“We’ve got to stick to the curriculum, right?” An Exploration of Female High School Physical Educators’ Beliefs About Competition in Their Classes

Ellen Singleton
University of Western Ontario

Abstract

In order to examine physical educators’ personal beliefs about competition, seven female high school teachers took part in individual interviews. Participants discussed their personal beliefs concerning competition, and what they thought their female students believed about competition. Further, they described their pedagogical decision-making in light of these beliefs. Themes emerging from the interviews indicated these teachers believed competition meant experiences that demanded intensity, focus, best performance, skill, and winning. They also believed that students understood competition only to mean winning or losing. Wide variations in skill competency led teachers to highlight participation and fun and downplay competition in class. These pedagogical responses and their implications for physical education teacher educators, student teachers, and practicing physical educators are discussed.

Introduction

In contemporary western culture, some form of competition is assumed to be an integral part of any game where two or more individuals or teams oppose each other (Skillen, 1998). In Canada, team games have traditionally formed a significant portion of school physical education curricula, particularly at the secondary level. Although all secondary provincial and territorial curricula include, with more or less detail, suggested approaches for teaching movement skills and their application in game situations, none mention competition as a concept, a topic, or even an issue when playing games. The notion that students may experience outcomes other than movement skills acquisition when competition is factored into class time sporting activities does not appear in these documents. Indeed, competition as an experiential aspect of school physical education classes is rarely broached even in academic literature (Dyck, Wong & Breadner, 2000; Ha, Johns & Shiu, 2003; Portman, 1995; Supaporn, Dodds & Griffin, 2003; Treasure & Roberts, 2001).

There is a significant amount of research on how physical educators’ values and beliefs affect their pedagogical practice in the gym. Some researchers

Ellen Singleton is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education, Brock University. Her research interests include issues surrounding the physically active female body - social, cultural, historical, and ethical; researching high school physical educators’ use of competition in their gymnasiums, and how they relate concepts of “fair play” to their understanding of competition; and, investigating the ways in which physically active females were portrayed in early children’s series books (circa 1900-1930).

concentrate on the influence of teacher preparation programs on preservice beliefs about the purposes and content of school physical education (Hopper & Sandford, 2006; Meek & Curtner-Smith, 2004; Ryan, Bridges & Yerg, 2000; Sherman, 2001; Singleton, 2006). Others explore how experienced physical educators reconcile such beliefs with their teaching practices (Banville & Rikard, 2001; Green, 2000; Halas, 2004; Harrison & Worthy, 2001; Kulinna, Silverman & Keating, 2000; Rutledge, 2006). Ennis & Chen (1995) observe that:

Value orientations describe educational belief systems that influence curricular decision making. They form the rationales that determine, in part, how practical decisions are made (Eisner, 1992). Within physical education, teachers make a significant number of important educational decisions. Decisions include what content to teach, how to teach it, and the extent to which the content will be learned by students. (p. 41)

Cothran & Ennis (1998) found teachers and students may not hold the same values about the educational and non-educational aspects of physical education.

Green (2000), in his investigation into the “everyday philosophies” of physical educators in the United Kingdom concluded, with some evident despair, that:

PE teachers’ “philosophies” are best understood as a shifting set of practices more or less favoured by PE teachers who, in turn, hold more or less ideological conceptions of PE which are inevitably circumscribed by their habituses and context. (p. 128)

The teachers in his study, particularly the male teachers, were adamant that school physical education should be almost exclusively framed as competitive sport experiences, even when:

it became apparent ... that teachers’ emphasis upon competitive sport did not sit at all easily alongside their ostensible commitment to “enjoyment”—not least because, as some teachers recognized, many pupils (perhaps especially girls but also less able as well as disaffected pupils) may be put off by such an emphasis upon achievement and competition. (p. 114)

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which female physical educators’ personally held values about competition related to how they believed their female students understood competition as it arose when games activities were introduced in their class. The teachers were aware that some students did not share their teacher’s feelings about competition and ideas about how it should be “played out” in physical education. This research focused on how experienced female physical educators negotiated their personal experiences with, and beliefs about, competition with all of their female students.

