

Generalist Student Teachers' Perceptions of Self, Physical Activity and Health and Physical Education Curriculum

By :

Michael Gard - Charles Sturt University

Dr Joan Fry - Charles Sturt University

Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Australian Association
for Research in Education, 30 November - 4 December 1997, Hilton
International Hotel, Brisbane.

Michael Gard is an associate lecturer in Personal Development, Health
and Physical

Education and Human Movement at Charles Sturt University. He is
enrolled as a Ph.D. student through the University of Wollongong.

Dr Joan Fry is a senior lecturer in Recreation and Human Movement at
Charles Sturt University

Contact

Mail: Michael Gard and Joan Fry,

Charles Sturt University,

Panorama Drive,

Bathurst, NSW, 2795.

email: mgard@csu.edu.au, jfy@csu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The debate about generalist versus specialist teachers in primary schools has long been fought, possibly nowhere more vigorously than in regard to physical education.

Here, it continues to appear as an issue in national enquiries into the quality of teaching. This study is based on the premise that people embody the feelings and beliefs that they hold about phenomena and so feelings and beliefs influence the ways people act. In the case of physical activity, it is thought that feelings and beliefs about the body and physical activity greatly impact on behaviour. Therefore in order to develop effective physical education teacher education programs, it is important to consider student teachers' perceptions of their bodies, physical activity and physical education curriculum. Data were collected through survey. Students in a primary course at a regional university volunteered to complete inventories designed to measure perceptions of self in relation to physical activity, perceptions of physical activity and feelings about the health and physical education curriculum. This paper discusses the findings of

these inventories. Tentative recommendations for health and physical education teacher education curriculum are proposed.

Background to the study

This paper is written from the perspective of an early career teacher educator. It takes as its starting point an understanding that the biographies of teacher and student are important elements in the teaching process. It represents part of an overall strategy of the researcher to include students in fundamental discussions about what constitutes subject physical education and what role it can and should play in the education of children.

In the present study, the theoretical position of the researcher is

informed by previous career experience in classic and modern dance and concerns about the apparent dominance afforded to other more competitive and combative movement forms in school physical education lessons. These concerns have been articulated clearly by dance educators with particular regard to secondary specialist physical education courses (Flintoff, 1991; Loadman, 1992). In these settings male hostility towards dance education is seen as an important factor in its marginalisation. In primary teacher education courses where females are often numerically dominant, less is known about the understandings and expectations of student teachers concerning physical education.

Little is also known about the attitudes and feelings students bring to these courses about their previous movement experiences and about their own bodies. It will be argued in this paper that these attitudes and feelings, formed partly by exposure to dominant physical education discourses, need to influence teacher education courses if the "sports skills and catharsis" view of physical education is to be challenged.

Introduction

It is clear that generalisations about the quality of physical education instruction in Australian primary schools are at least problematic if not counterproductive. However, there would appear to have been sufficient concern within the profession for Tinning, Kirk and Evans (1993, p.viii) to comment that:

We recognise that there are some good, perhaps even excellent physical education programs being taught by some caring teachers. But in general terms these are the exception rather than the rule. In most Australian primary schools, the teaching of physical education leaves much to be desired.

Little seems to have happened in more recent years to suggest that this situation has significantly altered.

It is equally clear that problems associated with physical education delivery in Australian primary schools are not solely the responsibility of individual classroom teachers (Evans, 1990; Hickey, 1992; Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, 1992; Blanksby, 1995). Recent research conducted at this

institution demonstrates only too well the precarious position of potentially marginalised areas of the curriculum such as physical education in some schools (Hatton, Meyenn, Parker, Sutton, Gard & Maher, 1997). The teachers interviewed for this study reported a wide variety of reasons for curtailing (or even eliminating) what were often referred to as "non-core" curriculum areas. These reasons included increased administrative work loads, heightened public expectations of a "back to basics" approach to education and concerns about potential accusations of sexual misconduct in physical education settings given the recent media attention afforded to the teaching profession.

