

Meaningful Participation of Girls in Senior Physical Education Courses

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The purpose of this investigation was to gain insight into the features of 32 senior physical education courses from 22 school districts in British Columbia that have successfully maintained high enrollments of female students. Analysis of course outlines, interviews with teachers, and student questionnaires were used to collect data. The following themes emerged: (a) focus on lifetime physical activities, (b) student involvement in course development, (c) authentic assessment, (d) gender as a course design feature, (e) value added options, and (f) positive and respectful class environment. Findings offer considerations for the design of physical education courses to address the learning needs of female high school students.

Key words: girl-friendly PE, Physical Education curriculum, authentic assessment, gender stereotyping in physical education, curriculum coherence

Cette étude vise à mettre en lumière les caractéristiques de 32 cours d'éducation physique au secondaire qui ont su maintenir un nombre élevé d'inscriptions chez les filles dans 22 commissions scolaires en Colombie-Britannique. Les données ont été colligées à l'aide de l'analyse des plans de cours, d'entrevues menées auprès des enseignants et de questionnaires à l'intention des élèves. Les thèmes suivants sont ressortis de l'analyse : (a) l'accent mis sur des activités physiques pouvant être effectuées tout au long d'une vie, (b) la participation des élèves à l'élaboration du cours, (c) la pertinence de l'évaluation, (d) la prise en compte des sexes dans la conception même du cours, (e) les options à valeur ajoutée et (f) l'atmosphère positive et respectueuse durant les cours. Les conclusions fournissent des éléments à prendre en considération lors de la conception de cours d'éducation physique en vue de répondre aux besoins d'apprentissage des filles au secondaire.

Mots clés : éducation physique conviviale pour les filles, cours d'éducation physique, évaluation pertinente, stéréotypes en fonction du sexe en éducation physique, cohérence du curriculum.

The primary mandate of Physical Education (PE) programs in Canadian schools is to help students develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to be physically active throughout their lives (Pangrazi & Gibbons, 2009). Craig and Cameron (2004) suggest that "schools could influence physical activity choices and options available to children and youth, through their policies, communications, and facilities" (pp. 55-56). Despite this mandate, educators struggle to offer PE programs that are interesting to and meaningful for female students. This problem is reflected in the low enrollment of young women in senior elective PE programs. In British Columbia, for example, fewer than 10 per cent of female students (compared to 24 per cent of male students) choose to enroll in PE once it becomes an elective course after grade 10 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2000). Substantive scholarship indicates that typical PE programs offered to adolescent girls in Canadian schools may not sufficiently engage them in relevant physical activity during the critical developmental period between childhood and adulthood (Fenton, Frisby, & Luke, 1999; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Gibbons, Wharf Higgins, Gaul, & Van Gyn, 1999; Olafson, 2002; Vertinsky, Batth, & Naidu, 1996).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is grounded in the conceptual underpinnings associated with curricular coherence. A coherent curriculum "holds together, makes sense as a whole; and its parts, whatever they are, are unified and connected by the sense of the whole" (Beane, 1995, p. 3). Beane (1995) identifies four crucial factors associated with curricular coherence: creation and maintenance of visible connections between purposes and everyday learning experiences so that students who come in contact with the curriculum can readily acknowledge its relevance. These conceptual underpinnings are the following:

- (1) selection and design of curricula based on topics that enhance the sense of content purpose and meaning for young people.
- (2) creation of contexts that organize and connect learning experiences so that students can understand how knowledge accumulates and deepens as they learn.

- (3) inclusion of extensive opportunities for students to explore fully how they and others make sense of experiences (pp. 7-9).

Ennis (2003) suggests that a coherent curriculum allows students to feel authentic ownership of their learning.

