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## Indian children's perception of physical education and sports in school

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### Abstract

Children's perception of physical education and sport in school influences their intention to participate in physical activities and understanding of its learning outcomes. Evaluation of students' attitudes towards PESS can also be helpful to educators to gain deeper insight into the challenges facing the subject in schools, especially given the fact that the status of PESS has declined considerably in many countries (Hardman & Marshall, 2001). In this study, the Sport in Education questionnaire developed by Bailey and Dismore (2005) was administered to 405 primary and junior secondary school students (225 boys and 180 girls) aged 6-15 years in Mbabane, Manzini and Piggs Peak, India. Results were analysed descriptively. Children's responses concerning PESS were categorized under five domains, i.e. physical, cognitive, social, affective and lifestyle. In general, Swazi children had positive attitudes towards PESS, with older girls indicating less favourable attitudes than the younger ones. The girls also had poor perceived competence in PESS activities compared to the boys. Regardless of age and sex, the children overwhelmingly rated Mathematics, Science and English as more important than PESS. The physical domain accounted for the children's positive perception of PESS as they gave similar reasons for participating in PESS activities regardless of gender, i.e. to be healthy and fit, prepare for school sport competition and identify with own school.

**Keywords:** Physical education, school sport, attitudes, age and gender comparisons

### Introduction

Participation in physical education (PE) is a fundamental right of children (UNESCO, 1978). This implies that schools should provide opportunities for children to participate in well-structured PE activities as well as ensure that they inculcate desirable attitudes and values which will promote future participation and development of healthy lifestyles (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2009) [6]. Despite the importance of PE in children's growth and development, Hardman & Marshall (2001) [4] reported that its status has declined in many countries, both in terms of statutory time allocation and resource allocation. According to Siedentop (1987) high school PE is an endangered species because it is gradually becoming extinct in secondary curricula. Siedentop's (1987) view was based on the growing lack of expectations for significant outcomes in high school PE and the more worrying indication that students cared less about the subject matter. Therefore, physical educators have a role to play in creating a positive environment and opportunities that would motivate students to develop high expectations of learning outcomes in PESS which could beneficially influence their attitudes and underlying belief systems about the subject.

A major setback to the image of PESS in public schools is that the evidence for many of the purported benefits and outcomes of physical activities are often debatable. Such claims which have been reported in the literature include its positive effects on self-concept, self-esteem, anxiety, depression, tension, stress, self-confidence, mood, efficiency and well-being (Svoboda, 1994). Talbot (2001) also reports that PE helps children to develop respect for the body - their own and others', contributes towards the development of mind and body, positively enhances self-esteem, social and cognitive development and academic achievement. In a critical review of the perceived benefits and outcomes of PESS. Bailey (2006) [2, 3] suggests that its outcomes and benefits can be understood in terms of children's development in the following domains: physical, lifestyle, affective, social and cognitive.

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He concludes that while strong evidence exists to suggest that PESS can facilitate development of these attributes in children, they do not occur automatically but require specific actions and interactions among PE teachers and sport coaches such that lessons taught emphasize quality provision, while applying didactic elements based on children's need to have fun, enjoy participation, accommodate diversity and promote the principles of inclusion and integration.

Several studies have been carried out on children's attitudes towards participation in PESS in various countries. In their study on American children, Subramaniam & Silverman (2007) [8] concluded that the children had moderately positive attitudes towards Physical Education and reported a decline in attitude scores as a function of the students' grade level. Stelzer, Ernest, Fenster & Langford (2004) [7] undertook a cross-cultural comparison of attitudes towards PE among high schools students in Austria, Czech Republic, England and USA. They concluded that whilst children across the countries had positive attitudes towards PE, most favorable attitudes were reported for students from Czech Republic, followed by Austrian and English students. In a study carried out among Turkish children, Koca, Asci & Demirhan (2005) [5] examined differences between coeducational and single-sex schools in terms of students' attitudes towards PESS. They concluded that children attending coeducational classes had more favorable attitudes towards PESS than those attending single-sex schools. Amusa & Toriola (2008) [1] also reported age and gender differences concerning perceptions of PESS among South African children of different racial groups. These findings support the importance of gender analysis in evaluating attitudinal dispositions towards PESS among children and adolescents.