The degree to which tertiary teacher education courses prepare generalist graduates to teach physical education has received considerable attention in the literature (O'Connell, 1981; Evans, 1990; Tinning et al, 1993). Indeed, while it seems that primary school teachers hold views that afford physical education a high level of importance, teachers generally report an unsatisfactory level of preparation in this subject during their university studies (Hickey, 1992).

One area of possible anxiety which has received relatively little attention concerns the feelings and attitudes of generalist primary teachers towards physical activity and their own body and how these affect their approach to subject physical education.

Body Image

According to Shelley Kay (1996) body image includes perceptual, cognitive and affective elements. This means that body image is not simply concerned with an individual's thoughts and emotions concerning the attractiveness of their body, usually in comparison to the bodies of other people. How the body feels and looks when it is moving, according to the mover, is also an integral part of one's body image. But it is also important to understand that the feeling of the execution of a physical movement can be influenced by the attitudes, feelings and skill level of other people. This concept is dealt with in detail by Iris Young (1990) while an excellent example is contained in Bob Connell's interview with a man who learnt to be ashamed of his throwing action because his father described him as throwing "like a girl" (Connell, 1995, p.62).

A range of questionnaires have been used to measure the cognitive and affective elements of body image (Secord & Jourard, 1953; Garner & Garfinkel; 1979; Franzoi & Shields, 1984). Self report measures designed to investigate the attitudes of students towards physical education have also been published (O'Bryan & O'Bryan, 1979; Seaman, 1970). The research presented in this paper used a semantic differential scale similar to that developed by Simon and Smoll (1974). This particular scale was originally used to measure the attitudes of children towards physical education and represents a reliable model from which a similar instrument for measuring the attitudes of student teachers can be developed. Use of these scales has also revealed that the adjectives used generally articulate three main factors: activity,

potency and evaluation (Baumgartner & Jackson, 1995).

Baumgartner and Jackson (1995) make the important point that scales designed to measure attitudes are limited because they can be influenced by how the participant feels about the person administering the scale. Shelley Kay (1996) also reminds researchers that attitudes about the body are labile and vary according to a participant's situation. For example, being clothed or unclothed (Markee, Carey & Pedersen, 1990) or having recently consumed foods perceived to be fattening (Thompson, Coover, Pasman & Robb, 1993) can affect body satisfaction. Nevertheless, self report attitude scales have consistently reported high test/retest reliability in the literature.

Self Perception and Physical Education

Some of the motivation for this paper comes from recent research into the effect of self perception on the behaviour of teachers (Roche & Marsh, 1994). Self perception as it relates to one's own body and its movements is known to be a powerful factor in the amount of physical activity a person participates in and the feelings they attach to that activity.

It is widely accepted that body shape dissatisfaction is more common amongst females than males (Rodin, Silberstein & Striegel-Moore, 1984; Hesse-Biber, 1996). This is clearly significant for physical educators. It is also clearly an area of responsibility since the focus of much of our instruction is centred on the body. Far from attempting to alleviate this problem, physical education has been implicated in its

production (Burns, 1993). These criticisms have pointed to the dominance of competitive team sports and the associated appropriation of physical education by the human movement sciences, both of which tend to emphasis leanness and problematise bodies (Wright, 1996).

The role played by oppressive official and unofficial hegemonic physical education discourses in problematising certain types of bodies, but especially young female bodies, has received considerable critical attention (Burns, 1993; Dewar, 1990; Grigor, 1990; Kirk, 1995; Kirk & Wright, 1995; Wright, 1997). These discourses relate to the relatively recent tendency to equate the terms "health" and "fitness".

Despite equivocal medical evidence about the connection between cardiovascular fitness and medical health, fitness has come to signify good health as well as self control and discipline, sexual desirability and sporting prowess (Burns, 1993).

