

# Student Voices—What Middle and High School Students Have to Say about Physical Education

*Lynn E. Couturier, Steveda Chepko, and Mary Ann Coughlin*

## **Abstract**

*This study was the result of an action research project between a local urban school system and the Physical Education faculty at a nearby college. The faculty and the teachers worked together to design, administer, and analyze a student survey that would give voice to middle and high school student perspectives on physical education. Over 5000 surveys were returned. When asked to rate the most important reasons why students choose to participate in physical education, most students agreed that they liked to get out and move, they liked competitive team sports, it made them healthier, and they had fun. When asked why students would choose not to participate, most students agreed with that they didn't like doing the same activities every year and that showering and changing were barriers to participation. Some differences in responses were found between middle school students and high school students.*

This study was the result of an ongoing partnership between a local urban school system and the Physical Education Teacher Preparation Program (PETP) faculty at a nearby college. In this partnership, the PETP faculty and selected teachers from this school system had developed and implemented a new system-wide physical education curriculum for grades K-12. The curriculum had been in place for two years when a series of in-service training days centered on implementation and assessment was scheduled. During these in-service days, teachers in the system began to reflect on why their students would choose, or not choose, to participate in the curriculum. The teachers sought assistance in

understanding student perspectives and choices in their school system. The PETP faculty agreed to collaborate in an action research project with the middle and secondary level teachers to determine what attracted their students to physical education and what barriers existed to their students' participation.

Over the last fifteen years, a great deal of effort has been invested in determining factors that encourage or discourage students from participation in physical education. These efforts have taken on greater urgency, as across the country, mandatory state requirements for physical education have been reduced or eliminated (NASPE, 1993). This trend continues, in spite of the public's increased awareness of the importance of physical activity for development, health, and wellness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). If physical education is to survive, particularly at the secondary level, teachers need to understand how their students perceive physical education. In other words, what attitudes, values, and obstacles shape student decisions to participate in physical education? What do students have to say about their experiences?

Existing research provides some insight into why students may choose, or not choose, to engage in physical education. Students like physical education when the curriculum has relevancy to their lives, reflects variety and choice, includes team sports, is coeducational, and provides opportunities for fun and enjoyment (Chen, 1998; Earl & Stennett, 1987; Figley, 1985; Lirgg, 1993; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Rice, 1988; Stewart, Green & Huelskamp, 1991; Tannehill, Romar, O'Sullivan, England & Rosenberg, 1994; Tannehill &

Zakrajsek, 1993). Even students who like physical education can be confronted by obstacles to their participation because of the necessity of changing and/or showering, required fitness testing, uncomfortable weather conditions, and potential for injury (Earl & Stennett, 1987; Ennis, Cothran, Davidson, Loftus, Owens, Swanson & Hopsiker, 1997; Luke & Cope, 1994; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Rice, 1988; Scantling, Strand, Lackey & McAleese, 1995; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993). Significant issues with physical education exist for those who do not like it. These students believe the curriculum is repetitive, boring, lacks personal meaning, the environment is too competitive, or they are likely to be ridiculed or embarrassed (Carlson, 1995; Chen, 1998; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Ennis et al., 1997; Luke & Cope, 1994; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Tannehill et al., 1994; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993).

In reviewing the literature, the curriculum was one of the most important factors in influencing student participation. This information reinforced the importance of the recent curriculum revisions undertaken by the teachers and PETP. However, since curriculum was not the only determinant of student attitudes, the teachers wanted to gather information about other potential impediments to participation. PETP faculty and the teachers worked together in designing, administering, and analyzing a student survey that would give voice to student perspectives on physical education.

### **Methods**

The first step in designing the survey was to meet with the Director of Physical Education for the school system and the department chairs for physical education in each of the eleven schools. In this meeting, three areas of interest were agreed upon; reasons why students want to participate in physical education, reasons why students do not want to participate in physical education, and demographic information. Using information collected in the review of literature and the teachers' own questions, PETP faculty developed a list of potential items for the first draft of the survey. These items directly reflected specific

concerns of the teachers and the department chairs as well as interactions these individuals had with students in their schools. The chairs reviewed this first draft and made recommendations for revisions. This new draft was presented at a second meeting with the chairs, who again made recommendations for revisions. A third draft was submitted to the chairs for final comments and minor edits. This draft was accepted for use in a pilot study.