Research Questions

There is no lack of Canadian and American-based studies of the “off-putting” effect of competitive class atmospheres for some students of both genders.

Research on female activity preferences in Canadian and American school physical education clearly indicates that many young women are uncomfortable with the often competitive nature of their classes, particularly those featuring team and individual sports (Ennis, 1999; Gibbons, Wharf Higgins, Gaul & VanGyn, 1999; Humbert, 2006; Humbert & Blacklock, 1997; Lenskyj & Van Daalen, 2006; Lockhart, 2001).

Influenced by my own previous experience as a secondary school physical educator and by current research on the effect of teachers' beliefs on their pedagogical decisions, as well as research indicating female students' dissatisfaction with the competitive atmosphere prevalent in some physical education classes, I began to wonder how teacher beliefs about competition may affect their practice. I realized, however, that grappling with the topic of competition in physical education is a little like wrestling with a whale in a bathtub. Both subjects are large, awkward, and slippery. Instead of attempting to research all facets of this extensive and unwieldy topic at once, I decided first to investigate just one aspect—the pedagogical implications of competition in female high school physical education. Because my own teaching experience was mostly with female students, and because I am interested in how female physical educators make sense of the work they do, this research was designed to examine values about competition held by female physical educators who teach primarily female students, and to relate these values to the competitive experiences of their students as observed in their physical education classes. In this research, I explore the ways in which these teachers' personally held values about competition relate to how they believe their female students understand competitive experiences that arise in class through participation in games and sports included as part of the required curriculum, and to the pedagogical strategies they employed to cope with competition issues they identified in their classes. Two questions were designed explicitly to explore these teachers' personal beliefs about competition:

- What do high school female physical educators value about competitive experiences?
- What do they believe competition experienced in their physical education classes means to female students?

Although small in scope, this research has implications for both preservice and practicing physical educators—female and male. Insight into how experienced physical educators incorporate personal beliefs and class observation into their management of competition in their classes may lead to a better understanding of the pedagogical decisions that relate to this important aspect of such classes. This may help both experienced and preservice teachers plan positive game experiences for all their students. Further, a more advanced understanding on the part of teacher candidates of how personal competitive experiences, when interrelated with personal belief systems, can affect pedagogical decision-making may contribute to deeper and more meaningful observations and reflections as they move into their practicum experiences in the schools.

Methods

Participants

In the late spring and early fall of 2003, twelve public school female physical education teachers from a mid-size southern Ontario city and its semi-rural outskirts were invited by phone to participate in an interview about their beliefs concerning competition as it related to teaching games in their physical education classes. They were informed that interviews would last about an hour at a time and locale of their choosing and would be transcribed. The participants were also informed that they would have the opportunity to review and comment on the transcriptions. Individual interviews promised greater in-depth exploration of the specific topic of competition commonly found in secondary physical education. Although this was not an adequate sample to make overarching generalizations about secondary female physical educators, the responses could provide entry points for further research on the topic.

Seven women consented to take part, and they are referred to here by pseudonyms. There was considerable variation in their age and teaching experience. The most experienced, Dana, Anne, and Fran had each taught for more than 20 years, while Georgia, the 'rookie', was in her fourth year. Emily, with six years, had taught for just a couple of years longer than Georgia, and Brenda had been teaching for ten years. All were currently teaching or had recently taught segregated girls' physical education classes in public high schools. The exception was Caitlin. Although she had taught girls' physical education in the previous term and in the seven years previous to the time she joined her current school, her assignment at the time of her interview was guidance and counselling. In addition to counselling she was also teaching a classroom-based physical education elective to coeducational grade 12 students. Neither Caitlin nor Dana were coaching teams, although both had done so extensively in the past. All other participants coached at least one extracurricular team at the time of their interview. Four people—Brenda, Fran, Emily and Anne—continued to play on community teams or compete in individual sport tournaments such as tennis or golf, as well as coach at school. Brenda taught in a large school in a rural area just outside of the city. Georgia and Fran taught in the same department of a very large inner-city high school. Dana was located in a mid-size high school in a quiet, older part of the downtown. Anne worked in a large high school located in a blue collar neighbourhood at one end of town. Caitlin taught in a mid-sized school noted for its racial and ethnic diversity. Emily taught a somewhat similar population at a high school located in the southern part of the city.

