A Qualitative Investigation of Middle School Students' Perceptions of Appropriate Instructional Practices in Physical Education

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Abstract

Many middle school (MS) students have been exposed to many inappropriate instructional practices in physical education (PE). Involvement in, and exposure to these inappropriate instructional practices become common occurrences, causing students to believe this is what should take place in their PE class. The purpose of this study was to better understand MS students’ perceptions and attitudes of appropriate instructional practices (AIP) in their PE classes. It was generally found from interviews that students perceived dodge ball to be acceptable, that wearing prescribed clothing (school shirt) will earn an easy ‘A’, and that having captains pick teams in front of the whole class all as appropriate practices for PE class.
**Introduction**

In 1992, the Council of Physical Education for Children (COPEC) published a position statement titled *Developmentally Appropriate Physical Education Practices for Children*. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) revised the document into three separate documents for elementary (2004a), middle school (2004b), and high school (2004c) physical education (PE). More recently, NASPE revised the Appropriate Instructional Practices (AIP) documents for elementary (2009a), middle school (2009b), and high school (2009c). In addition to other purposes, these documents “address key aspects of instructional strategies and practices that are essential to delivery of quality physical education to adolescents and young adults” (NASPE, 2000c). Another purpose for these documents is to give “specific guidelines for recognizing and implementing developmentally appropriate physical education activities and practices…practices that are in the best interests of children (appropriate) and those that are counterproductive or even harmful (inappropriate) need to be identified for the benefit of the students (NASPE, 2009c, p.7).

With these purposes established, these documents serve as a tool “intended for policymakers, school administrators, and parents to provide specific guidelines…in the best interest of children” (2009a, p.7).

The area of AIP in PE, research has been conducted among many different populations. For example, K-12 students (Barney & Christenson, 2014; Barney, Strand, & Prusak, 2013 & Barney & Strand, 2008), parents (Barney & Pleban, 2010), school administrators (Barney & Prusak, 2016), Physical Education Teachers Education (PETE) Majors (Barney, Christenson, & Pleban, 2012), PE teachers (Strand & Bender, 2011), and regular college students (Strand, Barney, & DeFries, 2008), have been studied to ascertain their knowledge of AIP in PE. After
analyzing the results from these populations there are several instructional practices that these populations have repeatedly misidentified as appropriate instructional practices for PE. For example, parents feel the curriculum should consist of large groups (teams) in game activities usually with one ball between the two teams. Another example of an inappropriate instructional practice is having captains pick teams in front of the whole class. This activity has happened for many years, leaving students hurt and embarrassed, along with wasting valuable class time. Yet, another example is the view that dodgeball is appropriate to play in PE class. This activity has been glamorized in movies (Cooper, Dobkins, & Gillespie, 2007) and print media (Reilly, 2001). The activity of dodgeball is typically enjoyed by males and disliked by females (Barney & Prusak, in press).

The AIP documents includes specific examples of appropriate and inappropriate instructional practices in PE. Research has identified two additional, specific inappropriate instructional practices that are commonly implemented in PE classes. The first, centers around students picking teams in front of the whole class. Barney, Prusak, Beddoes, & Eggett (2016) surveyed junior high school male students in PE class about picking teams. Students participated in two curriculum units (flag football and soccer). For these two units’ students were picked by captains in front of their whole class or the teams were picked in a private draft with the PE teachers and captains. The researchers asked the PE teacher to have a captains pick teams for one unit and for the other unit, there would be the private meeting to select teams. After analyzing the data, the students did not express strong opinions or feelings about captains picking teams in front of their class or having a private draft. These results surprised the researchers, prompting a second study. The next study included units in basketball and volleyball and used the same methodology. Once again, the results were very similar to the data
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from the flag football and soccer unit. The researchers decided to randomly interview the junior
high school students to gain further insight. The results from the interviews painted a different
picture. Students that were picked last or towards the end knew they would be picked last or
towards the end and did not like how it felt to be picked last. The students that were captains and
students who were picked first expressed empathy for those students picked towards the end.
They stated that they felt “bad” for their classmates, and that they “wouldn’t be thrilled” if they
were picked last.