The pilot study was conducted in a nearby high school outside the system. Once completed, minor edits were made to the questionnaire to ensure clarity and ease of response based on the feedback from the pilot. This final revision of the survey was submitted for approval to the original school system. After approval was granted, the questionnaire was translated into Spanish and both Spanish and English versions of the survey were distributed to all middle and secondary schools in the system (copies are available upon request from the authors). The survey was then administered to students in physical education classes over a one-week period in the spring.

### **Results**

Out of 7000 surveys distributed, 5308 were returned for analysis reflecting a 76% response rate. The school system was comprised of four high schools (grades 9-12) and seven middle schools (grades 6-8) and the participants ranged in age from 11 to 20 years. For detailed demographics, see Figure 1. Of particular note in the demographic section of the survey was the students' rating of their interest in various activities. Students ranked team sports first, swimming second, dance third, fitness fourth, individual sports fifth, and cooperative games sixth. In keeping with the partnership, the results of this study were made available to each teacher in the school system with breakdowns by school and by grade.

#### *General Survey Results*

In the first section of the survey, students responded to items related to why they would

choose to participate in physical education class. The researchers found that most students agreed that they chose to participate because; "It makes me healthier" (70.7%), "I like participating because I have fun" (69.6%), "I like getting out of the classroom and moving" (68.8%), "I like playing competitive team sports" (65.7%), "I like learning new games and activities" (64.8%), and "I like participating in lots of different activities" (64.4%). When asked to rate the three most important reasons why students choose to participate in physical education, most students listed; "I like getting out of the classroom and moving" (43.2%), "I like playing competitive team sports" (36.1%), "It makes me healthier" (33.4%), and "I like participating because I have fun" (32.5%) as their top reasons. The items least often rated as the three most important reasons students chose to participate in physical education were "I like learning about my body" (16.5%) and "My friends think it is cool to participate" (4.7%).

In the second section of the survey, students were asked to respond to statements that described how students feel about physical education classes. When asked to describe their opinions about various curricular aspects of their experiences in physical education classes, most students agreed with; "I would like to be able to pick my own activities" (75.5%), "I would like to be able to tell the teacher the activities I would like to do" (73.6%), "I would like to choose what group of students I participate with" (61.0%), "I would like to be able to work at my own pace" (55.7%), and "I would like to do a greater variety of activities" (54.0%). When asked to describe their opinions about other aspects of their experiences in physical education classes, many students agreed with "I participate in Physical Education because I am getting better at physical activities" (46.2%) and "I think Physical Education is as important as English and Math" (43.1%). Only 26% of students agreed that they participate in physical education because they liked their teacher.

The third section of the survey asked students to identify why some students would choose not

to participate in physical education. The items in this section could be grouped as curricular, social, or environmental issues. Repetition in the curriculum was identified as an issue, as 45.1% of the students agreed with "I don't like doing the same activities every year". Twenty percent or less of the students agreed that any of the following were curricular barriers to participating in physical education classes; "I don't like the stretching and fitness activities" (20.0%), "I never learn anything in Physical Education" (18.7%), and "I don't like to compete" (17.6%).

When asked to identify some of the social reasons why students choose not to participate in physical education, most students agreed with "I don't like going to my next class all sweaty" (64.4%). Less than 20% of the students agreed that any of the following were social barriers to participating in physical education; "I don't feel like it" (19.7%), "I don't feel I am good at sports" (19.1%), "I don't feel that I am as good as my classmates" (16.9%), "I am afraid of breaking my nails during Physical Education class" (16.4%), "I am afraid other students will make fun of me" (15.6%), "My friends don't think it is cool to participate in Physical Education class" (11.4%), "I don't like playing in classes with boys and girls together" (10.7%), and "I don't participate because my religion says I shouldn't" (8.1%).

