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Content Standards Versus Students' Beliefs about Assessment in Middle School Physical Education: Are We on the Same Page?

During the 1990's many professional organizations including physical education (PE), developed content standards for K-12 students. The content standards for PE were established by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 1995). The content standards for PE emphasize measurable student outcomes, primarily in the areas of sport skill proficiency, acceptable levels of physical fitness and the application of knowledge to physical activity contexts. The content standards have been widely adopted by K-12 PE teachers in many states. In addition, the NASPE outcomes have frequently become the basis for establishing student outcomes in many states that are engaged in high-stakes testing. However, it is uncertain whether the content standards established by NASPE and state authorities are consistent with K-12 students' views about how they should be assessed. If inconsistencies were found to exist, teachers would likely experience difficulty enlisting the cooperation of students in achieving the NASPE student outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to ascertain students' beliefs about how they should be assessed in middle school PE and compare those beliefs with the content standards established by the profession (NASPE). Subjects were 203 female and 148 male high school freshmen who previously completed required middle school PE classes. On the instrument, students were requested to rank the importance of seven factors typically used to grade students in middle school PE. In addition, students' also rated their physical fitness level, skill level and attitude in their PE classes compared to their peers. Two graduate students and the first author administered the instrument during the students' first high school PE class. Responses were analyzed by descriptive (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics (chi-square, ANOVA). Results indicated that students viewed the importance of each of the seven factors differently. In fact, 53% of the students believed that their effort should be the most important factor in their grade. Overall, 87% of students considered three affective factors or social behaviors (effort, frequency of participation and respect for rules) as the most important determinant of their PE grade. Conversely, students rarely ranked their sport skill level (2%), physical fitness level (3%), or performance on tests (5%) and homework (5%) as the most important factor in their grade. Furthermore, a substantial number of students indicated that their skill level (36%) and physical fitness level (29%) should have no bearing at all on their PE grade. In conclusion, students in this study viewed social behaviors as far more important for grading purposes than their physical fitness level, skill level and cognitive performance. This view is at odds with the emphasis on measurable outcomes espoused by NASPE and the standards-based testing systems present in many states. Therefore, communication with students about the importance of NASPE standards and how those standards are assessed is critical for reconciling the differences between students' priorities and those established by NASPE and states. In addition, it is likely that students' will be more responsive to authentic assessments of their physical fitness, sport skills and knowledge than to traditional methods of testing. Further, if teachers are going to use students' social behaviors as a basis for grading, it is imperative that valid and reliable instruments be developed that are linked to defensible educational objectives. Finally, the influence of students' perceived physical fitness level, skill level, and attitude on their ratings will also be discussed.

Students' perceptions about how they should be graded

Since the early 90's educational focus in content and assessment has shifted away from what students are "doing" -- and the time they spend doing it -- to what students actually learn -- or "outcomes".

In the 1990's many national organizations in various content areas in education, including physical education (pe), brought leaders in their respective professions together to answer the question, "what should students know and be able to do?" In 1995, the National Standards for pe were published. Since that time, a concerted effort has been made to use standards in pe classes as benchmarks for curriculum and assessment to hold students accountable in areas professionals deem critical. In pe, standards include psychomotor, cognitive and affective measures, specifically, physical fitness, cognitive knowledge, and desirable social behaviors. However, until students accept the importance of standards as part of curriculum expectations there will be incongruity between what students perceive as important for assessment, specifically what should be graded, versus what the profession views as important for students to "know and be able to do". Thus, achievement of standards will be difficult. The purpose of this study was to measure student's perceptions for "how they think they should be graded" in pe classes. Specifically, do students' views of grading practices in pe class match views held by the profession as stated in the national standards? Participants were 203 female and 148 male freshman in four different high schools. Students were surveyed the first week of their freshman pe class and asked to remember their middle school pe classes. Carlson's (1995) survey instrument was used. Students ranked 7 factors (questions) related to fitness, knowledge, and social behaviors as (1) "should be the most important part of students' gym grade" to (4) "should not be used at all to grade students. It is not important at all." Responses were counted as frequencies, converted to percentages and analyzed by chi-square (.05 level). Results indicated that 54% of males and 58% of females felt "How hard I try in gym class", an affective measure typically not graded, was by far the most important measure to them that should be used in grading. Add chi square stuff...

These results indicate a huge (**significant?**) disconnect between what the profession values as important content -- what a student knows and can apply -- versus what students' value as important content. Over half of the students felt that their --effort -- "how hard a student tries" is far more important for grading purposes than what they learn or how well they do in physical skills, fitness, homework, written tests, etc. Closing the gap might mean adding affective measures to grading for MS students. For example, letting students rate themselves on effort for the day, might be one way to close this gap, or using a personal social responsibility score from the Hellison (1985) model for example, might be another way.