High School Physical Education Students’ Perceptions Toward Multiethnic Groups

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**Abstract**

Recent census data indicates student populations are drastically changing. It is essential to inform educators of the need for cultural responsive teaching and multicultural education with students attending public schools. This study investigated high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups within a physical education setting using a modified Multicultural Sensitivity Scale. Participants included 140 high school male and female students ages 14-18 years. The students voluntarily completed the 27-item 5-point Likert type questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were computed using means and standard deviations determine differences in responses for each of the 27 items. Results indicated some students are open to learning about other cultures which is the first step in reducing prejudices and stereotypes. For all educators, multicultural education can be an opportunity to raise awareness and breakdown racial barriers within their school by getting students to work alongside each other in a culturally diverse multicultural based program. Physical education offers a unique environment for students to be engaged with each other in a variety of learning opportunities.

*Keywords*: culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, culturally diverse activities, physical education, teacher education

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Students entering educational institutions in the 21st century are experiencing an evolving composition of increasing numbers of ethnic minorities across the United States. The most current 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data indicated that racial and ethnic minorities accounted for roughly 85% of the nation’s population growth over the past decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In California, educators have known for years that student populations are changing drastically. Over the years the educational literature has attempted to prepare current and incoming educators of this fact.

Wyman (1993) stated that an educational approach that recognizes and responds to the needs and traditions of culturally diverse students is labeled “multicultural” or “multiethnic education.” This concept has become critical to our current educators and teacher education programs. Theoretically, instructional approaches that integrate multicultural concepts within the physical education setting can strengthen inter-racial and extra-racial bonds along with increasing sensitivity levels between student groups (Sutliff & Perry, 2000).

Respecting the demographic shift toward an increased multiethnic population encourages a greater awareness toward the sensitivity levels between all persons. Teacher education is attempting to address this by providing teacher training programs that produce culturally sensitive teachers who are able to meet the needs of students from all cultures and ethnicities. Currently, in California the courses in Single Subject Credential Programs are required to meet SB 2042 (2002) which necessitates an infusion of competencies that will prepare teacher candidates to teach English Language Learners (ELL) from diverse cultures and first languages other than English. To support this mandate, teacher education programs typically offer one course in multicultural education while infusing ELL strategies throughout the teacher education program.

Teachers may be the answer to helping students learn to work and accept each other as Jibaja-Rusth, Kingery, Holcomb, Buckner, & Pruitt (1994) suggested over 17 years ago that increasing the interaction between teachers and students of color requires a high degree of multicultural sensitivity in order for teachers to fully address cultural subtleties in the classroom. Torry & Ashy (1995) ascertained that all students are able to achieve their full potential for academic, social, and vocational success only when teachers are culturally sensitive. This concept can be taken one step further by asking if this idea also includes cultural sensitivity between students, especially with respect to the cooperative learning approach that many educators are embracing. According to Posnick-Goodwin (2006), helping students to get to know students from other backgrounds is critical for all schools, and educators should pave the way. Learning about others, becoming sensitive to the challenges and feelings of others, and learning to work with people are essential skills all students need to learn.

One movement towards improving the process of learning about multiculturalism and developing more effective teachers through changes in teacher education programs has emerged. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is just one approach towards infusing multiculturalism and teacher education (Gay, 2000). It has been suggested that institutions responsible for teacher education rethink their current curriculum to include increased education on CRT (Abbate-Vaughn, 2005; Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Gay (2000) discussed the importance of implementing the six specific qualities: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory that define CRT and have these qualities incorporated within the teacher education program. Villegas and Lucas (2002) warned that the traditional approach of just adding an additional course to the existing teacher education curriculums may not have sustainable effects unless the entire teacher education curriculum adopts the ideas of developing culturally responsive teachers and have the content infused within every course of the curriculum.

Researchers have investigated sensitivity levels that have transcended many academic and instructional groups. Larke (1990) investigated levels of sensitivity between preservice teachers through the utilization of the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory. The investigation utilized a 28-item agree/disagree questionnaire that ascertained a respondent attitude regarding (1) general cultural awareness, (2) the culturally diverse family, (3) cross-cultural communication, (4) assessment, and (5) the multicultural environment. The results indicated that respondents had hesitations associated to interacting and working with multiethnic students and their parents. Larke (1990) suggested the preservice teachers discomfort should be addressed by offering increased opportunities to raise cultural sensitivity.

