

Girls' Experiences in Physical Education: Competition, Evaluation, & Degradation

Cheryl van Daalen, RN, PhD

ABSTRACT: School nurses are often asked to participate in the health component of many physical education (PE) programs in schools. With this opportunity comes an ability to invite a model of physical education that enables physical, mental, and relational health. A pilot study was initiated to explore why girls' enrollment in physical education was dwindling once the compulsory credits were achieved. What emerged was the reality that for many girls, physical education was a source of constant shaming regarding their athletic ability and eventually themselves. Forced competition, degrading evaluation, and sexuality- and size-related harassment by both peers and teachers led the participants in this study to opt out of any further physical education classes. Within school-based physical education exists an opportunity to promote the health of adolescent women. School nurses, in partnership with physical education teachers and girls, can construct a model of physical education that is neither based on competition nor athletic ability, but rather, on building a positive self-esteem and a positive relationship with one's body. This model would be rooted in participation, fun, and female friendship.

KEY WORDS: competition, feminist analysis, physical education, shaming, self-esteem, school nursing

INTRODUCTION

At a time when childhood physical activity, fitness, weight, and health are of growing concern, an examination of school-based physical education (PE) is critical. Although the link between physical activity and health is well substantiated (Deacon, 1991; Ganley & Sherman, 2001; Summerfield, 1990), school nurses must explore how physical activity is experienced by children and youth in PE programs.

Participation in physical activity and PE is declining, and more specifically, girls' participation is declining at a rate that behooves nurses and other child health advocates to examine this phenomena (Biscomb, Matheson, Beckerman, Tungatt, & Jarret, 2000). It is not enough to promote PE without understanding how it is experienced by those expected to participate. School nurses are trusted by students, parents, and teachers, and in collaboration with others, can work

to design a model of PE that is youth-friendly (in this case, girl-centered) and is rooted in principles important to youth. Physical activity is essential for health. However, when it brings with it competition, evaluation, and degradation, it is a recipe for disaster. In asking girls about their experiences in PE, several salient recommendations have been elicited.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this small feminist qualitative inquiry using grounded theory was to glean meaning from the narratives of the young woman participants. The methodology was feminist in that it (a) valued the lived experience; (b) sought to listen to young women and to enable them to come to voice; (c) searched for ways to do research "with" participants rather than "on" participants; and (d) challenged the positivist assumption that objectivity was an attainable goal for researchers (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Reinhartz, 1992). The goal was to honor female intelligence and in doing so, to place the focus on their experiential knowledge and wisdom. It was made clear to both the par-

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Table 1. Reflective Story Assignment

You are to attend one grade nine (junior high) girls' PE class and observe the entire process from outside the PE office, outside the change rooms, inside and outside the gymnasium, and the dialogues of the girls afterwards. During this observation, jot down memories that come to mind regarding your experiences in PE, sport, and recreation. See what being back in PE reminds you of and jot down your feelings and thoughts. Afterwards, write a story. The character in the story can be you or a fictional female character. Write of her experience in PE. Once you have written your story, tuck it away for a few days. Return to your story and read what you have written and journal any reasons that come to mind concerning your reasons for not taking PE for the rest of high school.

Note. PE = physical education.

Table 2. Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience with gym class (a) at a young age; (b) later on; and (c) most recently with grade nine.
2. When you were at the gym . . . what memories surfaced?
3. Tell me about your story and how it relates to your own experiences?
4. Describe for me one time when you recall (a) really enjoying PE/sport/recreation; and (b) really disliking it. What was going on?
5. Why do you think some girls don't take PE after grade nine?
6. Tell me about your decision-making process when you decided to drop PE after your grade nine year?
7. Do you think that any of these factors influence a girl's decision to stop taking PE? If yes, how? RACE—GENDER—SEXUAL ORIENTATION—SIZE—CLASS—ATHLETIC ABILITY
8. Did your family play a part in this decision either directly or indirectly? Do you remember a specific incident?
9. MIRACLE QUESTION: Suppose one night a miracle occurred while you were sleeping—and the problems with physical and health education for girls that you've identified . . . were solved. What would your gym look like . . . **feel** like . . . **be** like?
10. Complete this sentence: "If I were a gym teacher I'd . . ."

