



## Middle school students' perceptions towards competitive activities in school physical education

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### Abstract

Competitive activities are usually part of middle school physical education in Cyprus. Students experience a variety of both sports and competitive activities throughout the year. Competitive activities may be used to promote physical activity in adolescence, help students develop their skills, promote sportsmanship and prepare students for real life, where competition exists in many aspects of life. However, the offered competitive activities by the physical education teacher may affect students differently; they either enhance students' interest for participating in the lesson and probably provide them with an enjoyable and successful participation or they may exclude students' from participating. Considering that children grow up in a "technology" world and that they spend much of their free time sedentary playing video games, it seemed critical to examine how the offered activities in physical education affect students. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate middle school students' perceptions towards competitive activities in school physical education. Ninety (90) middle school students (56 girls & 34 boys) from 9 urban middle schools all over Cyprus, who were randomly selected, participated in this study. Students' age ranged from 12-15 years. For data collection purposes lesson observations were scheduled, field notes were collected and participants' interviews were organized in the school settings. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed data collection on students' perceptions towards competitive activities in school physical education. Three visits per class were paid by the investigator to observe the lessons and the competitive activities offered during the lessons and to take field notes and other valuable information. In addition, formal interviews were conducted with all participating students. The results revealed four common themes: a) all students participate in competitive activities, however, few of them possess the skills that will allow them to play and enjoy these games, due to lack of time for appropriate practice in class, b) high skill children have a good time, middle skill children have less good time and low skill children just fill in the space, most of the times, c) the structure of a competitive game affects each student's experiences in physical education, and d) the first 3 themes seem to affect students' attitude towards the lesson, since some students may develop more positive attitudes where others more negative attitudes towards Physical Education, also affecting their perceptions towards the game. Physical education teachers might need to structure their classes in ways that promote opportunities for skill development. Not all children possess the necessary skills for the competitive activities offered in physical education. Probably, teachers need to re-examine the way competition is structured in school physical education and if it is appropriate to offer such activities, before all students learn the skills.

**Keywords:** physical education, middle school, competitive games

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### Introduction

Middle school students experience a variety of sport and competitive activities that are offered in physical education. The use of competitive activities might be used to promote physical activity and develop skill, promote sportsmanship, build character and prepare students to live in a competitive world (Drewe, 1998; Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006) <sup>[12]</sup>. These activities may enhance participation interest, or may exclude students from enjoyable participation experiences and detract from interest in participating in the activity presented in class (Kohn, 1999; Ntoumanis, 2001) <sup>[17]</sup>. Students with different skill level have different experiences in physical education (Constantinides, 2013; Constantinides & Silverman, 2018; Manson, 2003; Silverman, 2005). For instance, low skill students usually have difficulty performing a skill in class, especially during a game. Several factors may contribute to student engagement in a competitive activity and in skill level. Factors such as time and appropriate practice in class (Silverman, 1985, 1990; Silverman, Tyson, & Morford, 1988), skill progression, effective task presentation (Rink, 1994; Silverman, Kulinna, & Crull, 1995) and other, may help students develop their skills, increase their success in an activity and their perceptions for being active. If students experience success, they may want to continue participating. And if competition is used appropriately, it can be a tool for skill development, while students are successfully experiencing competitive tasks in class and are having fun (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2009).

A physical education program that is developmentally appropriate is based on three principles of motor development: a) motor skill development is sequential and related to students' age, b) applying similar sequences of motor skills allows for children skill development, c) the rates at which children build on skill development through sequences of motor skills varies. Children in Cyprus coming from elementary school to middle school, may not have the same physical education background (Constantinides, 2011; Constantinides, Montalvo & Silverman, 2013), since physical education in elementary school is taught by classroom teachers who may not have the educational background that will allow them to teach the lesson effectively (Constantinides, 2016, 2018). Considering that the policy followed for all public schools, according to the ministry of education is the one for mixed-skill-classes (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth & Sports, 2009) <sup>[15]</sup>, middle school students' skill level varies. In that sense, physical education teachers need to make sure that all students possess the necessary skills that will enable them to effectively participate in competitive games and have fun.