A second study instructional strategy looked specifically at exercise as punishment (EAP)
in PE class. Barney, Fullmer, Higginson, Griffiths, & Whaley (2016) interviewed college-aged
students regarding their thoughts and experiences of EAP during their time in K-12 PE. It was
generally found that the college students in this study did not enjoy EAP while they were in K-12
PE. When the college students were asked how it made them feel when they experienced EAP,
they said “it was humiliating”, “it changes the mood [of the class]”, and “embarrassed” when I
had to run in front of my classmates. The college students were asked if EAP would have any
effect on their future physical activity (PA). One student stated, “Why choose to do something
that you’ve learned is a punishment.” These two studies illustrate the impact these instructional
practices can have on attitudes towards PE class and lifelong PA.

Many of these AIP studies have helped create a baseline of information helping PETE
faculty better understand different populations and knowledge regarding instructional practices
in PE. This information has been beneficial to current K-12 PE teachers and PETE faculty in
preparations of their students. Although the many AIP studies that have been conducted, there is
a paucity of qualitative results. This presents an opportunity to add to the AIP literature. Thus,
the purpose of this study was to better understand middle school (MS) students’ perceptions and attitudes towards AIP in their PE classes.

Methods

Participants

This study included 25 students (eight males and 17 females; 12 6th graders, eight 7th graders and five 8th graders) from the southeastern region of the United States. Approval was obtained from the university institutional review board (IRB). The school district IRB gave approval, the researcher contacted the PE teachers at the MS to explain the study, which included student interviews. The four PE teachers (two males and two females) subsequently agreed to the study, as well.

Procedures

Over a three-day period, the researcher interviewed students, with parental consent, regarding their perceptions and attitudes regarding AIP in their PE classes. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes and were audio recorded. All the students were asked the same questions during their interview. The interviews took place in an empty classroom in the gymnasium. At the conclusion of the interview the student would return to their PE class and activities.

Interview Questions

The interview questions that were formulated for this study came from the results of the Barney, Strand, and Prusak (2013) study. The results of the study found that students felt the following instructional practices were appropriate: a) teachers organizing activities involving large groups or teams with one ball for the activity, b) dodgeball, c) having captains pick teams in front of the whole class, and d) students’ should be graded on wearing prescribed clothing and
e) students should being given outside-of-class assignments (homework) to apply what was taught in PE class.

Data Analysis

Participant responses to interview questions were analyzed for each interview question and reviewed to generate preliminary coding categories, with framework analysis methodology for participant responses, as outlined by Check and Schutt (2011). Framework analysis incorporated the stages of 1) familiarization, 2) thematic, 3) indentification and 4) charting and interpretation (Rabiee, 2004). The investigators used established categories from Barney, Strand and Prusak (2013) to sort the data. These categories included: a) student’s participation in large groups or teams with one ball, b) dodgeball, c) students being graded on wearing prescribed clothing as part of their grade, d), out-of-class assignments (homework) is appropriate for PE class, and e) captains picking teams in front of the whole class (Table 1).

Results

Student Participation in Large Groups or Teams

Student comments regarding their participation in large groups or teams dealt with a lack of students not participating, leading to students goofing off. During interviews students that were more skilled didn’t like or were frustrated when they participated in activities in large groups and teams with one ball. Fran said,

“Because we play with one ball, students will not pass the ball to everyone. I hate that. I want to play, but no one will throw the ball. Because of this there is lots of arguing, which is just a waste of time.”

