



SECONDARY PHYSICAL EDUCATION AVOIDANCE AND GENDER: PROBLEMS AND ANTIDOTES

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Our goal was to locate and evaluate the barriers that impact and cause females to avoid secondary elective physical education courses. We sought to find answers to stop the further decline of female enrolment in secondary physical education by looking into curricula, program and instructional variables. Anecdotal evidence informed this study which was very much exploratory, building upon several key facts. First, Ontario (Canada) secondary students are only required to take one credit (course) in physical education in order to graduate and second, most students take the required physical education course in grade nine which is their first year of high school. Following this there is an average of 10% fewer females in every physical education class in the province of Ontario and only an average of 12% are enrolled in physical education each year. Several issues were identified and explored including self-confidence; motivation; perceived value of physical activity; opportunities for physical activity; marking scheme; competition; co-ed classes; teaching approach; and peers as possible problems and solutions.

Key Words: physical education, female enrolment, secondary, teaching approach, educational problems

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this writing effort was to explore the reasons why physical education at the Ontario secondary school level is often avoided by female students. From the onset, this query appeared to be somewhat straightforward yet upon scrutiny of related research and literature this question became an opportunity to discern interrelated issues. Our investigation was built upon our own anecdotal teaching observations and was very much exploratory, building upon several key facts. Firstly, Ontario (Canada) secondary school students are

only required to take one credit (course) in physical education at the high school level in order to graduate (Policy Memorandum No. 124a, 2010). Secondly, during their first year of high school, most students take a physical education course, as it is a requirement for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Thirdly, after grade nine, there is an average of 10% less girls in every physical education class in Ontario (Faulkner, 2007; Pate et al., 2005). Fourthly, amongst all Ontario females in secondary school only an average of 12% are enrolled in physical education each year (Faulkner, 2007). The findings from past research outcomes suggested that female secondary students were least likely to be enrolled in physical education and similarly unlikely to habitually participate in vigorous physical activity during a physical education class. These facts were puzzling and required further examination to be explored thoroughly.

The purpose of the Ontario Secondary Physical Education curriculum and program implementation at the high school level is to promote the development of personal fitness, competence, skills, attitudes, and knowledge that will help students deal with a variety of personal and social demands in their future (Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum, 2000). Grasping the importance of Physical Education (P.E.) for youth today causes us to suggest that it is crucial to identify the reasons why secondary level females do not take physical education in high school to the same extent males do. It was believed that by uncovering reasons for this enrolment imbalance we could locate explanations and strategies that may transform this enrolment imbalance while illuminated key factors contributing to this state of affairs.

BACKGROUND

Interest in this topic originated from within our experience as Department Heads of a Physical Education programs within an Ontario secondary school framework. Our roles placed us in a position to ensure that all of our classes were being taught at the highest academic level possible, by the best instructors, to all of the student body. The aim was to meet the needs of all students by following the current health and physical education curriculum of Ontario. Effort has been put forth to provide courses that will keep Ontario students active while coming to understand the importance of being active habitually for life. Firstly, it was understood that all students need to learn how to be physically active in their everyday life and understand the importance of good overall health and wellness. It was further believed that, “learning, memory, concentration, and mood all have a significant bearing on a student’s academic performance, and there is increasing evidence that physical activity enhances each” (Sattelmair & Ratey, 2009, p. 365). In addition, we acknowledged that all

students should take physical education annually, in secondary school, in order to realize positive physicality, while attempting to perform at the highest levels academically. The aim or hope was to ensure that physical activity became habitual, and something students might continue to do throughout their adolescence and later, in their adult lives. Every year, there was a significant decline in female enrolment in our physical education courses, and since our practice-based observations, we have been trying to discover the reasons for this decrease in female gender enrolment.