Furthermore, it has been argued that these discourses are oppressive for females since body shapes chosen to represent female fitness and health in the popular media and educational texts are simultaneously the product of male fantasies as well as unattainable for the vast majority of girls (for a discussion of media depictions of physical attractiveness see Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson and Kelly, 1986; for a historical perspective of the depictions of females in educational texts see Davis & Oswalt, 1992). Meaningful female involvement in physical education is also compromised because of the types of movement skills which are given highest value in these discourses. As participation and success in male dominated competitive sports has become the main focus of physical education instruction, a tendency to

argue that the acquisition of these specialised skills is the best way of promoting a healthy and life long association with physical activity has emerged (Tinning et al., 1993). This tendency can be further seen in the practice of professional sporting organisations making development officers and elite athletes available to Australian primary schools to conduct sport coaching clinics. (Jones, 1990; Tinning et al. 1993). These sessions are often organised to fill time normally allocated to physical education instruction. As a result, physical education has become synonymous with sport in many schools. Many male students are also potentially marginalised by definitions of health and movement success which are connected to athletic skill and a particular body shape (Kirk, 1995). Mesomorphic male sporting champions chosen to act as "role models" and to represent "fitness" and "a healthy lifestyle", embody an idealised image of masculinity (for an example of this see Mooney & McLeod, 1993). Given apparent institutional endorsement of these images in dominant physical education discourses, it seems likely that similar feelings of inadequacy to those felt by female students are possible amongst male students. Clearly also, male students who are not successful in competitive sports because of inferior skill are at risk of perceiving their body and its movement possibilities in negative terms. As the objectives of physical education become closely associated with performance in male dominated competitive sports, certain bodies, especially the young female body, is problematised. It would seem a reasonable assumption therefore, that in a profession numerically dominated by women, many primary classroom teachers are likely to have

been positioned negatively in relation to subject physical education.

The focus of the present exploratory study is to investigate the attitudes and feelings of generalist student teachers towards physical activity and subject physical education.

Method

Sample

A first year cohort of students enrolled in a four year primary education degree course in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, were chosen for this study. Students were enrolled in the first of two curriculum subjects in their degree programmes which deal with subject physical education and the New South Wales K-6 Personal Development, Health and Physical Education syllabus document (Board of Studies, 1994).

The questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire requested biographical information such as age, sex, cultural and educational background which could be used to analyse questionnaire data. The second part used a combination five point Likert scales and open ended questions to measure the students' attitudes and feelings towards their own physical education experiences while at school and about teaching physical education. For the purposes of this study subject physical education was divided into

five categories; aquatics, athletics, dance, games and sports and gymnastics. Each Likert scale was followed by an open ended question designed to check these responses and to give the students an opportunity to explain their choices.

The last part of the questionnaire used two semantic differential scales to measure the students' attitudes towards themselves in relation to physical activity and towards their own body. The semantic differential scales uses bipolar adjectives, each adjectival pair separated by a seven point Likert style scale to measure direction and strength of attitude.

Additionally, the adjectival pairs in the two scales fall into one of three factor categories mentioned above: activity, potency and evaluation. These are arranged randomly throughout the two scales and are used to make possible more general observations about the attitudes of respondents towards themselves.

A pilot study using a draft version of this questionnaire was completed using a different cohort of students to determine test/re-test reliability and to validate survey items. The questionnaire was also given to colleagues within the School of Teacher Education for comment.

Procedure

At the first lecture for the subject described above and with the teaching researcher absent, all present students were informed about the nature and purpose of study by the non-teaching researcher who also

answered any questions. Each student was given a written informed consent protocol form which summarised this information. In the corresponding lecture one week later participating students signed written consent forms and completed the questionnaire in the presence of the non-teaching researcher.

Of the 92 students present, 49 returned completed questionnaires representing a response rate of 53.3%.