Data collection

I developed a semi-structured interview based on the two research questions and piloted the interview with one volunteer before inviting the others to take part. Because I wanted to situate each participant as clearly as possible in her own competitive context, both personally and pedagogically, I developed a series of questions focused on demographic information such as years of teaching experience, the type of classes generally taught, personal competitive

experiences, if any, and self-identification as competitive or non-competitive, and to what degree. These questions were designed to elicit from the participants responses focused on the first research question: What do high school female physical educators value about competitive experiences? A second series of questions was designed to explore their perceptions around the second research question: What do they believe competition in their classes means to female students?

It quickly became evident that these topics were interesting ones for the participants. Each managed to respond to every question I had planned for the interview. Since most had chosen to be interviewed during a preparation period, almost every interview was abruptly terminated by the bell for the next class. Regardless, none was less than an hour. Each teacher was given a transcript of her interview a week or so later and was invited to respond with further comments, observations or corrections. None chose to do so.

Data analysis

Data analysis for this research was modeled on the process followed by Green (2000) when he investigated the “everyday” philosophies of English physical educators. Green observed that qualitative approaches:

typically involve an attempt to identify the central features of, and patterns within, interviewees’ responses via a categorization of content. Texts can be interpreted on a number of levels but an overriding concern is the attempt to comprehend the perspective of the interviewee. This necessitates an analysis not only of the content of interviews in terms of words, phrases or themes . . . but also an analysis of discourse in the form of an interpretation of such themes. (p. 115)

A qualitative analysis of data generated by semi-structured interviews is concerned with the ways people understand things, and emphasizes the search for meaning as well as the frequency of particular words or phrases.

In accordance with Green’s methodology, the interview data from the study were initially arranged into common clusters or “categories of meaning” (Green, 2000, p. 116), based upon the core themes of the interviews—that is, what the teachers valued about competition, what they believed competition meant to their female students, and how they responded pedagogically to these observations and beliefs. These categories were further adjusted to incorporate specific topics that emerged during the interviews. An in-depth analysis was carried out by integrating topics with current research on teachers’ values, and also with my own previous twenty years of experience teaching female physical education. The following section describes and discusses the topics that emerged from these perspectives.

Interpretations

What teachers value about competition: “It would be an intensity...”

The first core theme of the research focused on what the participants valued about competition. A significant sub-theme that emerged from the interviews

concerned the meaning the experience of competition had for each of these women. Research indicates that female high school students are reluctant to participate in physical education classes with pronounced competitive atmospheres. From my own experience, I believed that teachers' attitudes and approaches to competition had a significant effect on the atmosphere of the class. As a secondary school physical educator, I was aware that some of my female students were reluctant to participate in competitive sport activities in my classes. Although my own experience of higher level play was limited, I understood how much competitive experiences were enhanced by physical skill and suspected some of my students avoided competition because they did not have the skill to participate at anything other than the most basic level of game play. Short units on specific sports became perpetual introductory courses as students struggled to remember cognitively and physically what they had learned and practiced in volleyball or basketball or track and field in preceding years. While some of my female students, usually the team players, enjoyed and sought out competitive opportunities in their classes, there always seemed to be a gap between those who were competitive and those who were not. In an effort to narrow the gap I began to concentrate less on skill development, and more on principles of equity and fair play. Instead of emphasizing skill acquisition and competition, I attempted to develop a positive, welcoming environment for all students where skill was played down, and everyone in the class had equal opportunities to participate. Sharing, teamwork, and cooperation were emphasized and encouraged. Rules, modified to accommodate lower skill levels were to be observed equally by all. The skill level of most students did not improve, but at least more students appeared to be participating and having fun.

