

Physical Education Teacher's Verbal Aggression and Student's Fair Play Behaviors

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how physical education teacher's verbal aggressiveness, as perceived by the students, is related to students' fair play self-reported behaviors. Four hundred twenty-nine physical education students completed two questionnaires during physical education classes. Correlation analysis revealed that there was a positive significant relationship between teachers' verbal aggression and anti-social fair play behaviors; and a negative, significant relationship between teachers' verbal aggression and prosocial fair play behaviors. Regression analyses indicated that teachers' verbal aggression could significantly predict students' self reported prosocial and antisocial fair play behaviors. Findings and implications for teacher communication are discussed and future research suggestions are made.

Sociomoral education includes activities that facilitate the promotion of social and moral development of students. The sociomoral development of students is one of the goals of school physical education across all education levels (Kirk, 1993). The lesson of physical education offers, in relation to other in class lessons, more chances for student—teacher and student - student interactions. This is one of the main reasons that investigators endorse that physical education is the most adequate environment for sociomoral education (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Bergmann—Drewe, 2000; Miller, Bredemeier & Shields, 1997). Additionally, the physical education lesson benefits from the diverse range of values, goals

and objectives that permeate education more broadly (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The relationships and interactions developed during physical education activity can contribute to students' moral development.

Recently, researchers have examined the factors that interfere with sociomoral development through sports. Research evidence showed that individual difference (e.g., goal perspectives) and contextual/environmental factors (e.g., moral atmosphere) should be taken into consideration when sport related moral behavior is examined (Vallerand, Briere, Blanshard, & Provencher, 1997; Gano-Overway, Guivernau, Magyar, Waldron, & Ewing, 2005). Particularly, the context within moral behaviors are performed is critical. In school physical education the students' moral behavior is also shaped through the principles and values that they share with their physical education teacher and their classmates (Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989). Verbal communication is one way of sharing principles and values in a social context. Nevertheless, there is lack of relevant research in exploring specific characteristics of teacher's verbal communication in physical education lesson in relation to students' sociomoral behavior.

One expression of students' sociomoral behavior in physical education classes is their "fair play" behaviors. The term "fair play" is used interchangeably with the term "sportspersonship". Keating (1995, p. 147) discussed the concept of "sportspersonship" in terms of the qualities required to exhibit fair play in sport. Fair play is a kind of moral code that guides conduct in sport. So, by the term fair play it is meant a set of

sociomoral values that are delivered through sport.

Aggression, on the other hand, can be defined as “any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (Baron & Richardson, 1994, p. 7). Specifically, verbal aggressiveness is defined as “an attack on an individual’s self-concept instead of or in addition to attacking the person’s position on a topic of communication, to inflict psychological pain” (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Various forms of verbal and physical aggressiveness include character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks, teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing, nonverbal emblems, and profanity. Verbal aggression can also occur in the form of personality attacks, disconfirmation, rejection, negative comparison, and blame (Infante, 1995). Regardless of the form, the verbally aggressive message usually results in the target of the message feeling embarrassed, angry, humiliated, or depressed (Infante, 1995). If verbal aggression is directed towards one person or a group of people over time, this behavior may be viewed as psychological abuse, possibly leading to chronic failure, known as learned helplessness (Infante, 1995; Infante & Rancer, 1996).

The overwhelming majority of studies examining the effect of verbal aggression consistently identify negative consequences associated with its use (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Martin & Anderson, 1995; Infante & Rancer, 1996). Verbal aggression leads to negative outcomes, greater tendency toward physical aggression and violence (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989) in all types of relationships from interpersonal, small group, organizational, family, pedagogical, intercultural, and political contexts. Additional studies have found that verbal aggression can lead to physical aggression (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993). For example, in sport, verbal aggressiveness can work as a catalyst to physical violence, by irritating opponents who then respond with physical aggression.