Various Canadian researchers have discovered that physical education plays an essential role in the activity levels of youth and adolescence for instance; Gibbons & Humbert (2008) concluded that school physical education had the potential to play an important part in both stemming the decline of physical activity levels and promoting lifelong physical activity (p. 168). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) suggested that, “overall, eleven (11) out of fourteen (14) studies found one or more positive associations between physical education and indicators of cognitive skills and attitudes, academic behavior, and/or academic achievement” (p. 29). Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin (2007), and Hollingsworth (2009) have similarly confirmed positive relationships between physical fitness and academic performance via research outcomes. Indeed, being able to engage in habitual (daily) physical activity allows us to achieve and/or maintain an enhanced level of fitness which permits us to complete ordinary everyday tasks with ease and in a comfortable manner, without undue fatigue. A need for quality physical activity has been well documented in recent literature globally as an essential ingredient for a healthy life (Holecko 2009). This need for Quality Physical Education (QPE) has been supported because of the common focus “upon the whole child and the complex interactions amongst the different domains of human development, QPE programmes have the potential to foster life skills related to creativity, initiative, problem-solving, critical thinking, social justice, equality and equity and leadership” (Mandigo, Corlett, & Anderson, 2007, p. 110). To avoid physical education and its inherent benefits appears to be a somewhat unwise decision at any time.

Physical education benefits the whole person including the mind, body and spirit as Mandigo, et al. (2007) explained: “The goals of a Quality Physical Education (QPE) curriculum that adopts a humanistic approach include the development of self-esteem, self-actualization, self-understanding and positive interpersonal relations with others. These values help students to make their own self–body–world connection” (p. 113). Physical education in secondary school is a practical means to draw attention to, and cultivate core values within our youth. Values such as honesty, effort, dedication and commitment to ones’

overall health are just as important as your commitment to hard work on the job (O'Brien, 2007).

Every secondary school in Ontario has a physical education program; however, many students choose not to take these courses beyond what is mandatory. It is important that educators encourage every student to take part in some type of physical activity in order to minimize such health related issues as high cholesterol, diabetes and low levels of self-esteem (Nieman, 2008; Piltz, 2002), which may present due to an unhealthy lifestyle. Researchers such as, Hollingsworth (2009) have “found a relationship to exist for participant students between wellness composites of coping, social, physical, and total wellness and academic achievement” (p. 5). Another researcher, Trost (2007) reviewed, fourteen studies of roughly 58,000 students between 1967 and 2006 and concluded, “eleven studies linked regular participation in physical activity is associated with improved academic performance” (p. 3). Similarly, Sattelmair and Ratey (2009) found that, “the *quality* of physical education is vitally important to cognitive and academic outcomes” (p. 11). However, in spite of these positive interrelationships we currently find that our childhood obesity epidemic has become a very serious problem that needs to be addressed immediately (McMurray et al., 2002). This situation should cause educators and students to support P.E. yet, Mendelson (2007) discovered that “in a time when the problem of childhood obesity needs to be addressed more than ever, physical education class is becoming increasingly unimportant in the high schools today” (p. 2).

ADOLESCENT OBESITY

It may be upsetting for parents to admit or realize that their child is inactive and obese, as they would have to accept some responsibility for this predicament and acknowledge, that in order to reverse this critical situation, improved nutrition and increased physical activity may be required (Holecko, 2009). Childhood obesity is caused by three major factors: genetics, overeating and lack of exercise (Nieman, 2008; Mendelson, 2007). More than 20% of our youth in Canada are obese and that number is increasing (Nieman, 2008). This is alarming since we know that seventy percent of obese adolescents will become obese adults (Reilly, 2007).

A vast collection of academic findings suggest that those who participate in sport, recreation and physical activity are generally healthier, more confident, and feel better than those who do not (Chomitz et al., 2009). Research indicates that thirty minutes of moderate activity a day is needed to maintain good overall health (Nieman, 2008). Taking secondary physical education seems like a prudent choice to move towards health and wellness. Yet, “clearly, the *quality*

of physical education is vitally important to cognitive and academic outcomes. Physical activity predicts higher academic performance, but physical education with insufficient levels of activity does not” (Sattelmair & Ratey, 2009, p. 369). It is believed that students must take quality physical education classes on a yearly basis, to enable them to lead a healthy lifestyle.