Note. PE = physical education.

ticipants and the PE teachers that the girls were the experts regarding their own lived experiences. Some educators stated, "That's excellent! We really need this information," whereas others said, "Don't bother. I can tell you why they don't take gym. They're lazy, and they don't like changing." More than ever, the necessity to ask girls directly about their experiences in PE became clear.

Five young women ages 15–17 years, diverse in terms of race, age, class, and sexual orientation, agreed to participate. Each had made the decision to drop PE after grade nine. Ethical approval was granted from the school board and the University of Toronto. The young women and their parents were provided with information outlining the goals of the study, as well as with the questions they would be asked in the interviews. Informed consents were obtained. The study started with a request for the girls to write a story about a young woman's experience in PE (Table 1).

During their observation of a PE class, they were encouraged to take in as much as they could using their senses, including the sights, sounds, temperature of the gym floor, as well as the energy in the change room, outside the PE office, and in the gym. Once the girls completed their stories, interviews were scheduled at a time and setting that was safe and relaxed, as defined by the young woman. The questions (Table 2), provided ahead of time, stemmed from themes emerging from their stories. Each young woman was interviewed twice.

The interviews were tape-recorded; each participant was given her transcript and invited to change, to add, or to delete any content. The aim was to provide a

Table 3. Factors involved in the Decision to Drop Physical Education

- Emotions/feelings.
- Body image pressures.
- Peers.
- Athletic ability.
- Teachers.
- Sexism, inequity, and sexual harassment.
- Sexuality and homophobia.

holistic description of the lived experience of PE in context. Because qualitative data analysis is not linear and analysis is highly interpretive, some structure was necessary. The "Constant Comparison" method of data analysis was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data were divided into manageable portions called *bibbits*, which were then coded to identify story lines (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986). What emerged was a picture of shaming and degradation, shrouded under the experience called PE.

FINDINGS

Storytelling yields rich data and provides insight into lived experiences that often go untapped. Such was the case with this project. The participants were informed that their opinions and experiences were of great value and could be used to make a difference for girls taking PE in the future. Their rich stories, both written and oral, exposed seven common reasons why they dropped PE (Table 3).

Table 4. Feelings and Emotions Associated With Physical Education

| Fear | Pressure | Discomfort | Loss of self-esteem |
|------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Insecurity | Intimidation | Hated it | Self-conscious |
| Hurt | Felt awful | Misery | Embarrassment |
| Dread | Felt forced | Felt terrible | Nauseousness |
| Depression | Nervousness | Anger | |
| Stupidity | Inadequacy | Fun | |

Emotions and Feelings Associated With PE

In their stories and during the interviews, 22 separate, yet interrelated, feelings and emotions associated with their experiences with PE were identified. Of the 22, all but 1 were negative (Table 4). The participants cited having “fun” only when they were “good” at the activity or sport in question. Clearly, to have a good time in this model of PE, one must be athletically proficient, while at the same time adhere to the norms of femininity.

I dropped gym because I was afraid. . . afraid of looking dumb and feeling worse about myself.

I didn't like gym much—like when I was in grade four. All we ever did was gymnastics, and I hated gymnastics. I sucked at gymnastics. I used to like to swing on the ropes, but I got in trouble 'cause you're supposed to climb them like a lady [laughing].

They described physical education as “awful” or “terrible,” and stated that they often felt forced or pressured to participate. They remembered being hurt, rejected, and traumatized by one or more incidents. They reported feeling insecure, uncomfortable, inadequate, embarrassed, and self-conscious about their bodies and about what they were being asked to do with them. If there was a most troublesome finding, it was PE's negative impact on the young women's self-esteem. All of the participants reported that being in PE contributed to feeling badly about themselves.

I felt. . . let's just say my self-esteem went really down. . . [voice faded]

When I watched that grade nine gym class. . . being there I think forced me to remember the grade nine things that were so hard. When they'd blow the whistle. I'd get so nervous 'cause I wasn't very good, and I knew what was coming.