Additionally, Torrey and Ashy (1995) investigated the impact of culture on preservice physical education teacher's through the Multicultural Self-Report Inventory. The instrument measured respondent's values toward implementing multicultural concepts during instruction. The 72 preservice physical education teachers (87% Caucasian) who served as subjects had no prior student teaching or academic training in multicultural education. The instrument was divided into categories with items addressing the following issues: (1) personal beliefs about culture, (2) beliefs about interacting with other cultures, and (3) beliefs about the importance of culture in teaching. The results suggested that respondents did not possess strong beliefs about culture and did not see how a student's cultural background would alter their future instructional approach.

As researchers continue to build a foundation for the best method to provide both veteran and preservice educators a wide view of multicultural education and cultural sensitivity (Haberman & Post, 1990; Jibaja-Rusth et al., 1994; Phuntsog, 1995; Torry & Ashy, 1995) it becomes paramount that additional insight is also derived from students. The purpose of this study was to determine high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups within a physical education setting using a modified Multicultural Sensitivity Scale (Jibaja-Rusth et al., 1994).

**Methods**

**Participants and Setting**

Participants included 140 high school students from one urban public school in Central California whose ages ranged from 14 to 18 years. There were significantly more males N=95 (68%) than female N=45 (32%) participants. Most students were Caucasian (65%) with a smaller population representing African Americans (1.5%), Asian Americans (5.8%), Hispanics (16.1%), Native Americans (6.5%), and "other" (5.1 %). There were three 9th grade (average class size 31-37 students) classes and one 10th grade class (class size was 31) used. Most participants (95%) lived in an urban setting.

**Instrument**

The questionnaire was a 27-item 5-point Likert type questionnaire containing the original 21 items from the Multicultural Sensitivity Scale (MSS) created by Jibaja-Rusth et al. (1994) plus an additional six questions that were developed by the researchers to specifically address the physical education setting. The MSS is a validated and reliable instrument (Jibaja-Rusth et al., 1994). Permission was sought from the authors of the Multicultural Sensitivity Scale prior to administering the survey to modify and add the additional questions. The rating scale consisted of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), undecided (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

All participants and parents completed the University Institutional Review Board approved consent forms. Consent was granted to use high school students by the school site principal. One condition stipulated by the principal was to indicate to the students that participation was strictly voluntary. Additionally, each participant’s responses remained anonymous.

The questionnaire was administered during the student's Physical Education class. No time limit was given to complete the questionnaire. Participants were instructed not to discuss the survey with others and to turn it in face down to ensure confidentiality. All participants completed the survey within 20 minutes. Means and standard deviations were computed on each of the demographic questions and for each of the 27 items.

**Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine high school students' perceptions toward multiethnic groups within a physical education setting using a modified Multicultural Sensitivity Scale. The means and standard deviations are listed for each item (see Table 1). After rank-ordering the items it was found that most students agreed with item 26, "I would like to learn games and activities that are from other ethnic origins", which shows an openness towards trying more non-traditional sports and learning about other cultures. Agreement with item 16, "Multicultural issues are a community issue" and item 24, "Multicultural issues are a school issue," demonstrated that students feel it is important that both schools and the community address race and cultural issues. Agreement on item 25, "I believe that students with certain ethnic backgrounds are more successful in certain sports than other students" is both interesting and disturbing, as this indicates students are stereotyping players in certain sports. For this reason, students may be missing out on opportunities to participate in a sport in which they could excel. Since stereotyping is a form of prejudice, these feelings have the potential to grow into larger cultural insensitivity issues.