Guided by the factors associated with a coherent curriculum, the purpose of this study was to look at course materials and to gather information from both teachers and students from senior elective PE courses in British Columbia schools that have managed to gain and maintain a high enrollment of female students. The study had the following objectives:

- (1) identify elements of content and structure that are common amongst senior elective PE courses with an enrollment of at least 50 per cent female students.
- (2) examine the rationale provided by the teachers to explain the origins, successes, and challenges of these elective PE courses.
- (3) examine the explanations female students provide for their participation in these elective PE courses.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

A disconnection occurs between what many girls value in PE and what they experience in some PE programs. Not surprisingly, some young women do not associate their physical activity preferences with those included in their PE courses. For example, Gibbons et al. (1999) found that grade 10 girls, who described their PE experience as boring and repetitive, chose to leave PE as soon as the opportunity was available. Similarly, Flintoff and Scraton (2001) reported that senior female students described their PE classes as having a negative impact on their studies, with its only value being a break from their academic classes.

In Canada (Gibbons et al., 1999; Humbert, 1995) and elsewhere, researchers (Felton, Saunders, Ward, Dishman, Dowda, & Pate, 2005; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Pate, Ward, Saunders, Felton, Dishman, & Dowda, 2005; Schofield, Mummery, Schofield, & Walmsely, 2002; Ward, Saun-

ders, Felton, Williams, Epping, & Pate, 2006) have identified several key features teenage girls look for in their PE courses. These features include (a) a choice of a variety of physical activities with a focus on individual lifetime activities, (b) the opportunity to develop relevant physical skills and personal fitness, (c) a positive learning environment that includes being with friends and protection from harassment, (d) an emphasis on enjoyment of physical activity, and (e) active involvement of students in course development.

Evidence indicates that if PE courses incorporate such features as those just mentioned, physical educators can establish and sustain the involvement of female students. For example, Gibbons and Gaul (2004) examined the experiences of young women in a senior elective PE course that explicitly incorporated the previously mentioned key features. First, they found the participants were greatly appreciative of opportunities throughout the course for input and individual goal setting. Second, they found that students valued a supportive class atmosphere that nurtured friendships among classmates. Third, they confirmed students' "desire to have a wide variety of lifetime physical activities from which to choose, and input into these choices" (p. 10).

Felton et al. (2005), Pate et al. (2005), and Ward et al. (2006) reported promising results in their investigations of the Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP) to increase the physical activity of girls. Similar to Canada's Comprehensive School Health (CSH) model, the CSHP in the United States takes a whole-school approach to promoting overall health of students. CSHP includes four elements: (a) instruction (e.g., PE class), (b) support services (e.g., recreation programs), (c) social support (e.g., mentoring programs), and (d) healthy environment (e.g., tobacco regulation).

Coined by the phrase "girl-friendly PE," the PE instructional component of the CSHP included the following seven features: (a) gender separation opportunities occur in classes, (b) students are physically active in PE classes, (c) noncompetitive activities are offered, (d) lifelong physical activity is emphasized, (e) classes are fun and enjoyable, (f) appropriate instructional methods (including small group interaction) are used, and (g) behavioural skills for PE are taught.

METHOD

Data Collection

Letters directed to PE Department Head were sent to 150 secondary schools that included grades 11 and 12 in all the 60 public school districts in British Columbia. Following a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), the researcher selected schools differing in size and geographic area. The following information was provided to the selected schools:

- (1) Copies of course syllabi and related materials for senior PE courses with enrollment of at least 50 per cent female students.
- (2) An invitation to teacher(s) of courses listed in (1) to participate in an interview regarding origins, successes, and challenges of the course.
- (3) Completion of a questionnaire by five female students in course listed in (1).

The office of research administration at the affiliated university granted human ethics approval for this research

To ensure triangulation, data were collected from several sources. Creswell (1998) defines triangulation as “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 202). As well, Patton (2002) suggests the collection of data from numerous sources to improve the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data. Three techniques were used to collect data in this investigation: (a) document analysis, (b) individual interviews with teachers, and (c) written questionnaires completed by students.