As mentioned earlier, students who experience success may want to participate in a competitive activity. Usually, high skill students experience success and low skill students just fill in the space. Success in an activity may affect students' perceptions towards that activity. Possession of skills is important for student participation in competitive activities. Perceptions of students toward that activity, however, might be another important factor toward that. Attitude theory suggests that affect and cognition may affect how students participate in an activity (Ajzen, 2005). Attitudes may have an effect on students' perceptions about physical education, which in turn may affect students' behavior (Pajares, 1992). As competitive activities are used in middle school physical education to support student learning, students' beliefs of their abilities may affect their participation in these activities (Ajzen, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Silverman & Subramaniam, 1999). If students do not possess the necessary skills to enable them participate in a game and have positive experiences, this may not only affect learning but also, it will negatively affect their participation in this activity (Carlson, 1995; Ennis, 1996).

Students with positive experiences in physical education usually want to continue participating in class activities and especially competitive games (Silverman, 2005; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002). On the contrary, students who repeatedly are unsuccessful in physical education activities may not enjoy the lesson and more likely, will prefer to discontinue participation (Carlson, 1995; Silverman, 2005; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002). Therefore, it is important to know how students feel about the activities offered in school physical education. The purpose of this study was to examine middle school students' perceptions toward competitive activities in physical education.

### **Material and Methods**

**Participants.** The participants were 90 middle school students (56 girls & 34 boys) from 9 urban middle schools all over Cyprus, who were randomly selected for this study. Students' age ranged from 12-15 years. Upon receiving permission from the ministry of education and written consents from parents, school principals and physical education teachers, lesson observations were scheduled in collaboration with school administrations and physical education teachers. In addition, a schedule for the participants' interviews was prepared for each school. Physical education teachers were asked to follow their normal school program, which included skill learning activities and competitive games at the end.

### **Measuring Instrument**

Data collection included semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions based on Bernstein's, Phillips' & Silverman's (2011) instrument, which provided reliable and valid results in previous studies. The instrument consisted of demographic information, activities that students liked or disliked, students' perceptions on activities presented in class, perceptions on their skill level, perceptions on competition in general and perceptions on competitive activities in physical education.

### **Observations and Field Notes**

For each participating school, three class-session observations were organized. During the observations, field notes were taken for each observed class. The competitive activities observed during these sessions were basketball, handball, soccer, running activities and other modified games. In addition, the researcher observed and recorded other valuable information such as the skills learned before the competitive activities and the way the classes were organized by the teacher.

### **Data analysis**

When data collection was completed, observations, field notes and questionnaires were transcribed. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Straus, 1987), the transcribed data were analysed. To ensure trustworthiness, observations, field notes and questionnaires were triangulated and constantly compared with all data sources

### **Results**

Data analysis revealed four common themes: a) all students participate in competitive activities, however, few of them possess the skills that will allow them to play and enjoy these games, due to lack of time for appropriate practice in class, b) high skill children have a good time, middle skill children have less good time and low skill children just fill in the space, most of the times, c) the structure of a competitive game affects each student's

experiences in physical education, and d) the first 3 themes seem to affect students' attitude towards the lesson, since some students may develop more positive attitudes where others more negative attitudes towards Physical Education, also affecting their perceptions towards the game. All four themes are analyzed below.

**All students participate in competitive activities, however, few of them possess the skills that will allow them to play and enjoy these games, due to lack of time for appropriate practice in class.**

Each school offered a variety of competitive activities during physical education. From the observations though, it was obvious that not all students possessed the necessary skills that would allow them to effectively play the offered games. The ability of the skill level among students varied in each observed class. Students seemed to have fun during these games, especially high skill students, mostly because they were with their friends. As John (we use pseudonyms in this paper) said "Being with your friends and playing games feels nice. You know them and they know you. You know what they can do and if they are better than you or not!" These students identified competitive activities in school physical education as not that competitive, when compared to middle skill students. They understood that possessing the necessary skills enabled them to be confident that they would be "protagonists" in these activities. As Nick mentioned: "You know that you're good in a game, but your classmates also know that. They support you, they want you to be in their team and they count on you." "It feels good when you play a major role in an activity. Winning the game depends on you and some other classmates who are also good enough" Georgia said. Maria supported that "it's more fun when you got the skills and you are able to compete with the other team." When high skill students were asked if they learned the necessary skills for these competitive games in class, they stated that for them it was easy to learn in class, although some of them were using these skills in after school activities, which gave them the opportunity to practice more. Low skill students highlighted that they need more time for practice, to learn the skills that will be used in competitive games. However, class time is not enough for that. In most schools, students supported that their physical education teachers encouraged them to use the skills they learn in class, in afterschool physical activities. In addition, teachers provided several links that students could use to watch again the skills, practice in the afternoon and probably learn better.