Body Image

All of the participants verbalized an impact on their body image related to their experience with PE. They either put themselves down or described instances when “guys or girls” ridiculed them. They dreaded wearing shorts, especially when it involved having to ask for a bigger size, and hated the whole process of changing in front of one another and never having enough time to transform themselves to how they wanted to look after PE.

I remember being intimidated by this one girl. She

used to make fat jokes about me. In junior high, I wasn't Miss Popularity. I was the girl who people hated . . . *the fat girl* . . . “look at the cow over there!” I used to go to the guidance counselor every second day, but nothing was ever done. You are the first person to actually care about how gym class was for me. This has been really good.

The participants stated they would rather skip the class or fake an illness than expose their bodies to one another or return to history class looking anything but as close to perfect as possible. They all verbalized body shame and instances of harassment related to their body size and shape.

There were all these little girls in my class doing cartwheels and showing off their little ‘gymnastical’ bodies.

Athletic Ability

A profound sense of *not being good enough* abounded within all of the participants' experiences with PE. Proficiency, strength, skill, and coordination were all reported as problematic for the participants. They shared their resentment at being evaluated on the way their bodies did and did not meet certain markers of success.

I hated grade nine . . . when they started marking you. They'd be like, “Oh Sally, you got 50! . . . and ——— you got 2 because you're not flexible. The marks were posted for everyone to see! When you're not very good at something, you don't want to go and do it in front of a whole lot of people . . . especially if those people are gonna make fun of you after.

An interesting finding was that the turning point for each of the participants (when they stopped liking PE) was after *Canada Fitness Testing*. In either grade six or eight, many Canadian students undergo standardized fitness testing. Every student is compared with every other student in the country, and the overall mark they achieve determines if they receive a gold, silver, bronze, or participation badge. This was the turning point, the point when using their bodies for fun and enjoyment was replaced with a need to prove oneself. This was a source of profound shaming for many students.

When we did Canada Fitness, that was just awful. Most of the guys could do better than the girls . . . and the girls would also all compete with each other. It would be like, “I got a gold; I'm better than you. I can do this many more push ups than you can . . . so you suck.”

Once I ranked low . . . that's when I started to dislike doing anything sportish.

Peers

Their relationships with peers once in the milieu of PE class was another strong factor associated with their dislike of PE. In fact, peer mistreatment was second only to forced evaluation and competition as a reason cited for dropping PE. PE not only became associated with visibility in skimpy uniforms, but with evaluation of their body size and ability. PE class be-

came a site where girls and young women could be marginalized, often in a way sanctioned by the curriculum. Competition was common, as were instances of intimidation and desperate attempts to try to fit in. Discrimination based on size, class, ability, race, and sexual orientation all seemed to escalate once girls came together in PE class.

I don't want to go through competition against my friends. I hate competing with my friends because we end up getting in fights.

When I got in there, everyone looked at me and said that I was conceited. "Look at the little Barbie doll . . . she's so stuck up." I think it was a month into the class when I really wouldn't talk to anyone.

Teachers

Not only did peer interactions result in relational discord and marginalization, but several participants cited teacher mistreatment rooted both in gender and racial bias. The focus on evaluation by teachers was unbearable, and the public announcement of results sent a devastating blow to the girls' already fragile self-esteem. The participants hated having male PE teachers in the years leading up to grade nine and described feeling judged, pushed, and ridiculed. They also resented the favoritism expressed toward male students in the years before same-sex PE classes. Several participants described both sexual and racial harassment; this finding is not unique to this study (Vertinsky, Batth, & Naidu, 1996).

When they'd do tests and stuff . . . you'd be singled out and everybody watches to see if you're gonna get it or not. When they started marking us is when I really hated gym.

I hated sitting there proving to the teachers that are guys . . . so what if I'm a female. I can do things that you can do. I hated that.

In grade seven, if I was White . . . I guess if I wasn't the color he was then I wasn't good enough. A lot of us Indian girls felt that way; we used to talk about it. He was racist, but in a very indirect way.