Malcolm said,

“When we play with large teams the best players will hog the ball and will be playing the
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138 hardest. Those that are not playing are standing around and talking. I guess as they are
139 standing around they can watch the others play and learn.”
140 Steve stated, “I don’t like playing on large teams. I can’t play as well, and I can’t shoot the ball
141 as much. I get mad at those standing around, because they get in the way.” And finally, Lindsey
142 stated,
143 “It can be rough. Everybody is going for the one ball. Some of the players are standing
144 off to the side. The athletic ones are playing. The ones standing off to the side have their
145 phones out. If the ball comes to them, they throw the ball away. It is a big pain.”
146 Dodgeball
147 The second category dealt with dodgeball being played in PE class. The theme that came
148 from this category was that both male and female students liked playing dodgeball in class. A
149 majority of students believed playing dodgeball was an appropriate activity. Many of the student
150 comments dealt with having fun while they played dodge ball. John said,
151 “I played dodgeball in elementary school and now in middle school we have played it. It
152 is so much fun to play. I am a baseball player, and I can throw the ball pretty good (the
153 student had a big grin on his face as he made this statement). When I hit someone, I
154 don’t think it hurts because the ball is squishy.”
155 Kelsey stated, “Dodgeball is so fun! It is fun throwing at people. It is also fun trying not getting
156 hit by the ball.” The researcher asked Kelsey how other students might feel when they were hit
157 by the ball. She said, “It is probably a bummer. Maybe they are saying, “Dang! After they get
158 hit they probably want to get back in the game. I do!”
159 Wearing Prescribed Clothing for a Grade
The third category looked at wearing specific clothing (school shirt) for a student’s grade. The theme from this interview question was that this method of grading was easily a main part of getting a good grade. Stephanie stated, “It’s an easy ‘A’. All you have to do is wear the [school] t-shirt and you will get a good grade. I don’t think that is the best way to be graded in PE.” The researcher asked Stephanie what she thought she should be graded on. She felt that a student be graded on “what we do in class. If we play the games and do our warm-ups.” Gus said, “I don’t want to lose points for not wearing my [school] shirt. I guess it is OK. There really isn’t much to grade in PE. So, they need to grade something. If that is what they want to grade on I am okay with it.”

Along with comments Stephanie and Gus made, many of the other students that were interviewed voiced the same opinions of wearing the [school] shirt would help get and “easy ‘A’.” The other opinion was that they did not want to lose points because they did not wear the [school] shirt.

**Out of Class Assignment**

The fourth category had to do with out-of-class assignments in PE. The general theme for this category received a universal reaction of “Homework in PE? No way!” Not one student said they liked the idea, or they thought having homework was unnecessary. For example, Jodie said, “I think it is unnecessary. I would not do it. Besides I play on the volleyball and softball teams, so that is my homework for PE.” Teresa stated, “It would frustrate me. I already have other school stuff to do. And plus, PE is a class to have fun. Having to do homework would take the fun out of PE class. That is just dumb.” Janet summarized student feelings about out-of-class assignments in PE when she said,

“I am not sure it is a good idea. I do know that if we had out-of-class assignments in PE,
not many people would do them. They would need to be recorded to prove the Coach
Smith (pseudonym) we did it to get the points.”

Captains Picking Teams in Front of the Whole Class

The fifth and final category was captains picking teams in front of the whole class. The
two themes that came from the interviews. The first was that picking teams was a common
instructional practice and students were used to it. The second theme was they wanted to be
picked by their friends or pick their friends to be on their team. For the first theme, Paul stated,
“When I am captain I hurry and pick my team, because I want to get playing.” The researcher
then asked Paul how picking teams in front of the whole class made others feel. Paul said,” I
think they are okay with it. Every time we play basketball and soccer, we pick teams. We do it
all the time.” John said, “Picking teams is okay. Everyone thinks it is fair. The only people that
are not happy are those girls that are not on the same team with their friends.” Kim said, “When
we pick teams, I don’t like it, because it isn’t fair.” Kim’s statement alludes to the fact that
picking teams is a common instructional practice. The second theme that was common among
the participants was being picked by their friends or picking their friends. Lindsey said,
“When I am captain, I always pick my friends to be on my team. It makes the game so
much funnier. Last year when I was captain, one of my friends was picked by another
girl. My friend was so mad at me. So after that I would pick her first.”
Brent stated,