In previous years Canadian-based data indicated that approximately 26% of Canadian children and adolescents were overweight or obese (Shields, 2005). This is not only a health concern; it is a lifestyle factor that can impact health and wellness. Potentially each day a secondary student is confronted with the ‘Top 5’ most popular items sold in school cafeterias. Food items such as; hot dogs, chips, pizza and candy are in the top 5 most popular items sold in canteen/tuck shops” (Government of Manitoba, 2006, p. 20). With this as a daily food source conditions such as irritability, apathy and low self-esteem may be the consequence of a poor diet and unhealthy lifestyle (Sigfusdottir et al., 2007). When a student consumes these foods regularly self-image and their sense of belonging can be impaired (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Unfortunately, body image is a significant part of a teenager’s life and obesity may be contributing to a lack of self confidence and lesser self image. Facts show us that twenty nine (29%) percent of teenage girls are considered obese in Canada (Sigounis, 2008); and this number is predicted to grow significantly in our country, unless something of significance is done soon. Of the many factors that lead to childhood obesity, poor diet, and inactivity (Sigounis, 2008), can be manipulated, whereas genetics is unmodifiable.

When it comes to poor diet, the focus needs to be on educating and informing cafeteria suppliers, stakeholders, and to a lesser extent, the parents as to how to make better choices for their children. Students and parents must develop techniques that allow them to removed unwanted sugar and sodium from their diet or risk acquiring diabetes or cardiac disease (Sigounis, 2008). Parents have an obligation to provide better nutrition in the household because children cannot purchase food on their own (Mendelson, 2007), and if given the money, they could often choose the unhealthy options. Informed and strategic education is the key to help people make better nutritional decisions every day. The place for this educational practice is in the physical education classroom where health and wellness is taught. This is the most probable area for successful change to be elicited, as a great deal of time, energy and resources are available for lesson planning and strategic implementation. As for inactivity, parents must encourage their children to participate in physical activity on a regular basis in order to help them have a healthier body and mind guided by contemporary knowledge to continue physical activity in their adult lives.

As a parent, one should educate their teenagers by encouraging a healthy diet and moderate amounts of physical activity. By ensuring adequate healthy food options at home and engaging in reasonably portioned, family meals, parents can have a huge impact on their teen's health and weight. In addition, research conducted on teens successfully demonstrated that a diet that was well balanced and contained foods that rank lower on the glycemic index chart helped to promote weight loss (Sigounis, 2008). The best way for parents to ensure that their children take part in physical activity is to encourage them to take physical education in secondary school. However, girls are commonly more apprehensive about physical education than boys for several reasons. We now present various reasons for female inactivity. These will be discussed amidst several strategies either employed or proposed in order to enhance enrolment, involvement and outcomes.

ADOLESCENT FEMALES: SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY BARRIERS

We begin by considering how Canadian male adolescents are more physically active than females in British Columbia (Poon, Chittenden, Saewye, & Murphy, 2006). We have also noted earlier herein how Canadian females are much less likely to enrol in senior (grade 10, 11, 12) physical education classes than males. These two findings were consistent with previous research within British Columbia, which called upon policymakers and educators to research participation of female adolescents (Gibbon et al., 1999). In Ontario the concerns were similar to B.C. (Faulkner, 2007). We know that girls steer clear of participation in elective secondary physical education for several reasons as O'Brien (2007) suggested, these include: self-confidence; lack of motivation; low perceived value of physical activity; lack of opportunities for physical activity; marking scheme; competition; co-ed classes; teaching approach; and peers. We consider each of these reasons and identify key mechanisms that may cause female adolescents to avoid elective Ontario secondary physical education classes.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is a belief in one's personal worth and likelihood of succeeding based upon one's self-esteem and general efficiency (Neil, 2005). "Players who learn the appropriate skills and competencies for effective participation in encouraging settings begin to build the intrinsic motivation patterns and positive dispositions towards activity that lay important foundations for future active lifestyles" (Piltz, 2002, p. 1). While this may be based in fact we must also consider that girls often believe everyone is watching when they take part in physical education, and no matter what game they are playing, they feel that

every time they touch the ball or make a play, they are being scrutinized and evaluated, and become afraid to make a mistake (Fraser-Thomas & Beaudoin, 2004). Furthermore, gym clothes that are often provided (shorts and a t-shirt) in gym class are not very appealing to most females (Olafson, 2002), as many girls do not like to be forced to wear this type of clothing in front of their peers. How one looks in clothes and in action can impact their self concept.