When asked to identify some of the environmental reasons why students choose not to participate in physical education, most students agreed with; "I don't feel I have enough time to change and shower" (52.9%), "I hate having to bring and carry my physical education clothes in school" (44.1%), and "I don't feel comfortable leaving my clothes in the locker" (40.3%). Interestingly, only 14% of the students agreed that they don't like to participate in physical education because the class is too big. When asked to rate the three most important reasons why students choose not to participate in physical education, 31.1% of students selected "I don't like going to my next class all sweaty", 22% selected "I hate having to bring and carry my physical education clothes in school", over 19% selected "I don't feel I have

enough time to change and shower” and “I don’t like swimming”, and 17.1% selected “I have a hard time remembering to bring my clothes.”

#### *Middle School and Secondary School Differences*

Middle school and secondary school students differed in their responses in several areas. In ranking activities, middle school students rated swimming first, team sports second, dance third, cooperative games fourth, individual sports fifth, and fitness activities last, while high school students rated team sports first, fitness activities second, individual sports third, dance fourth, cooperative games fifth, and swimming last. High school students were more likely than middle school students to choose to participate in physical education because “It makes me healthier” (high school, 73.1% versus middle school, 68.3%) and because “I like getting out of the classroom and moving” (72.3% and 65.7%, respectively). In contrast, middle school students were more likely than high school students to choose to participate in physical education because “I like learning new games and activities” (middle school, 70.0% versus high school, 60.3%). No significant differences were found between middle and high school students in the ratings of the three most important reasons to participate in physical education.

Middle and high school students also differed in their opinions about curricular aspects of their experiences in physical education classes. High school students were more likely than middle school students to agree that; “I would like to be able to pick my own activities” (high school, 79.3% versus middle school 71.7%) and “I would like to be able to tell the teacher the activities I would like to do” (77.2% and 69.1%, respectively). In contrast, middle school students were more likely than high school students to agree that; “I would like to be able to choose what group of students I participate with” (middle school, 67.1% versus high school, 56.8%).

When asked about other aspects of physical education experiences, middle school and high school students differed in their opinions in many

ways. Middle school students were more likely than high school students to agree with; “I participate in Physical Education because I am getting better at physical activities” (middle school, 52.8% versus high school, 41.2%), “I think Physical Education is as important as English and Math” (47.5% versus 39.7%), and “My parents think Physical Education is as important as English and Math” (34.6% versus 26.7%). However, high school students were more likely than middle school students to agree with “I participate in Physical Education because I have to” (high school, 41.3% versus middle school, 32.4%). Responses to swimming also yielded differences. High school students were more likely to agree that they don’t like swimming than middle school students (43.5% and 23.6%, respectively).

When responding to why students might choose not to participate in physical education, a few differences were found between high school and middle school students. High school students were more likely than middle school students to agree with “I don’t feel I have enough time to change and shower” (high school, 57.9% versus middle school, 46.6%) and “I hate having to bring and carry my physical education clothes in school” (49.1% and 37.7%, respectively). In contrast, middle school students were more likely than high school students to agree with “I don’t feel comfortable changing in front of others” (middle school, 45.1% versus high school, 28.4%). In identifying the top three reasons why students might choose not to participate in physical education, middle and high school students differed significantly on one item. Over 26% of high school students selected “I don’t like swimming” compared with only 10.5% of middle school students.

#### **Discussion**

As the teachers in the school system had specific areas they wanted to examine through the survey, many of the items tested aspects of student perceptions not previously addressed in the literature. For example, one surprising finding in this study was that 71% of students agreed that

they would choose to participate in physical education because “it makes me healthier”. The profession’s message of health and wellness through physical activity seems to have pierced students’ understanding. The importance of the curriculum has already been established in previous research (Carlson, 1995; Ennis et al., 1997; Luke & Cope, 1994; Tannehill, et al., 1994), but the findings in this study suggest to practitioners that students would like more input into activity choices. The student voices in this urban school district were clear in their desire for “choices” within the context of the physical education curriculum. Students also want to choose the groups they participate with and to be able to work at their own pace.

Some of the items in the survey tested commonly held beliefs, which did not turn out to be valid for this population. Choosing to participate or not participate because “friends think it’s cool” was not selected as an important reason (fewer than 20%). Furthermore, fewer than 20% of the students identified that stretching/fitness activities, competitive activities, breaking fingernails, religion beliefs, anxiety over ability or potential embarrassment, or class size were reasons not to participate.