In the classroom, verbally aggressive instructors are perceived as unconcerned (Myers, 1998), unfriendly and inattentive (Myers & Rocca, 2000b), lacking in nonverbal immediacy, namely a sense of closeness or intimacy (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999), lacking credibility and lead to negative student perceptions of the teacher (Martin, Weber, & Burant, 1997; Myers, 2001; Schrodt, 2003), and engaging in inappropriate classroom communication behavior (Martin et al., 1997). Moreover, perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness is negatively associated with student outcomes such as state motivation, affective learning, cognitive learning, and satisfaction (Myers, 2002; Myers & Knox, 2000; Myers & Rocca, 2001). Myers and Knox (1999) also, reported a negative relationship between perceived use of verbal aggression by the teacher and student affect toward the teacher, the course content, and the recommended course behaviors. When instructors engage in character, competence, and background attacks as well as ridicule, malediction, threats, and nonverbal emblems, students report lower amounts of affective learning (Myers & Knox, 1999). Also, a negative relationship exists between perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness and establishment of a supportive classroom climate (Myers & Rocca, 2001). Finally, Gorham and Christophel (1992) have pointed toward verbal aggression as a demotivating force in the classroom, indicating that 43% of the factors that students report as uninspiring are a function of instructor characteristics and behaviors. Myers and Rocca (2000a) also reported that perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness is related to lower levels of student state motivation. The manner in which teachers communicate in the classroom with their students has a great effect on the learning process that takes place in that classroom (Richmond & Gorham, 1996).

Nevertheless, the relationship between teachers’ verbal aggressiveness and students’ sociomoral behavior has not been examined. The examination of this relationship can provide implications about teachers’ preparation and gym communication. The purpose of this study was to

examine how physical education teacher's verbal aggressiveness, as perceived by students, is related to students' fair play self-reported behaviors. Secondly, this study examined if students' fair play behaviors are predicted by teachers' verbal aggression.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were 429 physical education students (boy, $n=256$; girl, $n=173$), in 20 coed classrooms in four cities of central and north Greece. Their mean age was 14.7 years old. All of them were students between the 8th and 11th grade of public secondary schools. Students completed both questionnaires during their physical education lesson in winter 2005. The content of the lesson was team sports (basketball, volleyball and soccer). Four investigators distributed the questionnaires and helped any student who had questions pertaining to the wording or meaning of any of the items on the questionnaires. It was emphasized that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the items. Students encouraged answering the items honestly, given that all responses would be anonymous. Five physical education teachers taught all the participants and their years of teaching experience ranged from 6 to 13. Permission to collect the data was obtained from each school's administration. The ethics committee of the University of Thessaly approved the study.

Measures

Fair play: The "Fair play in Physical Education" questionnaire (F.P.P.E.Q.; Hassandra, Goudas, Hatzigeorgiadis, & Theodorakis, 2002) was used to assess student's fair play self-reported behaviors. The F.P.P.E.Q. is based on the conceptualization of fair play and its components (Butcher & Schneider, 2001), and the Multi-dimensional Sportspersonship Orientations Scale (M.S.O.S.; Vallerand, et al., 1997). The scale has

four dimensions measuring two pro-social fair play behaviors, the 'convention' and 'respect to teammates', and two anti-social fair play behaviors, the 'gamesmanship' and 'cheating'. The dimension 'respect to teammates' includes behaviors like verbal support, help and sympathy of teammates, e.g.: "I reward the good efforts of my teammates". The 'conventions' are positive social behaviors in sports-games, like shaking hands after the game, e.g.: "I shake hands with opponents when the game ends". 'Cheating' is an attempt to break the rules of a game while escaping detection and punishment, e.g.: "I cheat if it helps me win". 'Gamesmanship', unlike cheating, does not involve violating the rules of the game in the hope of avoiding detection, but it is the use of legal, but morally dubious, designed tactics to unsettle opponents, e.g.: "I try to upset the opponents". The questionnaire consists of 16 items, four in each dimension, scored on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{never}$, $5 = \text{always}$). The instrument was developed to assess fair play for the Greek student population. Fair play dimensions and corresponding items were adjusted to fit the environment of physical education in Greek schools. Factor analysis has demonstrated the four-dimensional structure of the instrument and the internal consistency of the subscales has been supported (Hassandra, et al., 2002).