However, the literature suggests that parental support and modelling are key motivators and indicators of physical activity in adolescents (Sallis, Prochaska & Taylor, 2000). Having parental support and encouragement will help females build self-confidence in this athletic forum. Self-confidence can only be developed over time and as Adams-Blair (2002) concluded: "It is now understood that participation in sports and athletic activity has a positive impact on girls' lives. Women who participated in sports as [young] girls report a greater confidence, self-esteem, and pride in their social and physical selves" (p. 48). Continuing to take part in physical education classes and physical activity helps build self-confidence in their abilities and ultimately with proper physical educators in the teaching profession, they will be able to continue to build that self-confidence while dealing proactively with negative comments.

Motivation

In physical education, there are times when skills are important to success. P.E. classes are often developed to improve certain skills while getting better at the particular sport being practiced and/or played. In order to get better at something, one needs to practice and devote time and effort to improve. When there is a significant lack of motivation to improve a skill that is needed for physical education classes few benefits may be found within this level of effort (Ntoumanis, Pensgaard, Martin, & Pipe, 2004). For the most part, it has been observed that some females are more motivated to prioritize academic excellence (i.e. grades) and focus predominantly in courses that will grant them a better chance at post-secondary institution acceptance than athletics, sport and fitness. Biddle and Whitehead (2008) have documented that changing priorities throughout adolescence means that physical activity is reprioritized, with many girls stating that they cannot be bothered to take part. This cross-cultural norm that females are to be more academically adept than their male counter parts may play a role. The best strategy is to recommend an increase physical education participation including encouraging parental support, introducing peer mentoring schemes involving girls who enjoy and regularly participate in physical activity and providing activities for adolescent girls that are fun, informal in nature and involve participation with friends. This form will led the female students to place a higher value on physical activity than without. The

“opportunities provided within many physical education programs do not appear to be valued by, or meaningful to, female students (Gibbons, Gaul, & Blackstock, 2004, p. 19), since the foci of the program is often a traditional sports emphasis based in competition. In a young girl’s life, many times the competitive nature of sport can be draining, both mentally and physically.

Do activities need to be structured? It has been found that most females will not take part in a class where structure is lacking however they often will not create their own physical activities in a gym setting. Some researchers have found that “self-determined motivation is related to PA [Physical Activity] effort, choice, and frequency” (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007). These variables may be the key solutions, as a current International study concluded that “regardless of self-determined motivation level, adolescents had higher step counts in the free choice condition compared to the structured condition. The free-choice PE class was likely a setting that facilitated self-determined learning” (Lonsdale, Sabiston, Raedeke, Ha, & Sum, 2009, p. 72). Again, choice, self-determination and structures are key variables it appears (Felton et al., 2005).

Experience suggests that within our traditional physical education courses, females are more likely to participate in the activity when there is a leader assisting the follow-through. They appear to lack the motivation and knowledge to prepare an exercise for themselves or possibly past experiences in P.E. has decreased this initiative. Fraser-Thomas and Beaudoin (2004) documented that the female motivational response to previous environmental pressures is significantly altered by the negative behaviour of boys. This is the reason why females will often not fully engage themselves to improve or work more intensely to tax the cardiovascular system in P.E. class as they are protecting themselves from negative male attention. This negative behavior (insults, inappropriate attention and comments) from boys in class is clearly displayed yet much of it is covert therefore our interventions fall short. As physical educators, coaching and motivational strategies is employed for the entire student body (O’Brien, 2007), yet with 30 or more students per class it is difficult to coach all individually. Possibly adding an extra physical educator assistant may be a key factor in raising this motivation.

Physical Activity: Perceived Value

When girls pick their academic schedule, they would rather take courses that are necessary to graduate or prerequisite to university. In the province of Ontario, only one P.E. credit is necessary for graduation and it is normally taken at the grade nine levels (Policy Memorandum No. 124a, 2010). All physical education classes are labelled as open courses. Once a girl is taking university-bound courses, they would rather not take a physical education course because they do

not believe that physical activity is important at school and they would rather take another university prerequisite or have a spare in their timetable to study, complete work or relax. Therefore, it becomes a trade-off between P.E. and another course (O'Brien, 2007). Girls experience a lot of academic pressure and sense they would be better off taking courses that are university requisites or volunteer during that period off we have found. Universities will look at their community involvement and marks for entry to their school and using this allocated time for volunteering, as opposed to a physical education class, seems to be more beneficial.