Many of the findings in this study corroborate previous research. Students chose to participate in physical education because they like team sports (Figley, 1985; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Rice, 1988; Tannehill, et al., 1994; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993), learn new games and activities (Earl & Stennett, 1987), have variety in activity (Carlson, 1995; Luke & Cope, 1994; Tannehill, et al., 1994), and have fun (Earl & Stennett, 1987; Lirgg, 1993; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Tannehill, et al., 1994). Support also exists for coeducational classes, similar to the findings of Lirgg (1993) and Tannehill, et al., (1994). Barriers to participation in physical education included having to go to class sweaty (Earl & Stennett, 1987), not enough time to shower/ change (Rice, 1988; Scantling et al., 1995), and repetition/boredom with the curriculum (Ennis et al., 1997; Scantling et al., 1995). Thus, much of the previous research

in this area was supported. The strength of this study, however, lies in the large number of respondents (over 5300) as well as differences in attitudes based on level in school.

The identification of differences between middle and high school students with regard to their perceptions about participating in physical education is an important aspect of this study. Although Lirgg (1993) reported that high school students preferred coeducational classes and middle school students preferred single sex classes, few other researchers have examined potential differences between these two groups. In this study, students voiced notable differences in the rankings of activity preferences. Middle school students ranked swimming first while high school students ranked it last. On the other hand, middle school students ranked fitness activities last while high school students ranked them second. Middle school students were more likely than high school students to agree that they like learning new games and activities, they want to choose the group they work with, they participate because they are getting better, they think physical education is as important as English or Math, they are afraid others would make fun of them, and they don’t feel comfortable changing in front of others. High school students were more likely than middle school students to agree that they like getting out of class and moving, physical education makes them healthier, they want to pick their own activities, they participate because they have to, they don’t have enough time to change and shower, they don’t like having to bring clothes for class, and they don’t like to swim.

These differences by level are noteworthy for their implications for curriculum design. Teachers need to hear and be sensitive to the grade level of students when making decisions about which activities to offer if the curriculum is to be meaningful. Swimming may be a critical physical skill, but it will likely meet with resistance if placed at an inappropriate level. Placing a new pool in the high school may not be ideal for instructional purposes when secondary school students are resistant to participating in this

activity. On the other hand, a curriculum heavy in fitness activities may be better received at the high school level than the middle school level. Middle school students may not be receptive to “working out”, but the goals of fitness and wellness may still be achieved by keeping the students continuously active in activities such as modified games. In fact, based on this study, teachers should try to capitalize on their students’ general awareness of the relationship between health and physical activity by weaving health and wellness themes into whatever activities they offer.

For high school students, choice of activities and input into those choices is critical. Many programs already include choices, but how often are the choices driven by the expertise of the teachers as opposed to the preferences of the students? Some curriculums may have electives, but repeat the same choices year after year. This structure does not promote the necessary variety for optimal student participation. Teachers need to consider activities that appeal to a broader base than the traditional individual and team sport curriculum. Consideration of the organization and structure of lessons may also enhance the experience of participants. Teachers may further benefit from considering the structure of their classes. If middle school students want to choose their own groups, value getting better, and don’t want to be made fun of by peers, teachers can plan lessons to accommodate choice of partners, equipment, and level of challenge. These are simply extensions of commonly held practices in elementary school.

Even if these curricular issues are addressed well, persistent structural barriers may remain to participation. Time to shower and change and the nuisance of bringing clothes to school are still deterrents to participation for many students. Some creativity with regard to dressing for class, coupled with some advocacy for appropriate scheduling of class time, may make it easier for students to participate. One suggestion for future research is to design a qualitative study that would examine the issues in this study with more depth and texture. Perhaps if we would listen,

students themselves could be resources for addressing some of the obstacles to participation in physical education.

Finally, the value of the partnership between the school system and the PETP faculty cannot be underestimated. The school system provides the vital connection between theory and practice that keeps faculty grounded in the day-to-day issues of teaching and it provides preservice teacher placement sites for the institution. The PETP faculty provides resources, inservice programming, consultation on projects, and assistance with school field days. Thus, the partnership is mutually beneficial. Collaborative projects such as curriculum revision and this research project are enhanced by the reciprocity of expertise. This type of partnership is critical for promoting best practice and developing action research and is well worth the time needed to cultivate it.