Data Analysis

Frequency tables using SPSS were generated for all Likert scales. These also yielded numerical means and standard deviations. Friedman two way ANOVA tests were used to test for significant difference between groups of respondents.

Means and standard deviations for all measures were generated from the semantic differential scales. Here each individual response was added to give cumulative scores to allow parametric statistical analysis.

Independent sample t-tests were used to test for significant difference between groups.

Results

Biographical information

Of the 49 respondents, 35 were female (71.4%) and 14 were male (28.6%).

This represents a similar ratio of female to male students that existed

in the total cohort at the time of sampling. The sample was predominantly made up of respondents who identified themselves as anglo-saxon Australian with only eight students falling into other categories. 33 of the respondents were between 18 and 20 years of age, 11 were between 21 and 30 and 5 students were 31 years of age or older.

"How would you describe your physical education experiences at school?"

Here a five point Likert scale was used where one represented "very negative" and five represented "very positive". Of the five categories of physical education included in the Likert scales in this part of the questionnaire, the students tended to rate games and sports most positively. This was true for the sample as a whole as well as for female and male students when analysed separately. Friedman two way ANOVA analysis of the responses of the whole sample revealed significant differences ($p=.0001$) across the five categories of physical education. The mean rating for games and sports for the boys (4.46) was higher than the females (4.29) although this was not statistically analysed given the dubious merit of undertaking statistical analysis of two ordinal means.

The sample as a whole rated gymnastics (3.07) and dance (3.13) most negatively. The females rated gymnastics most negatively (2.92) while the males gave their lowest mean rating to dance (2.92).

When asked to name their most enjoyed area of school physical education, 20 of the 49 students named games and sports while only three named gymnastics. While 10 students named dance as their most

enjoyed area, not one of these was a male student.

"How do you presently feel about teaching physical education to K-6 students?"

The five point Likert scale for this question ranged from "very apprehensive" to "very confident". Here again games and sports received the highest mean rating from the whole sample (4.48) with gymnastics (3.13) and aquatics (3.40) scoring the lowest mean ratings. Responses for the sample were once again significantly different ($p=.0001$) across the five categories.

Gymnastics received the lowest mean rating from the female students (3.03) while dance was clearly the lowest for the males (3.08).

Respondents were then asked to nominate the area of greatest and least confidence. 40 of the 49 respondents either named games and sports as the one area they were most confident about teaching or games and sports in combination with another area. Dance was a distant second here with 9 nominating it while gymnastics was nominated by four respondents making it the least popular choice. Not surprisingly, level of personal skill and familiarity was the most common reason given for responses.

Nearly half the respondents (23) nominated gymnastics as the area they were least confident about teaching with most citing concerns about safety. Similar concerns were raised about teaching aquatics which was nominated by 14 students.

"How would you rate the importance of teaching physical education for K-6 students?"

On a five point scale from "very unimportant" to "very important" all areas except gymnastics (3.94) received a mean rating of above 4.0 from the whole sample. While games and sports once again received the highest mean ratings from the sample (4.77), females (4.8) and males (4.69), these were only slightly higher than those given to aquatics. The females rated gymnastics as least important (3.94). The male students rated dance and gymnastics equal lowest in importance (3.77). When asked to nominate the area of greatest importance for K-6, 23 nominated aquatics (7 times in combination with another area) and 19 nominated games and sports (7 times with others). 8 respondents said that all areas were of equal importance. Two clear justifications emerged from these responses. Those that nominated aquatics said it was important for safety and survival reasons. Those that nominated games and sports generally reasoned that students could learn to cooperate and develop social skills.

Semantic Differential Scales: Physical Activity and Body Image

For these scales respondents were given two incomplete sentences. The first scale stated: "in relation to physical activity I see myself as having been". This was followed by 18 adjectival pairs to measure direction and strength of feeling. The second scale began with "my body is" and was followed by 14 adjectival pairs.