In spite of the importance of PE in promoting physically active lifestyle in children, very few studies, if any, have been carried out on attitudes towards the subject in Swazi schools. Therefore, this study was primarily carried out to examine the attitudes of a group of school children in India towards PESS. A secondary purpose of the study was to analyse gender differences in the children's perception of PESS.

Physical Education has had a long history in India since becoming British protectorate in the early 19th century. Physical Education was originally based on the 1933 British syllabus and has long been taught and examined at the three teachers colleges in the country. However, teacher preparation in the subject was problematic as no programme was in place at the university level for many years to train Physical Education teachers. In recent years, positive attempts were made to formally re-introduce the subject as a curriculum offering in primary schools; an impetus that was driven by the launch of a certificate course in Physical Education at the University of India in 2007.

## Methods

### Research design and participants

A modified Sport in Education questionnaire originally developed by Bailey and Dismore (2005) [2, 3] was administered to evaluate children's attitudes towards PESS. Participants were 405 students (225 boys and 180 girls) categorized into three age groups, i.e. 6-10 years (n = 132); 11-14 years (n = 155) and 15+ years (n = 118). They were drawn from five primary and junior secondary schools in Mbabane, Manzini and Piggs Peak, India. The children participated in the study after parental informed consent was obtained.

## Questionnaire

The Sports in Education questionnaire has seven close and open-ended items, which are described as follows: two questions focused on participants' age and gender. Three close-ended questions are designed to elicit responses to the various dimensions of perception of PESS using Likert scale format. Another question requests respondents to compare the relative importance of PESS with other school subjects. The last two questions required respondents to describe their feelings about PESS and indicate preferences for its various aspects.

As suggested by Bailey & Dismore (2005) [2, 3], the Sports in Education questionnaire was analyzed based on five main themes (or domains) which cover specific aspects of children's development: physical; lifestyle, affective, social and cognitive. These domains could be described as follows: physical (reasons why children like or dislike PESS, i.e. regarding their physical condition, fitness, health and movement skills); cognitive (statements related to intellectual functioning and academic performance); social (reasons which are related to personal interactions, pro-social behaviors and social development, such as the children's self-perception of intention to compete, cooperate, like a teacher, socialize with other pupils, meet with friends, like playing in teams, etc.), and affective (responses concerning attitudes, self-esteem, anxiety, stress and other mental states (depression, happiness, fun, etc.). In the affective domain were included statements reflecting relaxation, expression of one's emotions, boredom, feel better, it's interesting, feel happy, feel good, etc. Finally, lifestyle domain reflects the children's perceptions regarding opportunities to engage in future physical activities and emphasizes general lifestyle dispositions. Typical examples of participants' responses in this domain included will be fit, will be useful in the future, won't be fat, it's all my life, etc.

Before the Sports in Education questionnaire was used for actual data collection it was validated in a pilot test involving 58 children (27 boys; 31 girls) attending two primary schools also in Manzini which were not part of the data used for the actual study. In the pilot test, the Sports in Education questionnaire was validated by using cluster analysis and calculating Cronbach alpha coefficients. Reliability coefficients ranged between 0.73 and 0.87 (Cronbach), thus indicating the stability of the questionnaire and its suitability for data collection.

## Data analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data. Percentages were calculated based on the students' responses to questionnaire items and used to present the results. The children's responses to open-ended items were analyzed qualitatively.

## Results and Discussion

Results concerning the distribution of Swazi children based on age and sex are provided the Among the boys and girls, the 11-14 year-old children were the highest number of participants, thereby accounting for 37.8% and 38.9% of the boys and girls, respectively or 38.3% of the total number of school children sampled.