When I asked the participants what competition meant to them, each woman based her response on her own competitive experience. Some, like Fran, Emily, Brenda, and Anne were still actively competing, and related their responses to recent activities of their own. Others, while no longer participating in organized sport, continued to find competition in more recreationally oriented activities such as golf; and some, while remaining active at the local YMCA, had moved away from any participation in competitive sport. All of the teachers identified themselves as competitive, some excessively so. Georgia, for example, remarked that she used to get sick regularly before competing in cross-country at university. Emily commented:

It's very different for me to look at it that way [not competitive] because I would say I'm a very competitive person, and ... when I get in there and play a game with [students], I can feel that I am much more competitive than anybody else in there

Anne and Dana connected competition to effort. As Dana said, "It was about doing your best. So the competition was more from me wanting to do the best I could at the moment."

For Brenda, Emily, and Georgia, competition was equated with success. The end product—winning—was what was important. Brenda, for example, believed that the desire to win was a primary component of competition, although this aspect of competition should be played down in class. This was illustrated when she

contrasted the nature of the competitive expectations she had for her school teams to those she held for her classes:

... my focus isn't competing in the phys. ed. classes. My focus *is* [to compete], as a coach The ultimate goal is to win. But in the phys. ed. class ... I don't teach it. I try and, I guess, de-emphasize ... competition.

Caitlin and Fran concentrated on the relationship between performance or skill execution and the competitive experience. Caitlin remarked:

I found skill "comfort" and skill development goes hand in hand with the ability to compete or being able to be comfortable with other people who want to compete against you.

It became apparent that for these participants, their past or present participation in competitive sport experiences had led them to develop a personal conception of competition that combined highly focused effort with practiced skill and an intense desire to do one's best.

Fran provided the most comprehensive summary of this perspective when she observed that:

... it would be an intensity. It would be a level of play ... not necessarily to play to win, but you're playing at an intensity ... where you pay more attention to detail as far as skill analysis, performance, results. ... I think it heightens your ability to play....

Although individuals voiced their ideas in different ways, as a group their conception of competition encompassed similar elements: competition meant intensity of experience, focused effort, practiced skill, best performance, and winning. These conceptions of competition became evident not only in the responses about their own competitive interests but in their observations on how they contrasted with those of their students. Emily described her students' surprise at her competitive approach to a game in which she participated during their physical education class: "... but [the students] think that it's kind of funny—like, why do you care about this phys. ed. class?"

What teachers think and do about competition in their classes: Two sub-themes

A second core theme that emerged from the data was what the teachers thought competition meant to the female students in their classes. Two sub-themes emerged as the core theme developed. In every case, observations about how competition was manifested were accompanied by spontaneous examples of what the teacher did to deal with the situation. Most echoed current research findings by acknowledging that past experiences in physical education class or personal feelings of self-consciousness may contribute to some students' present resistance to participation in high school physical education. It is significant, however, that these teachers saw this as a problem of classroom management to be solved quickly by the application of appropriate management strategies, rather

than as an opportunity for deeper pedagogical reflection. For them the exigencies of practice in effect overrode the possibilities of reflection on theory. Thus, the first sub-theme explores the teachers' observations about their students' responses to competitive activities, while the second sub-theme focuses on the teachers' efforts to manage competition in class.

Observing student competition: "They just want to win."

The participants were unanimous in identifying the immense range of interest and ability present among students as the two most important elements affecting competition in class. The teachers mentioned the frustration they observed among more skilled students (who were usually school team players) as they struggled to play the game with others who were less skilled, less confident, and less interested in achieving what the better players felt was the obvious goal of the game—that is, to win. All of the participants thought this diversity in interest and skill presented huge challenges for them to keep all the students engaged and active. In an echo of their own belief that an important element of competition was skill, most instructors felt the wide diversity in student abilities and experience contributed to some students' unwillingness to participate. As Fran observed:

What makes it flop is the fact they don't try... . Why don't they try?
Some of it's skill based. Some of it's self-esteem ... some of them
don't want to deal with the peer pressure of being the best and good.