**High-skilled students have a good time, middle-skilled students have less good time and low-skilled students just fill in the space, most of the times.**

High and middle skill students were having fun in competitive games. For high skill students, it was fun being with friends and "ruling" the game. Martina mentioned that "You enjoy the activity more when you are with friends that are good as you are, or a bit better. You are successful in what you do and that feels good!" Simon felt that "It's fun being with people that they know as much as you do. It doesn't feel like so much competitive." Philip stated that "it's fun because you know what to do and how to do it."

Middle skill students also have fun in competitive activities; however, it seems to be more challenging for them. Mary stated that "it's fun being with your friends, although it's challenging, because you try to get better every time." Patricia was having fun as well, although she was focusing on improving her skills during those activities. Tiffany felt that she kept improving her skills which made her enjoy the offered activities more: "When you realize that you are better than before, it's kind of fun." Andrew stated that "it was fun to compete with other students who possess similar skills with you. Challenging with them helps you get better."

Low skill students also participated in competitive activities in physical education; however, lack of skills did not help them enjoy the activity as middle or high skill students. Although they were taught the skills in class, these students supported that they needed more practice time to be able to enjoy competitive activities. Julia stated: "if I had more time to practice the necessary skills, I'm sure I would enjoy these activities. Other classmates are better in these activities." Maria felt that she wasn't as skilful as other students: "some kids know better how to play and they have more fun than I do. You can tell when you see how excited they are during these activities." John stated: "You can't be good in everything. I'm good in math and science, but not so good in phys. ed. I guess I need to practice more, to catch up." Teresa stated that she was happy when her team was winning, although she did not have much participation: "I just stand there and when I get the ball I try to reach my teammates. It does not happen much, but when it does, I like it." Paul understands that he's just standing there: "Actually, when the teacher gives us competitive activities, I just stand there. This is not fun, but I don't want to cause trouble." Maria also stated: "Competitive activities are a group thing. It requires group effort. Some kids are better than me, but at the end if my team wins, I'm happy too."

**The structure of a competitive game affects each student's experiences in physical education.**

The way competitive activities are structured in physical education, may influence students' experiences. That means teachers need to be extremely cautious when structuring the teams. Teachers in the observed classes preferred to structure the teams themselves, to avoid high skill students from picking only their friends – usually other high skill students and make uneven teams. In addition, many teachers were careful not to pick last the low skill students. Most of the times they were not picking students according to skill level, but rather randomly. That was seen positively, especially from low skill students. For example, Cynthia, a low skill student, stated that "the teacher is trying to make two strong teams. He keeps changing players so that different teams are created every time. That's a good thing." Maria felt that the teacher was fair enough and he did not want to

discriminate between the students and Paul supported that it was better that the teacher was structuring the teams, instead of a classmate.

Usually teachers come up with even teams, to make it fair for everybody. However, what looks even in teachers' eyes might not be the case for students. Phillip, a high-skilled student said: "If we had Mario in our team, we would be the winners!" In a similar manner, Martina mentioned that "if Silvia was not sick that day, if she was able to participate in the days' activity, we would definitely win. Silvia makes the difference!" Children in a classroom are aware which classmates are high, middle or low-skilled in physical education. When teams are structured, they can tell if their team is strong enough or not. In addition, how students value winning or losing, may also be an important factor for students' experiences in physical education. If winning the activity every time becomes very important, then, when students lose may affect the way they feel about the offered experiences. Losing may negatively affect their feelings about competitive activities, leading to negative feelings about their experiences and furthermore, leading to negative attitudes towards physical education.

A common component in most of the observed classes was that physical education teachers created a positive and safe environment. Although students were happy for winning a competitive activity, no student called names such as "losers", in all observed classes. This is not easy to do with teenagers, so credit should be given to these teachers.

**The first three themes seem to affect students' attitude towards the lesson, since some students may develop more positive attitudes where others more negative attitudes towards physical education.**

As mentioned earlier, all students participate in competitive activities, however, few of them possess the skills that will allow them to play and enjoy these games, due to lack of time for appropriate practice in class. Teachers struggle to teach all their students and provide equal opportunities during skill learning. Some students though may need more practice time to be able to demonstrate the skill the way other students do. The available time for physical education in middle school in Cyprus is limited to 2-3 40-minute school periods per week. Obviously, if a student does not possess the skill, then it will be difficult to use that skill effectively in any activity. That makes it difficult to compete with others. And when they see others playing better and win the activity; they probably lose interest for that activity. The activity after a while will not be fun; it will be something they have to do, something boring, which in turn will bring negative feelings for the activity, the lesson and physical education in general.