The children overwhelmingly indicated positive perception of PESS regardless of age and gender. This was accounted for by responses received from 87% of the total number of participants. However, when the data were analysed according to gender and age categories, the following trends

were observed: More boys (92%) than girls (81%) had positive perception of PESS. In contrast, 19% of girls and 8% of boys showed negative perception towards PESS. The girls' data showed a decline in interest in PESS with age specifically, younger girls (6-10 years: 5-10; 11-14 years) had more positive perception of PESS than older girls (15+ years). Specifically, the percentage of girls in the various age groups who indicated positive perception of PESS were 49% (6-10 years), 35% (11-14 years) and 12% (15+ years), respectively. However, among the boys, a consistent trend was found in which they indicated positive perception of PESS irrespective of age group.

It was also of interest to this study to find out the students' perception about the relative importance of PESS compared with other traditional school subjects. Results showed that Mathematics, English and Science were consistently rated as more important than Physical Education. This trend was consistent across gender and age categories and confirms the low status of Physical Education in schools as well as the lack of seriousness attached to the subject.

In terms of the perceived competence in PESS, the Swazi girls (44.2%) indicated poorer self-perception of competence than the boys (26%). The older (15+ years) girls (58%) indicated that they were poorest at PESS in contrast to the younger ones, specifically the 6-10 year olds (9%). In response to open-ended items in which the participants were requested to give reasons for their perception of PESS, most of the answers obtained could be categorized in the affective and lifestyle domains. Similar answers were provided by the boys and girls. Responses in the affective domain included statements such as, "it's good for relaxation, it helps my emotions, it makes me free from boredom, it makes me feel better, it's interesting, it makes me happy, it makes me feel good," etc. Typical responses concerning lifestyle domain emphasize general lifestyle dispositions such as, "I will be fit, it will be useful to me in the future, I won't be fat, it's all my life," etc.

The findings of this study have significant implications for designing and implementing PESS programmes in Swazi schools. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Amusa & Toriola, 2008; Koca *et al.*, 2005; Stelzer *et al.*, 2004) <sup>[1, 5, 7]</sup> the results showed that the children generally had positive attitudes towards PESS. However, the girls' perceptions of PESS as well as their self-perceived competence in the subject were more negative than those of the boys. The girls' poorer perception may be a reflection of the influence of Swazi culture which is male dominated. Consequently, young girls hardly have role models in society and this could negatively influence their value orientation and belief systems, especially concerning competence in PESS activities. Therefore, in designing PESS programmes emphasis should be placed on providing a variety of activities so that children can enjoy participation regardless of their skill level. This strategy would encourage participation in PESS by girls and promote achievement of intended learning outcomes.

It was also of interest to this study to find out determinants of the children's perceptions of PESS. The results showed that physical, affective and lifestyle domains accounted for the children's perceptions of PESS. In contrast, Figley (1985) examined the determinants of attitudes toward PE among college students and reported that teacher and the curriculum ranked as the top two factors determining both positive and negative attitudes, which accounted for approximately 70% of all responses. Figley (1985) also reported that variety and

choice in programme content were curriculum factors that were most likely to be associated with positive attitudes among students. Similar findings were reported by Luke and Sinclair (1991) in their study of grade 11 students. However, in a study of 386 students Luke and Cope (1994) investigated students' attitudes toward components of teacher behavior and PE programme content. They found that attitudes of male and female students toward teacher behavior and programme content were similar at every grade level.

The findings of the present study which indicated that the learners regarded other school subjects as more importance than PESS is understandable in the light of the fact that Physical Education. Therefore, the children would be naturally inclined to attach more importance to subjects in which they would be examined in view of its importance to their future career aspirations.

The present results have practical implications for providing quality PESS in Swazi schools. Responses from learners which indicate their interests, preferences and value orientation are important considerations for designing and implementing PESS programmes. It is also important that PESS programme content reflects a variety of choices and activities which will provide ample opportunities for children to participate regardless of their skill levels.

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