive atmosphere." How "athletic" and "competitive" girls felt was very much related to how *safe* they felt the playing field was. The girls made it clear that they like to compete, but, foremost, they like to feel adequately prepared to face their opponents and feel safe.

The essence of these findings is that the girls' perceptions about competition and prescribed gender lines are changing. One might consider these findings very promising as some of the traditional taboos about women and competition seem to be fading. Such changes may be the effects of Title IX, which did indeed provide girls and women with a lot more opportunities to compete and participate in physical education and sports. Since the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (2002) reported that 40% of athletes were girls, it is reasonable to assume that today's perceptions about the athletic skills of girls and women and about their participation in physical activity are changing.

Providing safer environments for all students should be a primary goal in physical education, as such practices have been reported (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Williams & Bedward, 2001) to be very influential on all students' personal growth. Most of the girl participants in this study claimed that peer behavior and teacher intervention can make a PE environment safe or unsafe, both physically and emotionally. Physical educators should sincerely attempt to intervene and interrupt

behaviors that create an unsafe learning environment for students. Students consistently reported that teacher expectations and safe learning environments influenced their participation in and attitude toward PE. In addition, coaches need to practice similar methods because their expectations and preconceived notion can influence student behaviors. It was quite evident in this study that the girls perceived a great connection between varsity sports, competition, and physical education.

The results of this study should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind: The female teacher participant was the primary PE teacher at the school for 19 years. The students had had no other PE teacher until the year of this study. The female teachers had developed the PE curriculum and all policies and procedures implemented in the-gymnasium. Thus, when girls gave their perceptions about the PE program, they basically referred to the female teacher only. Thus, girl participants' perceptions were based on their experience with one teacher. Although experts in the field of research methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Maxwell, 1996) recommend that indirect open-ended questions be used for interview techniques, the participants' responses might have been clearer if the questions had been more direct. Lastly, the attempt to use a convenient sample of participants resulted in attracting mostly participants who enjoyed PE. Thus, we obtained the perceptions of a specific group only.

Despite these limitations, this study has clear implications for teacher preparation programs in physical education and for education in general. Higher education needs to take the lead in preparing teacher candidates to recognize that their everyday interactions with and expectations of students have a tremendous impact on their overall growth. Thus, PE professionals and classroom teachers need to communicate more effectively with their students. Learning environments should be a collaborative effort between teachers and students so that students of both genders have

the opportunity to experience competition, success, and achievement without serious injury or humiliation. Providing effective curricula and safe learning environments that equitably meet the needs of students may have a more positive influence on girls' participation in and attitude toward physical education. More effective communication between students and their PE teachers, however, may not be enough. More collaboration between all educators and coaches involved may be a better approach, as students don't function compartmentally.

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