When teachers organize competitive activities, the structure of these activities seems to of great importance. Creating equal teams that they can compete is a major component. However, children have fun according to their skill level, in a mixed team. That means high skill students have fun, middle skill students also have fun, but not as much as high skill students, since they have in mind how to get better in that activity, how to improve like Phillip, Simon or Martina, how to make themselves "count" in their classmates' eyes. In the case of low skill students, they usually end up just filling the space and cheering for their team if it's winning. However, that's not fun for them, due to lack of skills. They feel happy if it happens once every while to give the final pass to a high skill student to score. It makes them feel important for their team. But that rarely happens. Predicting this, as some observed teachers did, they come up with the rule that the team cannot score unless the ball is passed to all teammates. Sometimes high skill students don't like that much, where others are really supportive to low skill students and they try to involve them in the game as much as they can.

Activities such as striking the ball themselves with a racket in tennis for 5 consecutive times, then 10, then 15 and so on, or each student passing the ball to the wall in volleyball, look different in students' eyes. Although there is competition as far as who will do better, students seem to have more fun, even low skill students, because they sense that it's a competition with themselves to break their own record first, and then a competition for the whole class. Most of the times they will not be the best in class, however, if they do better than other students who are considered low skill, like themselves, they are happy about it and they feel proud of themselves. For example, Maria felt proud of herself because for the first time she broke her own record and she did better than her friend Teresa and others. The competition in some low skill students' mind is among kids in the same skill level. For them, understanding that they cannot reach high skill classmates' performance level, they seem to be satisfied just performing better than students at their own skill level.

Competitive activities where two equal teams are created by the teacher are composed of mixed-skill level students. In the observed classes, mostly high and middle skill students had fun. Low skill students, although they were getting the ball from time to time, they were not having fun. It's obvious that if you are doing something that is not fun, after a while you will stop doing it. Just filling the space is not fun for any kid. And if the offered activities are not fun, then, as mentioned before, students will lose interest, will probably develop negative feelings for physical education and will probably develop negative attitudes towards physical education and physical activity.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper documented how middle students feel about competitive activities offered in school physical education. Through their interviews and the observations in school settings, more light is given to their experiences in competitive sport, in an effort to enrich the existing literature. Students enjoy competitive activities; however, not all of them are successful in these activities due to the difference in their skill level.

The way tasks are structured in competitive activities and the class environment created by the teacher seem to be important for student enjoyment (Rink, 2001; Silverman et al., 1995; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). All students are required to participate in competitive activities, but not all of them possess the skills that will allow them to participate in an activity to the fullest extent. According to low skill student perceptions, they feel nice when they are part of the winning team in a competitive game; however, their enjoyment is restricted to a final pass that a high skill student has used to score a point, or just by touching the ball. In that sense, low skill students will rarely experience success and their enjoyment of competitive activities likely will be affected.

Lack of time for appropriate practice was a component highlighted by most of the participating students, when they referred to possession of skills. Time and appropriate practice are crucial for student success (Silverman 1985, 1990, 1993, 2005; Silverman, Subramaniam, & Woods, 1998). Students lacking of certain skills required in the offered activities, often could not participate when placed in game-type situations. Considering that physical education teachers usually offer competitive activities for students to have fun, one would expect all students to have fun. Class observations and participating students' perceptions showed that not all students might be having the same fun experience. Students who do not possess the skills to participate, might not be included in an activity, might stop playing and might just stand there filling the space (Carlson, 1995; Roberts, 2001; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2000). Teachers who include competitive activities in their classes need to make sure that all their students possess the necessary skills that will allow them to participate in these activities, experience success and enjoy what they are required to do in physical education.

Participating students perceived that their enjoyment was augmented when the teacher created a positive and safe class environment. Indeed, in the observed classes, students were very supportive to each other. Sometimes, during skill practice, students demonstrated again the task to their teammates or gave advice on what should be done for success. In addition, during practice time, teachers did not focus on the outcome, but more likely on execution of the task the right way. That is aligned with previous studies (Garn & Cothran, 2006; Solmon & Lee, 1996; Taberero & Wood, 1999) which suggest that a focus on task rather than the outcome more likely will create a positive environment, which in turn will stress student learning.

When participating in competitive games though, many high skill students preferred to pass the ball to other high skill students, to ensure their team will do well and probably win the activity. That was a common issue during competitive activities, which probably made the skill level difference more obvious and allowed minimum opportunities for low skill students.