When it came to their experiences with female teachers, overwhelmingly, the young women preferred same-sex teachers. Female teachers sought to make gym and the change rooms safe and comfortable, but focused far too much on evaluating the athletic ability of the girls.

I guess in grade eight in a way, I started having fun again, because we had a woman teacher. She encouraged us a lot and would say, "It's okay. Try again."

I remember Mrs. W., she'd be like, "Girls, is it alright if I come in?" She knew that we wanted our privacy and stuff.

Sexism, Inequity, and Sexual Harassment

Differential treatment based on being a girl also emerged as a contributing factor to their decision to drop gym and emerged through the context of male PE teachers and coed classes. Many of the young wom-

en did not want to go into coed classes after grade nine. They presented a clear analysis of the curricular differences between boys' and girls' PE classes. They maintained that there was much less structure and evaluation in their male counterparts' experiences with PE in grade nine and stated that this was not fair.

If you look at the curriculum for guys in comparison to the girls, it's so different . . . we used to talk to the guys, and they'd be like "you gotta do that? . . . Oh, we just play basketball." We sit there and have to learn archery and volleyball and then get marked for it. The guys don't. When there was health class, there was more memorization for us than the guys . . . the guys got off easier than we did.

Finally, the young women reported being made to feel like sex objects and described situations of sexual harassment.

When guys would come into the gym . . . they were yelling, "woo!!! sexy!!!" Miss B. had to tell them to leave the gym. I don't want to hear that.

Sexuality and Homophobia

Participants who defined themselves as lesbian or bisexual placed sexuality as one of the reasons gym class was uncomfortable and unsafe. There was no room for sexual diversity. Homophobia is rampant in sports and has been well documented (Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 2003b).

It's hard when you're a different sexuality than other people 'cause you're always afraid that if they find out then they'll say stupid things like, "Oh, I don't want to change in front of her 'cause she's always looking at me." If they knew, I'd be singled out for sure.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this pilot study are alarming and confirmed a trend I witnessed as a school nurse. As soon as the required credits were completed, many girls dropped PE. The emphasis on competition and evaluation, coupled with shattering experiences of degradation based both on body size and on athletic ability forced girls out of organized PE. Sadly, for these young women, PE was not a positive experience. The experience of having their bodies aesthetically and athletically evaluated, combined with competition both in the gym and in the change room, created a lose-lose situation. Peer mistreatment, constant evaluation, competition, and a continual attack on their self-esteem do not comprise a formula for success in anyone's curriculum.

Competition

One of the key factors associated with the girls' decision to drop PE was the compulsory competition that was involved, a factor that had an impact on their relationship with peers. When asked, the girls wanted PE to be about coming together with their peers, rath-

er than growing further apart. Feminist sport activist Helen Lenskyj (1995, 2003a) confirms this finding. She advocates for girl-friendly sport, PE, and physical activity/recreation, and calls for a shift in focus from competition to the social side of sporting participation. "Women value the social side of sporting participation—the fun, the friendship and connections" (Lenskyj, 1995, p. 9). When the participants verbalized not wanting to compete, but just wanting to "play," they were told to stop complaining and called "sis-sies." These girls, like many other girls, "resist socialization into sport because they do not find that they relate with its generally held values of competition" (Lenskyj, 1993, p. 38). According to one of the participants, "In my ideal gym . . . I think if all this stuff was eliminated that more and more women would be more together . . . more bonded . . . instead of in competition."

The desire for friendship, a feeling of being bonded or what one participant called "woman togetherness," as well as the call for the elimination of compulsory competition, reinforces important feminist scholarship exploring the psychology of girls and women. Kaplan (1991) describes *Self in Relation Theory* (SIR), which suggests that women and girls are socialized toward relations and attachment, and that disconnections are psychologically damaging and evoke great fear, if not aversion. Some of the participants experienced the competition with and beating of their "opponent" during PE class as a very real threat to their bonds of friendship: a threat that leads many more girls to drop PE (Lenskyj, 1994, 2003a). "I don't want to go through competition against my friends. I hate competing with my friends because we end up getting in fights," stated one young woman.