Document Analysis. Syllabi and other relevant materials (e.g., student course guides) for PE courses that had a documented enrollment of at least 50 per cent female students were collected. A total of 32 PE syllabi (from 22 school districts) that met this description were submitted. Teachers sent either hard copies or electronic copies of course materials.

Individual Interviews. The purpose of the individual interviews was to gather information from teachers about the origins, successes, and challenges associated with the PE courses. In the letter requesting copies of course materials, teachers were asked to indicate their willingness to par-

ticipate in an interview to provide the investigator with further information about the courses. All teachers who submitted course materials agreed to be interviewed. Twenty-eight teachers (22 female, 6 male) were interviewed by telephone, and four teachers (3 female, 1 male) were interviewed in person. The interviews were 45 to 90 minutes in length. All interviews were audiotape recorded. Sample questions are included in Appendix A.

Written Questionnaires. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information from female students who were enrolled in the designated PE courses. Teachers were requested to invite five female participants who represented a range of experience, motivation, and achievement in PE to complete the questionnaire. Participants responded in written form to nine questions about their reasons for enrolling in the PE course, as well as questions about specific aspects of the course (see Appendix B). One hundred thirty-one students (3 to 5 students from each of the 32 schools) completed the questionnaire. Upon completion, students put their questionnaires in an envelope, sealed them, and returned them to their school secretary. The questionnaires were then mailed directly to the investigator.

Data Analysis

A content analysis, a strategy to identify core meanings in large amounts of data (Patton, 2002), was conducted on the data collected for this investigation. In the determining core meanings, the researcher for this study looked for preliminary patterns in the data. To provide meaning to these patterns, she further defined them into more comprehensive and distinct themes.

Audiotapes were transcribed and returned to participants for verification. Following verification, the transcripts from the three data sources were organized for content and theme with the assistance of the IN VI-VO qualitative data analysis package.

As suggested by Creswell (1998), the researcher began her analysis with pattern coding and classifying each data source independently. Data source triangulation was used to check the consistency of patterns across the three data sources. The procedure allowed the researcher to trace each coded item back to its original data source and determine

whether patterns and themes were emerging across the multiple data sources. To make connections between emerging patterns and themes, each theme was revisited several times throughout the analysis. The project researcher and a research assistant were involved in patterning and coding. To further enhance the credibility of the findings, an informed expert not directly associated with the investigation made an independent review or audit of the transcripts, coding procedures, and the resulting themes.

RESULTS

This section presents six distinct themes that emerged from the teacher interviews, student questionnaires, and document analysis. The themes, which are described in detail using quotations from these three data sources, provide insight into the notable features of senior PE courses that have maintained a high enrollment of female students. The first two themes focus on aspects of course content: emphasis on lifetime physical activities and valued-added options. The third and fourth themes highlight choices teachers made in the design process that had an impact on course content and structure (use of student input, all-female option). The fifth theme demonstrates the important role of authentic assessment. The final theme focuses on the nature of the learning environment that young women value in their PE courses.

Theme 1: Focus on Lifetime Physical Activities

“Focus on Lifetime Physical Activities,” the theme most frequently mentioned in all three data sources, highlights development of alternatives to the existing senior PE offerings. The major alternative included a strong focus on lifetime physical activities. The phrase “lifetime physical activity” was mentioned in all 32 course outlines. This phrase encompassed those physical activities that could generally be maintained independently over a lifetime. This purpose was apparent in comments such as

This PE course has things I enjoy doing like Swiss ball and yoga, there's no way I'd take the other PE course. (Student questionnaire)

This course seeks to engage students in new physical activities that encourage lifelong fitness. It is hoped that this course provides an alternative to PE programs currently offered. (Course outline)

We want to offer a course that better represents the physical activities a young person will participate in after graduation. (Teacher interview)

The most frequently listed physical activities in course outlines included yoga, aerobics, Pilates, boxercise, strength training, self defense, and walking. In addition to personal fitness activities, a second focus was on outdoor adventure. Six courses had a definite focus on activities such as hiking, camping, orienteering, rock climbing, kayaking, and snowshoeing. A third category, lifetime physical activity, although somewhat less prominent than the preceding categories, offered a range of recreational activities including bowling, skating, golf, curling, and squash.

