

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 &