In Fran's opinion, even some skilled students preferred not to exert much effort.

Like Fran, Dana emphasized the importance of skill development in her students' ability and desire to play competitively and suggested her students' past experience may have been a contributing factor to their attitude toward competition in physical education in high school:

Because they've been in an elementary situation where they haven't
always had the kind of program that suits their needs. ... There may
have been boys in the class and they were intimidated. There may have
been activities that were really geared to the boys in the class....

She believed that as her students began to understand that they are able to learn and use new skills, their confidence and level of competitive game play increased: "So they come in and all of a sudden they realize, oh yeah, I *can* play in this three-on-three tournament. ... I *can* perform a gymnastics routine."

Dana thought competitiveness was something that had to be nurtured and developed. She concluded that many of her female students lacked the skills or the confidence to play sports at a level of competency conducive to any sort of personal enjoyment of the competitive challenge inherent in most games. Dana contended however that as student skills and confidence rose, their own motivation to engage in intense, focused competitive activities developed as well:

They are much more willing, as they go through grades 9, 10, 11. ...
By the time they get in 11, they really want to get out there and play,
and play hard. ... They come into the gym raring to go.

While this conclusion may seem reasonable, it is important to remember that Grades 10 and 11 physical education in Ontario are offered only as elective classes, and that students self-select into (or out of) senior level physical education classes. It is probable that those who enjoy physical activity, including competitive sports, are more likely to choose Grade 10 physical education as an elective than those who do not.

Caitlin commented that while skill was a factor, self esteem and confidence may contribute even more to a young female student's decision whether to participate whole-heartedly:

To come into a gym, there's nowhere to stand, you know. Where do you go? And then, "Gees, I've never been able to catch a ball or shoot a hoop or whatever. But I have to be here, in revealing clothing where the grade 9 boys are ... looking at me in this revealing clothing...."

Since skill improvement was an elusive goal in grade nine classes, and a lack of self confidence sometimes resulted in minimal concentration on the game, the teachers focused instead on the motivational effects they believed competition could have on students. Most of the participants felt competition could have positive or negative effects on student attitude and participation in class. Georgia observed that while she believed for most students competition was a positive experience, she also noted that if students

can't do a sport, just can't do it, they're the ones who all of a sudden become very aggressive, very angry and they're the ones who throw the racquet and walk away. Those are the ones that take the competitive situation very negatively.

Caitlin observed:

I see kids who are driven to surpass their earlier standards. ... I also see kids who cannot stand to lose. And then I see kids who are regular competitors, kids who want to win this point but if they don't it's not a big deal.

Emily struggled with a student conception of competition unique in her experience. Although she herself believed competition had to do with "really wanting to win, caring about winning, and going for the reward," and although she admitted she rarely observed that attitude in her classes, she was accustomed to observing students playing to win and arguing about points and rules. But the *laissez-faire* attitude of her current grade 9 class was beyond anything she had experienced before:

We're playing badminton this week, and I did a tournament yesterday--there was a prize for winning. [At the end of class] they said it was a tie. I said, "Do you want to play for one more point to determine who

wins?" "No, we'll just split the points." That, to me, is very unusual. My other classes last semester weren't like that. They argued [about every point].

While all of the teachers listed "winning" as one of the elements contributing to the meaning of competition for them, all placed winning within a game context that included "best performance, intensity, and focus." This perspective contrasted strongly with how the teachers felt their students thought about competition. Most believed their students understood competition only in simple terms of winning or losing and that their attitude toward the game was determined by the outcome. Since many students were only capable of playing at a very low level of skill, they were unequipped to comprehend the concept of competition shared by all of the physical educators—that rather than *determining* the enjoyment of the whole game experience, competition *depended* upon focus, intensity and skill for the game to be fully appreciated. Anne commented succinctly: "They just want to win and if they see themselves as not winning, they see it as failure."