Opportunities

Arguably, all schools need more funding and the educational institutions within the province of Ontario are no different: When funding is minimized then resources are hard to come by (Fraser-Thomas & Beaudoin, 2004). Even maintaining equipment is very expensive which leads to a fact that, that in Ontario, "36% of secondary schools charge fees for Physical Education [and] athletic fees in secondary school can cost up to \$500 (People for Education, 2009, p. 3). Sometimes, the physical educator must make a decision and play a game that can accommodate thirty three (33) students with the equipment on hand, no matter its condition or state of repair. For example, two nets and a soccer ball can allow for various types of games. The problem is that not all girls enjoy these types of activities and some would rather experience something else that requires less sport-based participation and more flow-based movements such as dance, stretching or running. Many girls do not like to be forced to play something they don't like because that is the only equipment available. For instance, it is possible that a number of girls would love to jump on an elliptical trainer or a treadmill at times and exercise in the weight room rather than in the gym, however cost for this equipment is often too much for a secondary school or Board of Education (Fraser-Thomas & Beaudoin, 2004). With limited equipment and limited facilities we opt for outside activities yet the elimination of the gym can deter girls from taking physical education and the limited variety of activities does not keep them interested (O'Brien, 2007). A possible creative solution is implementing more dumbbell based training sessions for muscular strength, plyometrics or circuits for cardiovascular and muscular endurance and stretching or yoga for the flexibility component to ensure all fitness aspects are utilized fully in any physical activity class.

Marking Scheme

Anecdotally, we have identified that some females would love to take physical education classes but the thought of a low mark discourages them, since parts of the marking scheme emphasize actual skills, and they believe this disadvantages

them. For example, the ability to catch and throw a ball with one or two hands (Ontario Physical Education Curriculum, 2000), is a skill evaluated. Furthermore, movement skills and level of physical fitness are evaluated (see Appendix A). If you are not highly skilled at performing this task, then ultimately your mark will be impacted accordingly. This is not always the case however it is an interesting point. Seeing as girls would rather not take P.E. to avoid a low mark, changing the scheme would be favourable, but in doing so we deviate from the provincial guidelines. Altering evaluation guidelines in the Ontario Physical Education Curriculum is the change that needs to take place.

Also, testing the athletic ability of a student in front of colleagues can be very difficult. Girls may not want to be the subject of attention during a class and dislike the possibility of being humiliated in front of their peers. Since girls are already highly scrutinized in their academic life, being judged in their free-time/stress-relieving activities seems counterproductive. For example, if the physical educator decides to have a race with all the classmates, someone needs to lose the race and that can be devastating for a female who is not a good runner and this is being pointed out in front of the class. An alternative to skills and competition based assessment and evaluation can include student goal-setting and individual fitness planning. In a study completed by Felton et al. (2005) found, “girls developed a personal portfolio that included assessments of their physical activity level, nutritional status, and body measurements” (p. 59). Clearly a flexible approach to the marking scheme is worth considering once there is Ontario Ministry approval.

Competition

Some view competition as desirable, and some see it as a barrier to participate (O'Brien, 2007). Females can often feel that in a co-ed class activities can get very competitive to a point where the game is no longer fun and the level of competition too high for their liking as Hannon and Ratliffe (2007) concluded: that girls were put off by “the risk of injury, aggression, and rough physical contact” [which were] “generally associated with male sports and boys participation in coeducational physical education” (p. 13). Fogelklou (2009) agreed, reporting that females felt inferior, and the boys do not pass to the girls during team sports. Healthy competition to succeed is more important than the outcome of the game, is the message required. Girls might feel intimidated by others in the group, if the game becomes too competitive. We believe girls would like to see classes separated by levels and ability so that they can participate and not feel as though they cannot contribute to the game, because the level of competition is too high. Females will avoid P.E. classes based on this barrier alone yet inherent in most competition where intensity is common

Hannon and Ratliffe (2007) pointed towards “aggression, and rough physical contact” (p. 13), often a feature of competition in some activities mostly “associated with male sports and boys participation in coeducational physical education” (2007, p. 13), classes tends to mute participation of females.