The focus on lifetime physical activity also included extensive use of community facilities. Several of the young women emphasized the importance of becoming comfortable in these facilities. For example, one student stated, "Now I feel okay going to the fitness club 'cause I know the routine." Teachers commented on the positive impact of interacting with adults at the community facilities:

The best thing for the students to see is a fitness studio filled with treadmills, bikes, and weights used by people of all shapes, sizes, and ages. (Teacher interview)

My students had a real eye-opener when they participated in an aerobics class with a group of seniors who lasted longer than they did. (Teacher interview)

In addition to helping students develop the physical skills for a wide range of lifetime activities, all courses included the requisite knowledge for safe and healthy participation. The following topics were frequently included: (a) nutrition, (b) principles of fitness, (c) basic anatomy and physiology, (d) sports injuries, and (e) sport psychology. These topics were well received by the students. Comments such as the following were common:

I enjoyed learning about healthy eating, it was more than don't eat junk food. (Student questionnaire)

My favourite was the injury stuff, it is important. (Student questionnaire)

Theme 2: Value-Added Options

The theme of "Value-added Options" emphasized the importance female students placed on receiving some sort of additional value or credit for completing a PE course. This recognition included external certification (e.g., CPR, fitness leadership) in addition to the credit received for course completion. Of the 32 PE courses examined in this study, 26 included this type of value-added option. It was evident that the students were impressed with this feature. One student commented, "It was a bonus to get the certificate in PE." Another student provided the following case in point: "A bunch of jobs I applied for wanted me to have CPR, so it was excellent to do it in PE." When asked if this feature had an impact on their decision to take this PE course, most students said it did not, but realized it was a benefit once they were in the course. The rationale provided by the teachers for including certifications was to help students gain viable skills for their future.

Theme 3: Student Involvement in Course Development

This theme highlighted the belief that affording students the opportunity for input into course development contributed to greater meaning and sense of ownership for their learning. Teachers viewed this opportunity for input as an important progression for students toward learning how to make adult decisions. This understanding is apparent in the following excerpts:

If we are supposed to help the students make the transition to adulthood, then we have to give them a say in some things. (Teacher interview)

Helping students take responsibility for their choices means we have to allow them to practice making them. (Teacher interview)

As can be seen in the preceding quotations, the opportunity for input into course development came with the expectation that students would take more ownership for their learning. The significance of feeling a

sense of ownership for learning was evident across the three data sources. Consider the following examples:

This is your course, choose wisely. (Course outline)

I see the change from being dependent on me [the teacher] to becoming their own person. (Teacher interview)

The teacher trusted us to make good decisions, which made me want to be there. (Student questionnaire)

Theme 4: Gender As a Course Design Feature

“Gender as a Course Design Feature” exemplified the struggle of physical educators with the longstanding challenge of meeting the needs and interests of a diverse group of students. When speaking about the origins of their particular PE course(s), all teachers expressed a concern with the low numbers of female students in their existing senior PE program. However, not all courses in this investigation explicitly incorporated gender as a factor in course design. Of the 32 courses, only eight plainly identified female students as the target audience. The following is a quotation from one of these courses:

This course will seek to engage young women in new physical activities that encourage personal fitness and wellness. As the design of this course is catered to your interests, it will focus on components of fitness you have identified as important. (Course outline)

When asked to explain her rationale for specifically targeting female students in course design, one teacher explained,