Emily's conception of her "exceptional" Grade 9 female students' attitudes to competition left her wondering a little about the tried and true competition-oriented motivational techniques that had worked for her in the past. Like Dana and Fran, Emily felt the students' lack of game understanding inhibited their competitive experience, and she wanted students to try to do their best—although for Emily, winning, rather than an increase in skill level or self-esteem, was the reward to be desired.

Regardless of the struggle each teacher had with competition, all assumed it was an integral part of physical education class, an unavoidable by-product of teaching sport and games, even if it never was mentioned explicitly in curriculum documents. Brenda summed it up this way:

We've got to stick to the curriculum, right? I think what's more important is educating them to have goals and achieve goals, and if the goals create competition and make them a little more competitive, great. ... But I don't focus on it. I mean, the curriculum has eight essential learnings and not one of them talks about competition. It's social skills, [not] competition. It's goal setting, [not] competitive rah, rah, rah. It's a classroom out there, right?

In the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum, two sets of expectations are found under each of four strands. The four strands are physical activity, active living, healthy living, and living skills. The strand most likely to include competition as a topic is *living skills*, which, as described in the Grade 9 and 10 curriculum document "helps students develop a positive 'sense of self,' as well as effective decision-making, conflict resolution, communication, and interpersonal skills" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999, p. 6). Although this strand is focused on proactive conflict resolution, effective decision-making, and positive social skills in physical education class, none of the overall or specific expectations listed under these headings suggest competition as a possible means to explore these topics. The gymnasium and the classroom may offer identical opportunities for personal growth, but

acknowledgement and emphasis of the distinctive nature of the “life skills” experiences that are possible through the sport and physical activities offered in physical education class are not included as part of the provincial document. Indeed, the concept that these “living skills” are to be explored through the unique experiences to be found in class-based sport and physical activity participation is never mentioned. “Sticking to the curriculum” means, in this case, a failure on the part of curriculum writers and those who implement these documents to acknowledge the singular advantages physical education classes offer to explore, through realistic and meaningful sport experiences, such “living skills” as effective conflict resolution and good decision-making.

It is noteworthy that of the seven participants, Brenda was the *only* one who linked provincially mandated physical education curriculum with competition, and when she did so it was to observe that competition is mentioned nowhere in the curriculum document. In fact, she equated the activity-oriented expectations specific to physical education with curricular expectations that may be found in any traditional classroom setting. While Brenda believed the games used to achieve personal goals may result in some competitive experiences in class, as far as she was concerned the *absence* of competition as an expectation in the curriculum document clearly indicated to her that competition should never be the focus of a physical education class. Further, while none of the other respondents referred to curriculum documents or specific curricular expectations to support their pedagogical actions, each instructor employed teaching strategies that were clearly designed to downplay competition when it arose in their classes.

Coping with competition in class: “I don’t focus on competition.”

What did these teachers do to meet the various challenges rising from the competition they observed among the female students in their gymnasiums? Setting individual goals, success-oriented “games of low organization” (GLOs) demanding little skill, and leadership roles for more skilled or competitive students were techniques most commonly employed in response to competition issues arising in class.

The majority strongly advocated a focus on the attainment of personal goals, rather than on team success in terms of winning and losing. Although the goals they stressed may be considered “products” of competition, like winning, or losing, the emphasis they placed on behaviour such as individual decision-making or achievement served to highlight “process” aspects of the competitive experience. Anne described how she treated competition from an individual point of view:

The way I do evaluation, I base it on each individual kid. I know that somebody’s working at the best of their ability or if somebody’s really good at something, and I try to target them so they can be showcased and valued for being in class.

Caitlin supported this point of view, observing that:

In Grade 9...the girls are less able to cope with competition and need a more individual approach ... lots of skill development, you get to

choose your partner, you get to play, and ... it's not, "We're going to have a tournament and everybody's going to watch you play in the tournament ...". Not in grade 9.