Co-ed classes

Due to the difficulties of creating a workable timetable, several of our physical education classes are often setup in a co-ed manner. Some females do not like this approach and would rather have classes segregated by gender. Females may feel self-conscious about having to play and participate in front of boys. Indeed, the “public nature of their physical education class and constant comparison with their male classmates accentuated the pressure felt to look good and be popular” (Gibbons, Gaul, & Blackstock, 2004, p. 20). They will avoid taking the course when they find out that because of the lack of enrolment, guidance must combine classes and have boys and girls take the course together. Physical educators would rather have classes divided by gender so that the level of competition is consistent with their ability and everyone who is taking part in the course feels welcome. Girls indicate often that the boys never pass the ball and it creates a division between the groups that the physical educator needs to address. Most girls do like competition however when it is boys and girls together, the level gets too high as opposed to when it is only girls together, they can compete at their level and be active (O’Brien, 2007).

Teaching Approach

Piltz (2002) suggested, “teachers and coaches are constantly seeking better ways of providing enjoyable learning experiences in games and sports as a means to attaining a range of learner outcomes including the development of competent and confident players (p. 1). However, the teaching approach “should reflect gender” (Chung & Phillips, 2002, p. 7). Ntoumanis and Biddle (1999) agreed, suggesting that different motivational approaches are used to increase physical activity among students and there are four themes that will help increase the level of motivation and commitment for physical activity:

- ◇ choice in the activity;
- ◇ improve a skill;
- ◇ feel supported in the class;
- ◇ expectations are identified for the course. (p. 11)

When the physical educator utilizes these modes, the level of motivation may well improve and enhance enrolment (Gibbons, 2009). Teachers should provide choice (Glasser, 1998) when teaching a physical education class because this

enhances commitment to the course and lesson being taught if they have an opportunity to provide suggestions (Gibbons & Humbert, 2006). It validates, empowers and enables participants in the class (Brooks & Magnusson, 2006). If the expectations are clear and all feel supported in their learning environment, most will want to take part in the activity and achieve success (Hurtes, 2002).

Peers

Females would rather take classes with friends we have observed. If the overall female enrolment is down in a physical education class, girls are more likely to drop the course because they do not want to be the only girl in the class nor without friends. They want to know that the class will be fun and filled with people they know, trust and this promotes social acceptance (Hurtes, 2002). In fact research completed by Gibbons and Humbert (2006) found that “female students consistently emphasize the importance of the learning environment in their PE classes” (p. 7). Such factors as group cohesion, enjoyment and respect for all are often key female concerns. We have found that sometimes even if the better female athletes sign up for a course and they know there are not other natural athletes in the class; they will drop the course because the level of competition will not be high enough for them. Hence the notion of the group dynamic determining and encouraging females to take a physical education course again is key to motivation and frequently plays a role in future course selection (O’Brien, 2007).

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

After reviewing all the barriers that females face in select secondary physical education classes, it is crucial that we look at the possible solutions that will encourage females to take physical education courses in the future. Even with specific perceived barriers within physical education and the reasons for avoidance illuminated, there are several plausible strategies that can be used to improve enrolment of females in secondary physical education classes (O’Brien, 2007).

We present several alternatives that can be implemented to improve and increase female enrolment in physical education classes at the secondary school level.

- increase the number of qualified physical educators in our elementary schools;
- involve students in the decision making process in physical education classes;
- promote a marking schemes that encourage participation;
- class segregation based on ability/gender;

- extend mandatory physical education in secondary school;
- create ‘individual’ focus courses.

We will look at every strategy listed above and create possible solutions to increase female enrolment in our physical education classes.

Qualified Physical Educators

In our elementary schools in Ontario since October of 2005 we have implemented what is called the “daily physical activity program” (DPA) where all students must take part in 20 minutes of physical activity per day (Policy/Program Memorandum No. 138, 2005). Regardless how schools implement this, all students must take part in some type of physical activity on a daily basis. The goal of the program is to provide elementary students with the opportunity to be physically active and have a positive impact on their physical, mental and social well-being.