Data analysis showed that the males students viewed themselves more positively on both scales. Independent t-tests of cumulative scores on both scales revealed significance difference on body image ($p=.05$) but not physical activity.

When all 30 adjectival pairs were separated into activity, potency and evaluation, male students again reported more favourable attitudes.

While there was no significant difference between female and male students for activity, significant difference was established for potency and evaluation.

Discussion

It is worth noting that while the students generally reported positive attitudes towards physical education and positive feelings towards themselves (although the females were not as positive the males), the disappointing response rate of 53.3% raises the possibility that many students with more negative feelings declined to complete the questionnaire based on what they were told about its purpose.

While it was not the purpose of this study to empirically establish attitudinal differences concerning physical activity and self based on gender and activity choice, these data raise some interesting questions for teacher educators.

The data presented here suggest that the dominance of games and sports in physical education practice appears unchallenged. This is certainly food for thought given that the most strident concerns voiced about the

decline of physical education in primary schools have often centred on sport. Furthermore, community sporting organisations have to a large extent begun to occupy some of the space previously taken up by school sport. Clearly proponents of other movement forms such as dance and gymnastics have at least as much to be concerned about as those who would argue the case for sport in primary schools. Based on the responses of generalist student teachers in this study, dance and gymnastics are unlikely to achieve anything approaching parity without challenging the understandings of student teachers. This could involve including student teachers in discussions about the construction of dominant discourses in physical education and suggesting new ways of approaching movement which don't involve competition and failure. By implication this means challenging also the "sports skills and catharsis" understanding of physical education which severely underestimates its educational potential for children.

Secondly, these data suggest that while the female students see themselves as being equally active and interested in physical activity as the male students, they see themselves as less successful. This is not surprising if the bulk of their physical education experiences have centred around male dominated competitive sports. This raises the question of whether or not an emphasis on games and sports reduces the likelihood of classroom teachers devoting significant time to physical education since it is widely accepted that teachers will tend to avoid areas of the curriculum about which they feel less competent. It needs to be stressed here that quantity of teaching is not being substituted for quality of teaching in this argument. What is being suggested is

that a narrowly defined understanding of physical education means a narrow range of movement alternatives in which teachers can feel competent. This situation would not appear to be in the interests of primary school teachers or students. Clearly teacher educators need to show students teachers that physical education is not a place in the curriculum where boys have a "natural" advantage and that their perceived superiority is partly a product of gendered understandings of human movement.

References

- Baumgartner, T. A. & Jackson, A. S. (1995) Measurement for Evaluation in Physical Education and Exercise Science, Dubuque, Iowa: Brown & Benchmark.
- Blanksby, B. (1995) The Missing Link: Primary School Physical Education Specialists, The ACHPER Healthy Lifestyles Journal, Winter, 21-24.
- Board of Studies, NSW, (1994) K-6 Syllabus and Support Document for Personal Development, Health and Physical Education, Sydney: Board of Studies NSW.
- Burns, R. (1993) Health, fitness and female subjectivity: what is happening in school health and physical education, in Yates, L. (Ed), Feminism and Education, Melbourne: La Trobe University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1995) Masculinities, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Davis, J. & Oswalt, R. (1992) Societal Influences on a Thinner Body Size in Children, Perceptual and Motor Skills, 74, 697-698.

Dewar, A. (1990) Oppression and Privilege in Physical Education: Struggles in the Negotiation of Gender in a University Programme, in Kirk, D. & Tinning, R. (Eds), Physical Education, Curriculum and Culture: Critical Issues in the contemporary crisis, Hampshire: The Falmer Press.

Evans, J. (1990) Sport in Schools Threatened by Lack of Teacher Training, The ACHPER National Journal, Summer, 8-11 & 22.

Flintoff, A. (1991) Dance, masculinity and teacher education, The British Journal of Physical Education, (Winter), 31-35.

Franzoi, S. & Shields, S. (1984) The body Esteem Scale: Multidimensional Structure and Sex Differences in a College Population, Journal of Personality Assessment, 48, 173-178.