For some teachers, controlled competitive situations could provide an extrinsic motivation for students who might otherwise not be motivated to exert themselves to a greater extent. As Fran commented: "So, it's not about winning by score, but yet we will keep score because it is a point of reference and a motivator for a lot of kids to try harder."

Assigning leadership roles to more competitive students was another technique mentioned by Anne and Georgia to deflect students' attention away from the pressures of winning and losing. Leaders may be physically skilled team players, or other more competitive students who take on the role of "tutor" to students considered to be less competent or less experienced. Anne described this approach in the following way:

I ask them to help, or ... sometimes I'll assign a coach to each one of the teams ... and the coach can play, but the coach usually sits out ... and decides who's going to play.

Most of the instructors mentioned modified games or GLOs as useful tools for enabling students to play in a competitive situation, without unduly emphasizing the win/lose aspect of competition. Usually the games were fun and activity oriented—a way to "get the blood moving" and the students puffing. The emphasis on fun and play helped to downplay more contentious aspects of class competition such as uneven levels of skill, thus enabling all students to participate. When I asked Fran if she encouraged her students to be competitive, she answered, "Absolutely." When I asked her how she did this, she responded:

We do games of low organization. I love GLOs because they tie everything together. It's not sport *per se* ... for example, one is sort of like cardio-baseball. You try to set records of who can get the most bases. ... There's a motivator, you see ... there's competition. You're throwing out carrots on who can run around the most bases.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Practice

Recent studies that have been devoted to exploring the experience of female high school physical education students have mentioned that a competitive class atmosphere appears to discourage many young women from full participation in their classes. Other research indicates that the values held by teachers may affect their pedagogical practice in the gym. A thorough search of the literature failed to reveal literature focused on physical education teachers' values concerning competition, and how those values may affect the nature of the activities or the atmosphere of their class. Further, a thorough search of every Canadian provincial and territorial Health and Physical Education curriculum guide for Grades 7 through 12 for references to competition and fair play, using the *Ministry of Education* website, revealed that the notion of "competition" as a concept suitable for exploration through sport was completely absent. In fact, *any* issues emerging from the intersection of modern-day social or cultural issues

with physical activity are completely missing in senior level Physical Education curriculum documents across Canada. Nevertheless, researchers have identified as unwelcoming PE class environments perceived by female students to be competitive. Other research has explored how physical education teachers' beliefs affect their curricular content decisions, including what to teach, and how to teach it. It was the purpose of this study to explore the ways in which female physical educators personally held values about competition related to how they believed their female students understood competition in games activities within their physical education classes.

Analysis of the interview data indicated that the participants felt competition was an enjoyable personal experience, one to be sought out time and time again. Each woman considered herself to very competitive. Each believed competition meant intensity of purpose, focus, best performance, skill, and winning—experiences most respondents considered to be very positive and rewarding.

Further, from their own competitive backgrounds the women identified physical skill as a major contributor to the positive emotional experiences that helped motivate them and encouraged them to stay involved in physical activity. At the same time, they echoed recent research findings by identifying winning and losing, as well as lack of physical competency as two of the fundamental reasons why some female students avoid physical education class. The participants observed that many of their female students entered high school with very low skill levels. While some teachers believed it was necessary to emphasize student skill development in order to raise self-confidence and improve participation, others focused on the positive effects of participation and minimized as much as they could the need for any skill.

Each teacher was acutely aware of the extreme range of interests and abilities presented by her students, especially in Grade 9, the last year in which physical education was a compulsory subject in Ontario high schools. In order to accommodate this diversity, all of the teachers explained that they modified game rules, encouraged students to set personal goals and celebrated individual successes. Teachers coped with competition issues arising in class by dealing with them essentially as issues of class management. While acknowledging there may be many reasons why their students were reluctant to participate in competitive activities, they preferred utilizing practical solutions that resulted in immediate results such as low organization games which got students up and moving right away.