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| Table 1 | | | |
| *Multicultural Sensitivity Scale* | | | |
| Question | Mean | Mean | SD |
| 1. | I have a tendency to trust students of my ethnic group more than I trust those of other ethnic groups. | 3.48 | 1.26 |
| 2. | I feel very uncomfortable in the presence of members of ethnic groups other than my own. | 3.99 | 1.14 |
| 3. | When I observe the hardships of some children, I understand why they are not proud of their ethnic identity. | 3.34 | 1.08 |
| 4. | Individuals should be deeply sensitive to the thoughts others have of them. | 3.35 | 1.25 |
| 5. | It is good to avoid encounters with people who are different from you. | 4.28 | 1.16 |
| 6. | Each ethnic group should strive to become more Americanized rather than maintaining the characteristics of their ethnic group. | 3.75 | 1.22 |
| 7. | I feel most secure when I am in the presence of members of my ethnic group. | 3.25 | 1.25 |
| 8. | I feel less comfortable when I socialize with persons outside my ethnic group. | 3.80 | 1.08 |
| 9. | I feel threatened by members of other ethnic groups. | 4.15 | 1.00 |
| 10. | When I understand the environment from which many children of ethnic minority backgrounds come from, I understand why they do not have pride in their ethnic identities. | 3.38 | 1.04 |
| 11. | The ethnic group that students belong to frequently determines how I respond to them interpersonally. | 3.59 | 1.07 |
| 12. | When I am offended by an ethnic minority, I generalize the behavior to other members of that group. | 3.74 | 1.05 |
| 13. | In order to be accepted by persons of other ethnic groups, I frequently find myself altering my behavior. | 3.63 | 1.11 |
| 14. | I have discovered that it is better to avoid associating with people who think differently than me. | 3.78 | 1.09 |
| 15. | I naturally respond more favorably to students of my ethnic group. | 3.45 | 1.13 |
| 16. | Multicultural issues are a community issue. | 2.67 | 1.19 |
| 17. | I prefer working with students with whom I can identify ethnically. | 3.49 | 1.12 |
| 18. | I have not been able to overcome my feelings of uneasiness when I see a group of people from a particular ethnic group together. | 3.75 | 1.03 |
| 19. | I feel tense and uptight when I have to work closely with students who are of a different ethnic group than my own. | 4.02 | 1.01 |
| 20. | I would feel more relaxed if I could work with students of my own ethnic group. | 3.64 | 1.07 |
| 21. | I do not enjoy associating with persons of other ethnic groups. | 4.09 | 1.05 |
| 22. | I classify people on the basis of obvious ethnic characteristics. | 3.81 | 1.03 |
| 23. | Including multicultural education in physical education is important. | 2.85 | 1.20 |
| 24. | Multicultural education is a school issue. | 2.83 | 1.14 |
| 25. | I believe that students with certain ethnic backgrounds are more successful in certain sports than other students. | 2.84 | 1.21 |
| 26. | I would like to learn games and activities that are from other ethnic origins. | 2.47 | 1.08 |
| 27. | I have been a victim of ethnic prejudice. | 3.60 | 1.26 |

On the other side of the scale, students strongly disagreed with item 21, "I do not enjoy associating with persons of other ethnic groups," item 9, "I feel threatened by members of other ethnic groups," and item 5, "It is good to avoid encounters with people who are different from you." This again indicated students openness to learning about other cultures. However, in light of the responses to item 25, responses to the above questions may only be a result of the students' willingness to record what they think is the "morally correct" answer. An indication of this is the bimodal distribution on item 7, "I feel most secure when I am in the presence of members of my ethnic group.” This was the only item that produced a high response rate for both "disagree" and “agree."

It is interesting to note that even though item 5 and item 14 are similar, the different wording elicited different responses from the students. The overall mean of responses for item 5, "It is good to avoid encounters with people who are different from you," was 4.28.Yet, item 14, "I have discovered that it is better to avoid associating with people different from me," evoked a lower mean at 3.78. Although both means lie on the right side of the scale, difference in responses may be a reflection of the more politically correct phrasing in item 5 versus the "real life experience" phrasing in item 14. The differing responses may also indicate a tendency to not “practice-what-you­ preach” type of philosophy when it comes to encounters with students who are ethnically different than themselves.

