

Teaching Physical Education in Urban Schools

What Was the Question?

McCaughtry, Barnard, Martin, Shen, and Kulinna (2006) analyzed how the environment of urban schools influences the emotional understanding and rapport that physical education teachers have with their students and how it affects their teaching.

What Was Done?

Over a period of three years, the researchers conducted multiple interviews with 61 elementary physical educators from an urban school district with about 162,000 students (88% African American, 7% Caucasian, and the remainder mostly Hispanic) in the midwestern United States. The subjects were interviewed from one to five times (N=136) using interpretive methodology.

What Was Found?

The teachers reported five unique challenges endemic to their urban schools that significantly shaped their thinking about students and their careers. Some also shared the strategies they employed to meet those challenges.

First, these urban teachers expressed frustration and anger about their lack of instructional resources (equipment, time, and facilities) and often felt guilt and regret due to the “second-rate” instruction they were forced to provide to the neediest of students. Some teachers quit, others learned to live with their emotions, while others attempted to move beyond their constraints by writing grants, soliciting donations, or purchasing supplemental equipment with their salaries.

Second, the teachers struggled to provide culturally relevant pedagogy by offering a meaningful curriculum that connected with urban, minority youths, while also exposing them to curriculum beyond their geographical and cul-

tural borders. They also struggled to provide coherent instruction to the growing number of immigrant, ESL (English as a Second Language) students. To face these challenges, teachers modified pre-scripted lessons to reflect students’ language and culture, thought deeply about the activities they taught, displayed images of diverse activities and athletes in their gymnasiums, translated important curriculum documents, formed culturally diverse “buddy-teams,” and learned key phrases in other languages for the benefit of the ESL students.

Third, these teachers dealt with community violence as it filtered into physical education classes. Concern, sorrow, and frustration were the most commonly reported emotions when discussing violence, as it had become students’ predominant means to resolve conflicts, to relate to one another, and to interact with teachers. This was cited as the number one reason for teacher attrition by those who stayed focused on social development and a conflict-resolution curriculum.

Fourth, to deal with the lack of community resources, teachers integrated more games into their curricula. Many expressed guilt for focusing on games rather than on skill development, regretting that they were unable to teach “as they had been trained.” However, they believed that contextual factors such as once-a-week physical education and students’ limited opportunities outside of school (e.g., familial obligations, lack of community programs and safe facilities) made it more important to focus on the emotionally satisfying side of the curriculum.

Last, teachers struggled to teach in a “culture of basketball.” Tension, frustration, and guilt surfaced whenever the subject was discussed. Many teachers felt this

way because of the game’s importance—often a tremendous source of social capital for urban minority youths—and resented the poor sportsmanship (taunting, jeering, and showboating) associated with the dynamics of the game. Some teachers felt guilty for being unable to motivate their students in other content and promote a quality physical education program. To overcome this, many teachers related other invasion games to basketball, used basketball as an incentive for participation in alternative content, or focused heavily on positive basketball units that rejected “ghetto” culture.

What Does the Study Mean?

This study suggests that urban physical education teachers face many challenges when trying to provide positive, safe, and culturally rich physical education for very diverse and complex students. It should serve as a cautionary tale about the importance of preparing future physical educators for the realities of urban schools and the essential task of creating visions of physical education that might *work* in these culturally challenging settings.

Reference

McCaughtry, N., Barnard, S., Martin, J., Shen, B., & Kulinna, P. H. (2006). Teachers’ perspectives on the challenges of teaching physical education in urban schools: The student emotional filter. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 77, 486-497 [Winner of the 2006 AAHPERD Research Consortium Research Writing Award].

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