Verbal Aggression: A shorter version of the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS; Infante & Wigley, 1986) was used, in a similar way to the survey used by Bekiari, Digelidis & Sakellariou (in press). The shortened version was specifically adapted to the Greek population. The VAS measures the verbal aggressiveness of physical education teachers as perceived by their students. This version consisted of 7 positively worded items, e.g.: "When students do senseless activities, the physical educator tries to be nice with them" and 7 negatively worded items e.g.: "When students refuse to do an important activity the physical educator tells them that they are unreasonable".

Results

Data analyses

Two scores were computed for each participant on the F.P.P.E.Q.: the prosocial score, which included the two positive behaviors (respect to teammates and conventions) and the antisocial score, which included the two negative behaviors (cheating and gamesmanship). Additionally, one score was computed for each participant representing the students' perceived verbal aggressiveness of their physical education teacher, as Infante and Wigley (1986) suggested.

To examine the relationships between physical education teacher's verbal aggression and students' fair play behaviors a correlation analysis was conducted. Finally, to examine if students' fair play behaviors are predicted by teachers' verbal aggression two regression analyses were done. In the first regression analysis, the dependent variable was the prosocial fair play behaviors and in the second one the antisocial fair play behaviors, while the perceived teachers' verbal aggression was in both analyses the independent variable. To address the issue of whether students' scores vary according to gender an analysis of variance was conducted.

Descriptive statistics

Mean scores, standard deviations and internal consistency scores (Cronbach's alpha) on each measure are presented in table 1. Analysis of variance revealed significant differences only on antisocial fair play behaviors ($F_{(413,1)} = 5.12$, $p < .05$) according to gender.

Relationships between teachers' verbal aggression and students' fair play behaviors

The results of the correlation analysis are presented in table 2. As it can be seen, there was a positive significant relationship between teachers' verbal aggression and antisocial fair play behaviors and a negative significant relationship between teachers' verbal aggression and

prosocial fair play behaviors. The significance of the first regression ($F_{(1,394)} = 341.338$, $p < .001$) indicated that teachers' verbal aggression significantly predict the prosocial behaviors towards fair play. The R square value indicated that 46% of the variance in the prosocial fair play behaviors was explained by the teachers' verbal aggression ($R^2 = .464$). The standardized regression coefficient for teachers' verbal aggression was also significant ($b = -.681$; $t = -18.475$, $p = .000$). This regression indicates that as the teachers' verbal aggression increased lower students' prosocial fair play behaviors resulted.

The significance of the second regression ($F_{(1,395)} = 278.941$, $p < .001$) indicated that teachers' verbal aggression significantly predict the antisocial fair play behaviors. The R square value indicates that 41% of the variance in the antisocial fair play behaviors was explained by the teachers' verbal aggression ($R^2 = .414$). The standardized regression coefficient for teachers' verbal aggression was also significant ($b = .643$; $t = 16.702$, $p = .000$). This regression indicates that as the teachers' verbal aggression increased higher students' antisocial fair play behaviors resulted.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between students' fair play behaviors and teachers' verbal aggressiveness as perceived by students in physical education classes. Additionally, it was examined if students' prosocial and antisocial fair play behaviors are predicted by teachers' verbal aggression.

The relationship between the investigated variables, as indicated by the correlations was in the expected directions. Nevertheless, correlations do not support causation. Correlations indicated that there is strong relationship between teachers' verbal aggression and student's fair play behaviors. In particular, the antisocial fair play behaviors positively correlated with teachers' verbal aggression, and the prosocial fair play behaviors negatively correlated with teachers' verbal aggression.

Table 1.

Mean scores and S.D. of fair play and verbal aggression

Variables	M	SD	N	Cronbach's α
Prosocial fair play behaviors				
Boys	3.64	.85	248	.86
Girls	3.51	.78	165	
Antisocial fair play behaviors				
Boys	2.50	1.11	248	.94
Girls	2.75	1.08	167	
Verbal aggression				
Boys	3.39	.81	245	.91
Girls	3.37	.82	164	

Table 2.