I try to pick my friends, but they are pretty good [players], so they get picked first. The
girls get all upset if they don’t pick their friends. One time after their teams were picked,
they were trying to trade some other girls so they could have their friends with them.”
Interestingly, not all students felt picking teams was a good instructional practice. A few of the students commented that when teams were picked, students were “hurt”, “embarrassed”, “they had a sad look on their face’, and said “it would be a bummer.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand MS students’ perceptions and attitudes towards AIP in their PE classes. The qualitative results from this study came from five categories from previous research (Barney, Strand, & Prusak, 2013). From these categories there came four themes from the MS student responses during the interviews. They were: 1) students like dodgeball in PE class, 2) wearing prescribed clothing is an easy ‘A’ in PE class, 3) out-of-class assignments are not good for PE and 4) picking teams in front of the class is a normal practice in PE class.

The theme of the appropriateness of playing dodgeball does not come as a surprise. Dodgeball has been played in PE class, and other settings, for many years (Barney & Pleban, 2010). Dodgeball, for some people is a rite of passage in a becoming young man or young women (Reilly, 2001). Dodgeball has been promoted to improve a students’ ability to jump, to avoid getting hit by the ball, improve a students’ throwing ability and to be courageous during the game (Barney & Prusak, in press). From this study many of the students stated the game was “fun”, “exciting”, and “awesome.” Yet, NASPE, has come out with a position statement regarding dodgeball. It states, “dodgeball is not an appropriate activity for K-12 school physical education programs” (NASPE, 2006). The document continues to state that dodge ball doesn’t build confidence in students, weaker students are targeted, phrases like “throw-to-kill”, “headshots” and “annihilate” are used, which are not appropriate. With this statement not endorsing dodgeball as an appropriate instructional practice, students indicated otherwise with
such statements like “Dodgeball is fun. It is fun throwing at people” and “Dodgeball is a good competitive game, and I am competitive, I want to win.” This mindset of dodgeball being appropriate will continue until PE teachers, parents and school administrators act otherwise.

Students indicated that wearing prescribed clothing was a procedure to help get an easy ‘A’ in PE class. Student comments were centered around wearing the prescribed [school] shirt to receive the ‘A’ grade. One student stated, “If you don’t wear the right shirt at all you could get a bad grade for the class.” Another student said, “Wearing the [school] shirt is an easy way to get a good grade in PE. The ‘A’ I get in PE is great for my GPA.” Here again, students felt that wearing prescribed clothing was an appropriate practice for them in their PE class. Yet, Miller (2002) stated that basing grades on dress, attendance and effort undermine PE class. Dress, attendance and effort are relevant assessments of students’ affective skills related to physical education. Rather, PE teachers should explore a variety of alternative assessment techniques to analyze students’ understanding and the teachers’ effectiveness. It’s also possible that students understand that dress, attendance and effort are not appropriate and meaningful measures in the psychomotor and cognitive domain and defaulted them to the affective domain. But that would mean they have an incomplete understanding of how the social/affective domain contributes to learning in PE (Barney & Strand, 2006). This instructional practice does not have the potential to negatively affect student attitudes towards PE or physical activity (PA) throughout their life. Yet, the message is sent to students, that wearing prescribed clothing and showing up to class will guarantee an “A” grade. The message being sent to students, parents, and school administrators is that PE is not important for student learning and that it is glorified recess. Here again, PE teachers need to change this instructional practice, which in turn, may start to change a person’s perception and mindset regarding PE.
Another theme dealt with out-of-class assignments (homework) and finding them
unnecessary for PE class. When students were asked during the interviews about out-of-class
assignments many of them laughed at the idea of having ‘homework’ in PE class. Not one
student felt out-of-class assignments could even be a part of PE class. One student openly and
honestly stated, “I would never do homework for PE.” Out-of-class assignments give students
opportunities to apply what they were taught in class. Mitchell, Stanne and Barton (2000)
studied attitudes of high school students towards out-of-class assignments in PE. Generally, the
students in this study vocalized the importance of out-of-class assignments for them. Yet, the
physical educators in this study felt the students were not giving their best efforts to complete
given assignment. The results from this study illustrates that students do not take out-of-class
assignments seriously. Here again, physical educators need to hold students responsible
regarding out-of-class assignments. This instructional practice can greatly affect a student’s
experience in their PE class. As students are given out-of-class assignments and are successfully
accomplished, skills can improve, resulting in greater confidence in participating in the given
game or activity.