Rather than use sports activities to explore with their students other aspects of competition that were important to themselves, all of them downplayed competition in class, either intentionally, like Brenda, or like Emily as a last resort, because her students resisted so strongly. In each case, teachers organized activities specifically designed to avoid the elements of competition with which many students appeared to be uncomfortable—excessive emphasis on winning and losing, and reliance on skill to succeed. Ironically, in doing so they restricted student access to the very elements of competition that held personal meaning for themselves: intensity of experience, focused effort, practiced skill, best performance, and winning.

All of the participants responded to the multi-faceted challenges presented by the diverse abilities and interests of their students by focusing on by-products of

game experiences, rather than on more conceptually complex goals. That is, they highlighted participation and fun and bypassed opportunities which would enable their students to explore other elements of competition, such as developing a deeper understanding of the challenges to be found in practicing and accomplishing complex tactics and strategies with others; or of working with others to achieve a team goal; or celebrating achievement regardless of whether it was accomplished by a team mate or an opponent; or encouraging others to recognize individual improvement, regardless of their comparative skill level in the class. Again, the result of the pedagogical strategies intended to make classes more inviting for their students was to minimize the very elements of competition that held the most personal meaning for the teachers: intensity, focus, best performance, skill, and winning.

Finally, only one educator referred to the curricular expectations found in provincially mandated physical education curriculum documents, and then only to observe that since there was no mention of competition in the document, she believed that competition should not be a focus in physical education classes.

Two implications arise from the analysis of data in this study. First, although not every physical educator may share the particular values about competition voiced by the participants in this study, it is worthwhile for each physical educator to be aware of the values they do possess concerning competition, and to reflect upon how those values may be realized in their gymnasiums, with their students. As well as developing an awareness of their own beliefs about competition, it would be a worthwhile "professional development day" project for experienced physical educators to become cognizant of current research that explores how high school students, female and male, feel about the competition they experience in their physical education classes. With this knowledge they could move to determine how their own students feel about the competition they experience in class.

Second, although competition is at present unmentioned in Canadian physical education curriculum documents, it is nonetheless a pervasive presence in class. Regardless of whether an individual physical educator encourages or downplays competition, the inclusion of familiar games and sports such as basketball, volleyball, soccer, and even golf in the curriculum usually guarantees that some form of competition will influence the class atmosphere. If, as many of the participants indicated, competition is an inescapable aspect of physical education, teachers and teacher candidates need opportunities to explore pedagogical routes that provide alternative approaches to understanding and dealing with competition in class. For example, each participant in this study believed that skill competency was a necessary element for enjoyment of competition. They were also clear that for many of their female students, low skill levels hampered any possibility of playing competitive games at anything other than the most elementary level. The only solution that seemed viable was to downplay competition and introduce games requiring little skill, or to remove skilled students from the games by providing them with leadership responsibilities. Neither solution seemed entirely satisfactory and learning opportunities for all students, skilled or not, were diminished. It is important, therefore, for teacher candidates and practicing physical educators to understand that there are other ways of comprehending and approaching both skill

development and competition. Skill development, for example, does not have to consist of traditional progressions taught in classes composed of demonstrations, drills and games. The Teaching Games for Understanding (or tactical) approach to game play advocated by Griffin and Butler (2005), programs promoted by the Sport4All organization and Metzler's (2000) Sport Education teaching module all focus on skill development that is child-centred, play oriented, and developmentally appropriate for the growth and experience of the participants.

Competition does not have to be exclusively focused on dominating and subduing an opponent by exerting greater force or power against them. Students should be encouraged to learn the value and satisfaction of cooperating with others to achieve a goal and that competition can contribute to the enjoyment of the game when all players are striving against evenly matched opponents, regardless of the overall level of play.

Teachers are required "to stick to the curriculum," but it is their professional experience and expertise that makes the curriculum come alive. In-depth reflection and pedagogical alternatives to traditional competitive issues in physical education will help to make that happen.

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