**Discussion**

The findings from this study demonstrated that high school students display a variety of perceptions about multicultural education and sensitivity levels in physical education class. The results from this study indicated that some students are open to learning about other cultures, which is one of the first steps in reducing prejudices and stereotypes (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991). Yet, this doesn't just happen. These are concepts that need to be taught, discussed, and emphasized. Students need to learn how to work together with trust and acceptance. Students need to be able to demonstrate their eagerness to work with students from other cultures rather than simply verbalizing their willingness. The teacher should strive to provide an environment that encompasses the six specific qualities (Gay, 2000): validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory that define CRT which will provide students with the skills and opportunities necessary to work together in the classroom or gymnasium. Since the physical education environment offers unique opportunities for students to collaborate and problem-solve in a physical setting as opposed to a traditional classroom setting it may prove to be a prime target to address multicultural education.

There are two major factors that physical education teachers can employ to embrace the idea of breaking down the multicultural issues. The first factor deals with the teacher’s behavior and taking on the role of a leader as is needed in CRT. This involves strengthening their teaching skills, becoming knowledge on instructional practices related to CRT, and having effective management strategies that involve both individual circumstances and large group settings. Teachers need to be aware of the many different cultures in the classes and adapt their teaching to all groups. For example, many Hispanic students prefer to work in small cooperative groups whereas many Asian students prefer to work alone (Nieto & Bode, 2012). The teacher must find the balance of how to effectively teach all students.

The second factor involves implementing cultural diverse activities throughout the curriculum that are designed to provide students with a diverse environment that conforms to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) 2009 instructional practices guidelines. Many times teachers implement a variety of multicultural dances and refer to this process as implementing a multicultural curriculum. Clemens and Metzler Rady (2012) have provided many ideas for not only introducing dances from other cultures but also physical activity games and fitness activities that represent a variety of different cultures. It is important that the teacher doesn’t just teach the activities but provides closure questions that allow students the opportunity to process their experiences. Teachers need to listen to what their students are encountering and have the confidence to discuss the uniqueness of their experiences. Teachers need to offer continuous opportunities that involve students working in random groups, trust building activities, and cooperative games.

A strong step forward of addressing multiculturalism when paring the responses from the questionnaire, specifically from questions 16 and 24, that indicated students do feel that multicultural issues are both the community and school issues along with practical applications of implementing an on-going program of culturally diverse activities. When teachers implement culturally diverse activities they will be offering opportunities for the students to learn games and activities from other ethnic origins as they indicated they wanted to on question 26. Implementing a curriculum that has a foundation in cultural diverse activities and experiences should address most of the responses from the questionnaire. Students will be provided a vast array of hands-on opportunities to engage and learn about each other and about activities

**Conclusion**

This study used high school students responses on the MSS questionnaire to identify their perceptions on multicultural issues. When teachers are aware of the attitudes and perceptions of the students in their classes, they can have a better understanding of how to be a leader and help the students learn about each other.

Nieto and Bode (2012) defined multicultural education as inclusive. They also discussed that multicultural education is about all people and for all people regardless of their ethnicity or other differences. Creating a culturally sensitive program may seem like an overwhelming task. Phuntsog (1995) suggested addressing practicing teachers’ perceptions to identify what competencies are crucial for promoting this type of learning. Gay (2002) indicated that teacher education programs must engage future educators in discussions of CRT to increase the awareness of strategies that will impact student learning and the likelihood of responsible citizens in society. Although this may be the most common solution, another very competent resource are the students. If given the chance, students can use their experiences to change multiculturalism from a way of recognizing minorities to a way of viewing society as a whole (Garcia & Pugh, 1992). The necessity for physical education teachers to engage in a consistent practice of implementing culturally diverse physical activities should prove one way to assist students and teachers in learning about different ethnic origins.

For all educators K-16 and beyond, multicultural education can be an opportunity to raise awareness and breakdown racial barriers within their school by getting students to work alongside each other in multicultural-based situations.

*Limitations and Future Research*

The investigation of students’ sensitivity levels should be broadened across additional content areas in the same school. It would be valuable to establish any patterns of students reacting differently in different courses based on the content being presented. An additional area of focus would include a longitudinal study following the students from the middle school level of education through high school and see if the results change due to the implementation of a culturally diverse curriculum. All educators should welcome new ways of helping themselves and their students feel comfortable in their learning environments.

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