Physical activity will impact student achievement, readiness to learn, behaviour and self-esteem we believe. Also, with a positive experience at a young age, the foundation for a healthy productive life is built (Policy/Program Memorandum No. 138, 2005). Unfortunately, many schools do not have qualified physical educators. People for Education (2009) revealed that only “40% of Ontario elementary schools have a health and physical education teacher” (p. 3). Instead of physical education expertise, many schools depend on all teachers to be prepared and able to conduct a 25 minute P.E. class with some type of daily physical activity, often without the knowledge or resources to do so. It could be like asking a physical educator to teach a music lesson. This would not benefit the teacher or the students. Students need to be exposed to teachers that are qualified in this area in order to make it fun and have students continue to take these classes throughout their academic career. The assumption is that if we have qualified teachers (Physical Education coursework/certificate/diploma) teaching physical education, then students will be exposed to proper instruction and techniques that will help them develop internal motivation for physical education, and as a consequence, increase the enrolment at the high school level. Even so, some qualified physical educators may be ineffective and “less effective physical educators seem to make no effort to establish rules and routines, which are necessary for increasing student activity and for learning of appropriate behaviours” (Vasiliadou, Derri, Galanis, & Emmanouilidou, 2009, p. 34). “Effective physical educators minimize the time of organization, waiting and transition while they increase the time of student active participation” (Momodu, 2000, p 54).

Physical Education: Empowerment

One of the best ways to motivate students to take physical education classes is to allow students to make curricular decisions with the teacher (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999). Allowing girls to contribute to the structure of the course is an important method used to encourage girls to take physical education since “the opportunities provided within many physical education programs do not appear to be valued by, or meaningful to, female students (Gibbons, Gaul & Blackstock, 2004, p. 19). One great way to put this motivational method into practice is to create a survey to begin to understand what type of activities they would enjoy doing during the semester. The teacher can learn from the data and build a physical education course around the interests of the students. Perhaps females will choose yoga throughout the course or maybe they would prefer ultimate Frisbee on the field. Use activities that girls want to engage in order to increase the level of participation and motivation in the class (O’Brien, 2007).

Promoting Participation: Marking

One of the strategies that can be used to improve female enrolment is to reduce the importance of movement skills and evaluate participation in the course. The ultimate goal of physical education coursework is to promote a physical and healthy lifestyle (Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum, 2000). In order to achieve this goal more emphasis needs to be placed on the level of participation and not how well you complete the skill. Shift the focus from completing the task to quality knowledge and understanding on the movement to the pure joy and fun of participating actively. Girls want to get a good mark in the class and if we evaluate the level of participation and not the ability to score a goal in a soccer game, then more girls will take physical education because they know they will be able to get a good mark if they are not a great athlete. Punishing students for their inability to be a superior athlete is not a positive way to promote a fun and healthy classroom environment. We want all students to enjoy the class and feel that they can be successful in the course with the emphasis on active participation. Avoid testing skills and move towards improvement, effort and participation (O’Brien, 1998). This type of marking scheme may increase female enrolment and participation in all physical education classes.

Class Segregation: Ability and Gender

Whenever possible, we must create classes with optional competitive and non-competitive activities. Segregating groups based on ability will help females feel more welcome in their class and they can play with an emphasis on cooperative games (Hannon & Ratliffe, 2007). Cooperative games are used to build team work, team chemistry and leadership skills among the group. The

goal is to have fun and be active at the same time (Gibbons, 1999). Completing the task together is a great way to get everyone involved and build that self validation in the group and in the class. Being able to be active in a non-competitive setting will encourage more females to take physical education classes. Everyone has different abilities. Grouping similar talent together will motivate females to take physical education courses with people with the same ability and they can have fun without being singled out during any game they play (O'Brien, 2007).

Gender segregation is another way to increase enrolment in physical education classes. Girls prefer to play sports with other girls. They feel that there is less pressure to win and they won't worry about boys laughing at them if they make a mistake. Girls are very supportive when it comes to sports. They encourage and support each other to do the best that they can. Having a gender-based physical education class will allow more girls to take physical education because they will feel welcome at all times and not embarrassed to make a mistake in front of competitive boys (O'Brien, 2007).