Finally, many of the students in this study felt that picking teams in front of the whole
class was a common (and largely appropriate) instructional practice for PE class. This practice
of picking teams in front of the whole class usually occurred when the class played basketball
and soccer, as stated by a student when he stated, “every time we play basketball and soccer, we
pick teams.” The researcher felt from this statement, this practice was a common place
occurrence, or a routine established with the students. Another point from this category was that
the students wanted to be picked by their friends and be on the same team. Student responses to
this interview question were, “I want to be picked by my friends”, and “I like it better when I am
on the same team as my friends.” These types of responses are similar to what Barney, Prusak, Beddoes, and Egget (2016) learned from their study, investigated junior high school boy’s experiences when teams are picked by captains. In follow-up interviews students stated that in many cases captains will pick their friends. With these two themes being repeated during the interviews, there were still statements made that picking teams with captains in front of the whole class was not liked by everyone. One student that was a captain said, “I bet students that are picked last probably feel bad.” Another student stated, “I don’t like to be captain, because I have to pick the last one [student] to be on my team. I don’t like the look on their faces.” Once again, these students’ statements are similar to findings from Barney, Prusak, Beddoes, and Egget (2016). From their study, students stated, “that being picked last “can be [a big deal] because it excludes people.” Other comments were, “It is not fun being picked last”, and “Being picked last means you don’t have any friends.” This instructional practice can be completely eliminated by the PE teacher by taking time to thoughtfully thinking through and creating teams before game play starts in PE class.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to better understand MS students’ perceptions and attitudes towards AIP in their PE classes. Interviews conducted with MS students in this study once again reaffirms the importance of MS physical educators, and all K-12 physical educators, to implement AIP in their lessons and activities. The results from this study reveal that such instructional practices such as captains picking teams in front of the whole class, being graded on wearing prescribed clothing, and the playing of dodgeball are still taking place in MS PE classes. Physical educators need to evaluate their instructional practices and make adjustments if they are taking place in their classes. These instructional practices have the potential to negatively affect
student attitudes towards their PE classes and eventually have a negative impact in a students
lifelong PA. Luckily, these students in this study that were interviewed did not have negative
attitudes towards their PE experiences. During the interviews the researcher asked the students
what they like about their PE class. Students responded by saying they liked the games and
activities they participate in, their PE teachers, and the opportunity to be with friends and make
friends. It is hoped through continued exposure to AIP in PE, MS students will have positive
attitudes and a desire to be physically active throughout their lifetime. This being one method in
helping to combat obesity (Committee of Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth, 2005;
Jain, 2004).

Study Limitations

Two primary limitations are noted for this study. Participants came from one middle
school either in the region or across the nation or world. Research involving additional MS
students is needed to ascertain the pervasiveness of these practices. Another limitation is the
categories used narrowed what was studied: many other instructional practices could be
investigated that related to AIP.
References


Table 1
List of Appropriate Instructional Practices (AIP) Categories and Student Interview Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIP Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Participation in Large Groups or Teams</td>
<td>* Students Goofing off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Not enough Interaction with the Ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodge Ball</td>
<td>* Student like playing Dodge Ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* It is fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing Prescribed Clothing</td>
<td>* Wearing the [school] shirt aids in getting an easy ‘A’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class Assignments (homework)</td>
<td>* Homework in PE? No way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Students wouldn’t do it (homework)</td>
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</tbody>
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