Middle skill students brought up many issues noted by low skill students, as they often felt that skill was essential to participation in physical education activities. This finding is supported by the literature as skill is an indicator for participation (Silverman, 2005; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002). Although middle skill students felt that more practice time would be beneficial for success, on the other hand, many of them stressed the challenge for themselves to improve through competitive activities.

As mentioned in the results, the first three themes led to the fourth one, that is the development of positive attitudes towards physical education. Student attitude may be affected by their experiences in class participation (Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002). Schools in Cyprus consist of mixed-skill students. As observed in the participating schools, students had different experiences during competitive activities, due their different skill level, and their perceptions were based on these experiences. Skill level was a determinant of how students participated in competitive activities.

It seems that students' attitude might have been negatively affected, if students did not have the skill to participate in a competitive game, also affecting their perceptions towards that game (Bernstein, Phillips & Silverman, 2011; Pajares, 1992)<sup>[18]</sup>. In many of the observed classes teachers were very supportive to students. Recalling from the existing literature that students' attitude might be positively affected in a positive environment (Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002, 2007), many teachers in this study succeeded in offering this environment to their students, mostly during skill practice. This was reflected on many students' comments, as they acknowledged their teachers' effort towards that. Furthermore, the structure of the teams by the teachers more likely helps in the development of positive attitudes. Some of the observed teachers structured four teams instead of two, based on skill level. That made competition even more interesting, since low skill students had the opportunity to "excel" during these activities competing with classmates of similar skill level. In a similar way, high-skilled students had the opportunity to compete with students at their skill level, making these games more exciting and obviously more fun.

Students in this study expressed their feelings about competitive activities offered in school physical education. Their comments and class observations helped to better understand students' concerns when they are required to participate in competitive activities. Students' perceptions and class observations provide insight into how teachers and class structure impact skill development and student attitudes in physical education.

Despite the teachers' effort to provide a positive environment to students, skill possession seemed to be a significant factor for their perceptions towards competitive activities. According to skill level, students had different experiences in competitive activities and their perceptions were based on these experiences, a theme that is aligned with what previous studies found (Bernstein, Phillips & Silverman, 2011; Manson, 2003; Silverman, 2005). Skill level was a determinant of how students in this study participated in competitive games. Student perceptions demonstrated that the way tasks are structured in a physical education class and the learning environment, are highly important as far as student enjoyment. The task itself as well as the way it is presented to students, may or may not allow opportunities for student success. Both are an integral part of the learning

process (Rink, 2001, Silverman & Subramaniam, 2007) and teachers might need to be cautious on which tasks they will include in their classes and how these tasks are presented to their students.

Possession of skills was an important factor for student participation. Students who do not possess the skills might not be included in a competitive activity, or they may stop participating (Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Roberts, 2001; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2000). The theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 2005) suggests that students' knowledge may affect how students participate in an activity. The results in this study revealed that the lack of skill hindered students' participation which in turn hinders student learning in an activity, and might have affected students' experiences (Bernstein, Phillips & Silverman, 2011). Lack of time for appropriate practice in mixed skill level classes, was a basic reason for not attaining skill and therefore, not been able to actively participate in a game and have fun. Students' pace of learning varies in a mixed class; therefore, teachers need to provide enough time for students' practice. In a mixed-skill class, teachers might need to think of personalized teaching or modifying their teaching in a way that helps the students learn better. For instance, if students have difficulties in completing a task, then the teacher could modify the task making it easier. In a similar way, for high skill students, teachers could modify the task in a way that challenges the students for higher achievement. Students understand that without skill, it is unlikely they can participate in competitive games. Therefore, physical education teachers might need to structure their classes in ways that promote opportunities for skill development. Not all children possess the necessary skills for the competitive activities offered in physical education. Probably, teachers need to re-examine the way competition is structured in school physical education and if it is appropriate to offer such activities, before all students learn the skills. As mentioned earlier, teachers may differentiate their teaching in mixed skill level classes, which is definitely not an easy task. Nevertheless, it would probably help the students learn better and would allow appropriate time for practice, according to skill level. In addition, teachers might need to hear students' voices and students' perceptions. Not only low skill students' voices, but all students' comments.

Sometimes, what seems to be obvious or simple for teachers, might not be the case for students. Considering that teachers strive for student learning, these implications might be very helpful for both the teachers, when preparing their class activities and for scholars who will further study students' perceptions towards competitive activities in the future.

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