## REFERENCES

- Carlson, T. (1995). We hate gym: Student alienation from physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 14*, 467-477.
- Chen, A. (1998). Meaningful in physical education: A description of high school students' conceptions. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 17*, 285-306.
- Cothran, D. & Ennis, C. (1999). Alone in a crowd: Meeting students' needs for relevance and connection in urban high school physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 18*, 234-247.
- Cothran, D. & Ennis, C. (1998). Curricula of mutual worth: Comparisons of students' and teachers' curricular goals. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 17*, 306-326.
- Earl, L. & Stennett, R. (1987). Student attitudes toward physical and health education in secondary schools in Ontario. *Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Journal, 53*(4), 4-11.
- Ennis, C., Cothran, D., Davidson, K., Loftus, S., Owens, L., Swanson, L. & Hopsicker, P. (1997). Implementing curriculum within a con-

- text of fear and disengagement. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 17, 52-71.
- Figley, G. (1985). Determinants of attitudes toward in physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 4, 229-240.
- Lirgg, C. (1993). Effects of same-sex versus coeducational physical education on the self-perceptions of middle and high school students. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 64(3), 324 - 334.
- Luke, M. & Cope, L. (1994). Student attitudes toward teacher behavior and program content in school physical education. *The Physical Educator*, 51(2), 57-66.
- Luke, M. & Sinclair, G. (1991). Gender differences in adolescents' attitudes toward school physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 11, 31-46.
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (1993). *Shape of the nation 1993: A survey of state physical education requirements*. Reston, VA: AAHPERD Publications.
- Rice, P. (1988). Attitudes of high school students toward physical education activities, teachers and personal health. *Physical Educator*, 45(2), 94-99.
- Scantling, E., Strand, B., Lackey, D. & McAleese, W. (1995). An analysis of physical education avoidance. *The Physical Educator*, 52(4), 197-202.
- Stewart, M., Green, S. & Huelskamp, J. (1991). Secondary student attitudes toward physical education. *The Physical Educator*, 48(2), 72-79.
- Tannehill, D., Romar, J., O'Sullivan, M., England, K. & Rosenberg, D. (1994). Attitudes toward physical education: Their impact on how physical education teachers make sense of their work. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 13, 406-420.
- Tannehill, D. & Zakrajsek, D. (1993). Student attitudes towards physical education: A multicultural study. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 13, 78-84.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1996). *Physical activity and health: A report of the Surgeon General*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

---

Dr. Lynn Couturier is the Department Head for Health and Physical Education at the United States Coast Guard Academy, Dr. Steveda Chepko is the Department Chair of Health and Physical Education at Winthrop University and Dr. Mary Ann Coughlin is an Associate Professor for Research and Statistics at Springfield College.

Figure 1 Physical Education Survey Demographics

		Count	%
Male		2601	49
Female		2707	51
Ethnic	Asian	211	4
	African-American	1411	26.6
	Hispanic	1614	34
	Russian	89	1.7
	White	1809	34.1
	Other	174	3.3
Number of friends Participate	1.00	284	5.8
	2.00	267	5.5
	3.00	678	13.9
	4.00	727	14.9
	5.00	2923	59.9
Number of classes you Participated	1.00	236	4.8
	2.00	237	4.9
	3.00	469	9.6
	4.00	743	15.2
	5.00	3193	65.5
Active Parent	1.00	1378	33.6
	2.00	580	14.4
	3.00	813	19.8
	4.00	394	9.6
	5.00	939	22.9
Describe how you feel about school	like a lot	836	16.8
	school is ok	3239	65
	hate school	907	18.2
Grade in school	A	1021	20.5
	B	2045	41.1
	C	1495	30.1
	Below C	410	8.2
Grade in PE	A	2520	52.1
	B	1133	23.4
	C	525	10.9
	Below C	660	13.7
Do you participate in physical activity outside of class	Yes	3749	74.9
	No	1258	25.1