Garner, D. & Garfinkel, P. (1979) The Eating Attitudes Test: An Index of the Symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa, Psychological Medicine, 9, 273-279.

Grigor, J. R. (1990) Females on the Fringes of Physical Education, Armidale: University of New England.

Hatton, E. J., Meyenn, R., Parker, J., Sutton, J., Gard, M. & Maher, K. (1997) The Status of Teaching in Rural and Regional Areas: Selected Themes, in Gale, T. C., Erben, A. & Danaher, P. (Eds), Diversity, Difference Discontinuity: (Re)mapping Teacher Education for the Next Decade. Refereed Proceedings of the 27th Annual Conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association and the 7th National Workshop on Vocational Teacher Education.

Hickey, C. (1992) Physical Education in Victorian Primary Schools: A Review of Current Provision, The ACHPER National Journal, Summer,

18-23.

Hesse-Biber, S. J. (1996) *Am I Thin Enough Yet?: The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Kay, S. (1996) *The Psychology and Anthropometry of Body Image*, in Norton, K. & Olds, T. (Eds), *Anthropometrica: A Textbook of Body Measurement for Sports and Health Courses*, Sydney: UNSW Press.

Kirk, D. (1995) *Female and Male Adolescents' Interpretations of Body Imagery:*

Implications for School Programs, Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Hobart, 27-31 November 1995.

Kirk, D. & Wright, J. (1995) *Health Issues and the Construction of Gender*, in *Proceedings of the Promoting Gender Equity Conference*, Canberra: Department of Education and Training.

Loadman, A. (1992). *Dance, masculinity and teacher education: a reply to Flintoff*. *The British Journal of Physical Education*, (Summer), 39.

Markee, N. L., Carey, I. L. & Pedersen, E. I. (1990) *Body Cathexis and Clothed Body Cathexis: Is There a Difference?*, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 70, 1239- 1244.

Mooney, G. & McLeod, M. (1993) *Footballers as Role Models for Primary School Children*, *Physical Education Teacher*, 10, 1, 5-7.

O'Bryan, M. H. & O'Bryan (1979) *Attitudes of Males Towards Selected Aspects of Physical Education*, *Research Quarterly*, 40, 343-382.

O'Connell, M. (1981) *Professional Preparation for Teaching Physical Education in Primary Schools in New South Wales*, Sydney: University of

Sydney.

Seaman, J. A. (1970) Attitudes of Physically Handicapped Children
Toward Physical Education, *Research Quarterly*, 41, 439-445.

Secord, P. & Jourard, S. (1953) The Appraisal of Body-Cathexis: Body
Cathexis and the Self, *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 17, 343-347.

Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts
(1992) *Physical and Sport Education*, Senate Printing Unit, Canberra.

Silverstein, B., Perdue, L., Peterson, B. & Kelly, E. (1986). The Role
of the Mass Media in Promoting a Thin Standard of Bodily Attractiveness
for Women, *Sex Roles*, 19, 519-532.

Simon, J. A. & Smoll, F. L. (1974) An Instrument for Assessing
Children's Attitudes
Toward Physical Education, *Research Quarterly*, 45, 407-415.

Thompson, J., Coovert, D., Pasman, L. & Robb, J. (1993) Body Image and
Food Consumption: Three Laboratory Studies of Perceived Calorie
Content, *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 14, 445-447.

Tinning, R., Kirk, D. & Evans, D. (1993) *Learning to Teach Physical
Education*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc.

Wright, J. (1996) Mapping the Discourses of Physical Education:
Articulating a Female Tradition, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 28,
331-351.

Wright, J. (1997) The Construction of Gendered Contexts in Single Sex
and Co- educational Physical Education Lessons, *Sport, Education and
Society*, 2, 55- 72.

Young, I. M. (1990) *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory* , Bloomington, Indiana University Press.