

Middle School Students' Attitudes Toward Physical Education

What Was the Question?

Student learning and achievement can be influenced by a variety of factors. Students are more likely to have a positive attitude about a subject and more likely to learn when they are in an environment where they feel comfortable and confident. This is important, since students' experiences in physical education can positively or negatively influence their immediate and long-term participation in physical activity. Boys have been found to be more positive about physical education than girls, and positive attitudes toward physical education appear to decline with age. However, there have been mixed findings when researchers have compared students' attitudes toward physical education and physical activity as a function of grade level. These mixed findings may have been the result of developing attitudinal measures without consideration of attitudinal theory. Consequently, the purposes of this study (Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007) were (a) to investigate the attitudes of middle school students toward physical education, (b) to determine whether attitudes were differentiated by gender, (c) to determine whether differences existed on subject matter by grade, and (d) to assess whether gender and grade level influenced student attitudes toward physical education.

What Was Done?

The study participants consisted of 995 middle school students (46% female, 54% male) between the ages of 12 and 14 (grades 6 through 8). Sixty-three percent of participants were Caucasian, 26 percent were African American, and 11 percent were classified as "other." They were selected from three schools that followed a

multi-activity curriculum designed to meet state requirements for physical education. Following parental and participant consent, an attitude measurement was administered that assessed attitudes toward physical education through the domains of "enjoyment" and "perceived usefulness." The enjoyment domain is an affective component that assesses the degree of emotional feeling or attraction toward an attitude object. The perceived usefulness domain is a cognitive component that assesses beliefs and characteristics about an attitude object. In this study, the attitude object was physical education. The measurement used a five-point Likert scale that had been previously tested for reliability and validity.

What Was Found?

The participants in general were found to have moderately positive attitudes toward physical education. When the two components of attitude were assessed individually, participants overall scored higher in the enjoyment domain than the perceived usefulness domain. This was consistent across both genders. A multivariate analysis found that there were no gender-by-grade differences. However, scores on the affective (enjoyment) and cognitive (perceived usefulness) domains declined as grade level increased, although only the affective domain was significantly different. Participants in eighth grade scored significantly lower than those in sixth and seventh grades.

What Does the Study Mean?

These findings support previous research suggesting that the affective component of student attitude declines with age. The authors suggest that this may be due to a repetitive physical

education curriculum. By eighth grade, students may be uninterested in and bored with the sports and activities that are offered, which causes their enjoyment to decline. The development of individual exercise and sporting pursuits over traditional team sports may help to provide greater interest and enjoyment within a physical education curriculum. It was also suggested that differences may have occurred because students in eighth grade may perceive enjoyment differently than students in the other two grades. Students in upper grade levels may need activities that require further analysis and exploration (e.g., dissecting skills and designing offensive and defensive strategies). Thus, physical educators should consider providing students with different cognitive and physical demands that the students are likely to find challenging. Although the authors were clear to recognize the importance of the cognitive domain within a physical education curriculum, they specifically encouraged the inclusion of activities and tasks that foster the affective domain. Enhancing student attitudes toward physical education, especially enjoyment, will foster immediate engagement and long-term participation in physical activity.

Reference

Subramaniam, P. R., & Silverman, S. (2007). Middle school students' attitudes toward physical education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23, 602-611.

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