Evaluation

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of girls in PE and learn what contributed to their decision to drop PE after fulfilling the compulsory credits. Not one of the participants actually wanted to stop taking PE. As far back as they could remember, they liked playing sports and making up games with their friends. They loved the fresh air and felt "free." They liked skipping, playing road hockey, running, climbing trees, playing with balls, and swimming. As soon as physical activity became hinged to athletic ability, an overwhelming feeling and experience of not being good enough replaced their feelings of freedom. They resented being evaluated on the ways their bodies worked. PE glorified those who were "good" and shamed those who were not. These participants generally were not. The residual feelings of being found inadequate came through in the stories they wrote and oral stories they shared about being evaluated—often in a most public way. Said one participant, "When they'd blow the whistle . . . my

stomach used to go crazy because I knew I wasn't very good."

Within every facet of their experiences was unremitting scrutiny. Their bodies were scrutinized, as was their athletic ability. They were evaluated by their peers, by their teachers, by any passer-by, and even by their government through Canada Fitness Testing. The negative impact on their self-esteem not only stemmed from constant scrutiny and the impact of "not being good enough," but also from the forced competition with their friends

Degradation

Competition and evaluation were sources of shame and degradation, based not only on their athletic ability, but also in regard to body size and heterosexual attractiveness. The participants' experiences of sexual harassment by both male and female peers and male PE teachers greatly contributed to their dread of PE.

I was tired . . . of not being as good as some of (the other kids) and being made fun of for it . . . and feeling stupid in front of everybody. Everyone would stand around and watch, and if you missed . . . everyone laughed.

Larkin's (1994) large Canadian study regarding the pervasiveness of the sexual harassment of adolescent women in what she called "hostile hallways" supports this finding. She found that sexual harassment was accepted as commonplace by many adolescent women. The compulsory visibility associated with PE uniforms brought shudders as the participants recounted stories of "the walk" from the change room to the gym, or worse, to somewhere outside on nice days. They recall running and not making any eye contact along the way. It was difficult to hear their often tearful stories of being degraded, but worse was their self-blame for "quitting" or "not being strong enough to stick it out." Portman (2003) reported similar findings when she interviewed grade nine girls who reported harassment, criticism, and demoralizing comparisons to boys or girls who were more athletically proficient or thin.

The lived experience of competition, evaluation, and degradation led to a further erosion of their self-esteem. Figure 1 illustrates that as competition and evaluation increases, self-esteem plummets. The lived experience of PE for the participants in this study was a lose-lose situation. Not only did they lose friends, they lost their right to wear protective coverings of their choice and their positive relationship with their body's physicality, (something, they reported, that had brought a sense of freedom when they were younger). The loss of self-esteem was perhaps most troubling. The Canadian Teachers' Federation (1990) survey of adolescent women found there was a drop in girls' self-esteem, and this study illustrates that PE only worsened this trend. Being degraded is anything

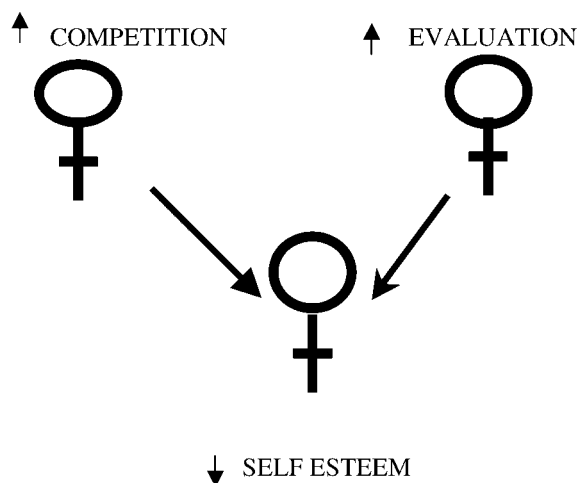


Figure 1. The Lived Experience of PE Class for Girls and Young Women

but health promoting, and school nurses must pay attention to this phenomenon.