Extend Mandatory Physical Education

In the current provincial policy, student must have one physical education credit in order to graduate (Policy Memorandum No. 124a). Most students take physical education in grade nine. Currently, a total of 30 credits are necessary to graduate with a high school diploma (Policy Memorandum No. 124a, 2010). If out of the 30 credits, we were able to increase the requirement from one physical education credit to two, then more people would have to take physical education and enrolment would increase. The more people that take physical education, the better it is for students to learn the advantages and importance of overall health. In order to keep obesity rates down, more students must take physical education to learn the key concepts and lifestyle changes they can make to ensure a long life. By introducing mandatory physical education at the senior level, females will be exposed to more physical activity and in consequence build a better understanding of being physically active throughout their lives.

Focus Courses

Creating courses that are (female) student based and meet the needs of the (female) students are a better way to increase female enrolment in physical education classes. Females prefer courses that will shift from traditional sports

to more modern themes like zumba, yoga and aerobics. Gibbons and Humbert (2008) explain:

When researchers asked older adolescent females (age 15 - 18) about their physical activity preferences (both within and outside school), physical activity dislikes, and barriers toward participation, four factors consistently emerged. These factors included the need for experiencing fun and enjoyment, a positive social environment that allowed being with friends and protection from harassment, choice and variety of physical activities with an emphasis on individual lifetime activities, and the opportunity to develop meaningful physical skills and personal fitness. (p. 168)

For example, we have created a girls only fitness class where the emphasis is about being active and helping other girls achieve their fitness goals. The course consists of using the weight room, gym and track to build fitness plans and achieve self-selected fitness goals. There is also a theory component to the course where we discuss nutrition and different types of training methods that allow girls to combine physical knowledge with mental knowledge so that they can build a better understanding of the importance of a physical and healthy lifestyles. Currently this course has an enrolment of 30 girls and has run for three consecutive years. The feedback has been constructive and the girls really enjoy the course. Furthermore, we take this class once a week to a local gym called "Goodlife". The girls enjoy going to the local gym and discover the numerous individuals who workout and train on a regular basis. It builds a partnership in our community and the girls may want to get a membership at the gym one day. Creating focus courses allow females to pick physical education classes that interest them and motivate them to be successful in their own area of interest (Dunton, Schneider, & Cooper, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Locating and evaluating the barriers that impact and cause females to avoid secondary elective physical education courses, it is clear that one needs to look at this more thoroughly and create solutions in the form of curricula, program and instruction to ensure that numbers do not decrease further. "There is some promising research that supports the notion that if the needs and interests of young women are incorporated into PE programs, they will willingly participate" (Gibbons & Humbert, 2006, p. 5). We need to implement and publicize these findings in a wide variety of media as busy educators often do not have time to consult journals.

Teachers must attempt to nurture self-esteem in all students by creating an environment that will encourage success and motivate all to continue in P.E.. We conclude that teachers should be encouraged to create a course or courses that demonstrate the importance of physical education and physical activity. Have marking schemes that encourage participation and does not evaluate the ability to complete the motor skill nor compete is essential. Competition needs to be individualized and healthy and not too intense or females will possibly shun the class and not want to compete or participate. Cooperative games need to be used in order to build classroom dynamics and leadership among all. Allow students to work with peers of their choice and take physical education together. Build courses by gender and segregate the competitive and non competitive people to encourage females to be active with their level of ability and interest. Create courses that meet the needs of the students and allow them to be involved in the marking scheme so that females know exactly what the expectations are in the course. Focus courses can encourage females to take physical education classes in their area of interest. For example, offer a fitness course or a nutrition course that may encourage more females to enrol in physical education. Courses that focus on their needs and interest will clearly encourage more girls to take P.E.. Physical education should be a significant part of everyone's life and making physical education mandatory at the senior level will increase enrolment rates. If students must take a senior physical education credit then enrolment will increase and all students will gain more knowledge, skills and ability in physical education and further understand the importance it will have on their everyday life. Felton et al. (2005) concluded:

Girl - friendly PE was defined as having the following seven attributes:

- (1) Gender separation opportunities exist in classes.
- (2) Students are physically active in PE classes.
- (3) Noncompetitive activities are offered.
- (4) Lifelong physical activity is emphasized.
- (5) Classes are fun & enjoyable.
- (6) Appropriate instructional methods are used (e.g., small group interaction).
- (7) Behaviour skills for PE are taught. (p. 58)

These conclusions need to be applied to halt the avoidance patterns now in play in secondary physical education.

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