Correlation between students' prosocial and antisocial fair play behaviors and perceived teachers' verbal aggression

Variables	1	2	3
Students' prosocial fair play behaviors	-	-.64*	-.68*
Students' antisocial fair play behaviors		-	.64*
Perceived teachers' verbal aggression			-

* $p < .001$

Results of regression analyses supported the relationship between fair play behaviors and teachers' verbal aggression. The aggressive verbal communication was influential in determining students' fair play behaviors. Analytically, the teachers' use of aggressive verbal communication predicts the students' antisocial fair play behaviors. These findings are consistent with prior research (Infante & Wigley, 1986; Infante, et al., 1989; Infante, et al., 1990; Sabourin, et al., 1993). The use of verbal aggression by the teacher resulted in an additional negative result according to our findings: the students' fair play behaviors. In particular, when teachers use an aggressive communication language with their students it seems that there is an increase of antisocial behaviors and a decrease in prosocial behaviors. In other words, when physical education teachers affront, befool or yell at their students, then students diminish behaviors like showing respect towards their teammates or using conventions like shake hands or congratulate opponents after a game, and increase behaviors like cheating and using tactics to unsettle opponents in their games during physical education lessons.

Findings suggested also, that boys reported higher scores than girls on antisocial fair play behaviors. These differences support prior findings in sport contexts (Bredemeier, 1985; Bredemeier & Shields, 1986; Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields & Cooper, 1987), which showed significant differences between males and females in antisocial behaviors. For example, Bredemeier (1985) found males more likely to endorse the use of aggressive, injurious acts in sport more than females. Some of the reasons for these differences might be the wider cultural stereotypes, for example, different social roles for men and women, the sport gender stereotypes, like the distinction between more male and more female sport, which leads boys and girls to different socialization into sport, and the physical education teacher's different expectancies from boys and girls.

According to Licht and Dweck (1983), educators tend to praise girls more for prosocial behaviors and at the same time they tend to blame boys less for antisocial behaviors. This implies that teachers have different social behavioral expectations of boys and girls in their classroom, which may result in different actual behavior.

Limitations of the study

It should be noticed here that the present study's correlations do not support any causation between the two variables. It's a preliminary study. We do not know, for example, if the student's antisocial behavior led the teacher to become more verbally aggressive. Additionally, many other factors should be taken into account, like students' education level, possible cultural differences, teachers' teaching experience and teachers' value orientations.

Implications for research and practice

In future research, more detailed examination of the relationship between teachers' verbal aggression and fair play behaviors, during physical education lesson should be investigated. For example, it would be interesting to examine which forms of teachers' verbal aggression in particular, lead students to cheat in their games or show gamesmanship behaviors. Observation and in depth interviews with students would reveal useful information for this relationship. A qualitative approach would provide more specific and practical implications and guidelines for physical education teachers. Likewise, additional antisocial behaviors during a physical education lesson should be examined in relation to verbal aggressiveness, like trash talking, injuring opponents during play and bullying e.g., a repeatable negative physical or verbal action and/or a deliberate intention to hurt another involving an imbalance of strength, either physical or psychological. Future research should also explore the perceived use of teacher verbal aggression from several perspectives (e.g., teacher, administrators).

The implications of the study for the physical education teachers can be seen during their communication with the students. That means, they should not use any verbal or nonverbal

communication that imply character or competence or physical appearance attacks, teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing, and profanity, or any form of personality attacks, disconfirmation, rejection, negative comparison, and blame. Especially, if teachers want to promote prosocial behaviors in their classes then it seems that they need to make sure that their own verbal communication is not aggressive. Additionally, the physical education teacher preparation programs should include education on how to communicate effectively with students and how to give feedback to students not only when practicing sport skills but also on their general behavior in the gymnasium.

Conclusion

In this study it was examined the relationships between students' fair play self-reported behaviors and teachers' verbal aggression as perceived by students. The results provide an impetus for the continued study of verbal aggression in the gymnasium. In addition, if sociomoral development of students is to be considered as an important goal of physical education, then there must be further investigation into the experiences, conditions, and students, which may facilitate moral growth and what factors are detrimental to students' sociomoral development.

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