The current model of sports needs to change, not the participants (Kroll, 2002, Rice & Russell, 1995). Instead of questions about a model of sport and physical education that never asks girls and young women for input about its structure or characteristics, there is an abundance of female deficiency arguments to explain the low numbers of girls participating in PE and in sports in general. It was difficult to hear the girls put themselves down for quitting PE. The responsibility lay not with the girls, but with the programming.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL NURSING PRACTICE

Although this pilot study was small, many implications for practice have been identified. Further research is required with larger, more diverse samples. Also important is research that explores the lived experience of girls who do not drop PE to understand what contributes to their decision to continue taking PE class. In addition, boys' experiences in PE must be investigated.

The author of this study has worked closely with PE teachers and coaches during her years as a school nurse and is convinced the findings would be disconcerting to those who have spent their careers encouraging girls and young women to be involved in physical activity. School nurses need to advocate for the opportunity to engage in self-enhancing physical activities that enable girls to feel good about themselves and to be physically and emotionally healthy. So, what needs to change? The participants were asked to complete the sentence, "If I were a PE teacher"

If I were a PE teacher, I'd never single a student out, and I'd try to make PE noncompetitive and fun for everybody.

If I were a PE teacher, I wouldn't judge . . . or mark

Table 5. Recommendations

- Shift the emphasis from demonstration to participation.
- Mark the students on participation, rather than on athletic ability.
- Eliminate the public posting of marks and fitness levels.
- Provide options regarding suitable clothing for participation.
- Adopt a zero-tolerance model related to any form of harassment, but especially related to race, class, size, ability, and sexual orientation.
- Coconstruct the curriculum and revise it often to reflect changing trends.
- Shift the emphasis from sport to physical activity.
- Eliminate competition among peers.
- Build activities based on cooperation, not winning.
- Teach skills, but do not evaluate based on the attainment of them.
- Provide choices in activities in each class.
- Provide more time after PE before the next class.
- After the structure of the change room and build several individual stalls and curtained showers to provide privacy.

Note. PE = physical education.

. . . any woman's ability in athletics. No competition. No gold medals just because you ran 0.1 faster.

If I were a PE teacher, I would make the girls feel comfortable about what they were doing, about how good they are at their own certain sports or activities. If they didn't want to participate, I would find out why, instead of saying, "go sit down and fill out this sheet if you're going to be lazy." I would talk to them and find out what they didn't like about what we were doing.

According to the participants, PE teachers in collaboration with school nurses must make several changes in order to make the curriculum and its delivery one that builds body-esteem, self-esteem, and female friendship and solidarity (Table 5). Adolescent girls should be involved in the implementation of these recommendations. The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario, Canada (RNAO; 2002), has developed best practice guidelines for working with adolescents that clearly reflect the practice of many school nurses. They suggest working with adolescents as partners, respecting their values, beliefs, and strengths, and creating opportunities for meaningful youth involvement. In acting on these findings and trusting the lived experiences of the participants, PE teachers and school nurses could transform PE to a girl-friendly model. Finally, given that this research was a pilot study, any further research should involve youth in the planning, implementation, analysis, and subsequent recommendations.

For many girls, involvement in physical activity started out as an everyday occurrence. When it became organized and housed in schools, it soon became a source of shame, ridicule, fear, and relational discord for many girls. Woman-centered values such as caring, nurturing, participatory decision-making, safety, and the sharing and affirmation of personal experiences could be the new ingredients of the lived experience of girls and young women in PE.

CONCLUSION

If we ask, they will tell us. School nurses and PE teachers need to keep asking and join youth to ensure that their voices are heard and affirmed. When asked, "Tell me what ideal gym would look like . . . be like . . . for girls and young women?" many took a long breath, smiled, and explained that they had given this much thought. They hoped their beliefs would one day become sentences read by women with some influence over what PE would look like for the generations that would follow them.

It would feel like you were accomplishing something . . . doing something to make yourself feel better and not have to be good at it.

More of us would be bonded . . . more together.

They'd all be happy . . . having fun. There wouldn't be any girl sitting in the corner saying, "I hate this".

Everyone would be getting along and feeling good about themselves.

It would be more fun . . . more of a woman togetherness kind of thing.

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