I think at the senior level there’s the opportunity to consider different physical activity preferences of boys and girls. I don’t view it as something negative. As adults they are entitled to do different activities. Why can’t we use this same idea in our PE courses? (Teacher interview)

Several teachers expressed concern that a course would be viewed as inferior if it were designed exclusively for female students. Responses from some participants expressed a similar concern:

I almost didn't sign up 'cause I thought it was a fluffy course for girls who didn't want to take "real PE" and we would just sit around with cramps all the time. NOT TRUE! The best thing was being with a bunch of women (not girls) who want to push themselves. (Student questionnaire)

A frequent comment from teachers stressed their desire to design an alternative to their existing PE courses that would attract both female students and male students, and not limit either gender. Teachers expressed their struggle with making course content decisions based on gender:

On one hand we don't want to force students into stereotypic activities (e.g., all the girls want to dance and all the boys don't). On the other hand there are some real differences. We're walking that fine line of encouraging students to try new things, while at the same time making sure we offer the things they want to do. (Teacher interview)

My preference is to design a course based on a particular area of interest, if the PE course draws 29 girls and 4 boys then so be it. As long as we have another course with 29 boys and 4 girls, then I'm satisfied. It's when we have two courses each with 29 boys and 4 girls that I worry. Before we created this course we had two PE courses with a total of 3 girls. (Teacher interview)

Theme 5: Authentic Assessment

In all the data sources, responses indicated that authenticity in assessment helped to make learning meaningful for students. Authentic assessment is defined as "an assessment procedure that emphasizes the use of tasks and contextual settings like those in the real world" (Gronlund & Cameron, 2004, p. 209). One student contended that she felt a huge sense of accomplishment when she completed the CPR test, not because she received a good mark, but because she learned a useful skill. Another student stated, "I don't mind being tested on skills that are important."

There was also a focus on providing an explanation for the role of evaluation in the learning. This quotation shows how this role is explained in a course outline:

In this unit, you will become familiar with the theory and technique involved in fitness development when evaluating your own level of fitness. This will provide a baseline for individual improvements and goal achievements. (Course outline)

In addition to highlighting the relevance of mastering various skills, all teachers adjusted the language in course outlines to personalize the content for students. In all course outlines, teachers placed a clear emphasis on personal goals in the evaluation process. Consider the following example:

This is one of the most informative aspects of PE because it is about you! You will have the opportunity to gather information about your own fitness. Your progress could be significant and satisfying! You will evaluate yourself and set some short- and long-term goals. Approximately 12 weeks after our first fitness evaluation we will reflect on our progress. (Course outline)

Theme 6: Positive and Respectful Class Environment

In addition to the preceding themes focused on course content and structure, the female students and most teachers consistently emphasized the importance of a positive and respectful learning environment in their PE classes. When asked what the young women valued in their PE class, they frequently mentioned feeling safe and included. In the following quotation, a student offers an explanation for the significance of feeling safe and included:

What I like most about this PE course is I don't have to worry about being embarrassed or scared. Everybody in this course helps each other and there's no creepy competition. What I used to hate about PE was getting ignored 'cause I wasn't good. It doesn't happen here. I don't know if it's because we're more mature or because we aren't playing jock sports or both. (Student questionnaire)

Interestingly, comments from the female students seldom mentioned an antagonistic relationship with male classmates in PE. Even in the eight all-female PE courses, only two students explicitly highlighted “being in a class with no boys” as something they valued about their PE course. On the other hand, teachers of the all-female PE courses attri-

buted the positive and respectful learning environment in large part to the absence of male students. The following quotation is an example, in this regard:

It is so nice to see the girls relax and enjoy [themselves] without feeling pressured by the boys. Interestingly, one day due to poor weather, we had to join with the other PE class, which were all boys. The girls immediately started to show those behaviours – you know the giggling, helplessness, placating to the boys. Although it was obvious that we were letting the boys share our gym space, the boys immediately took over. Instead of joining our aerobics class, we ended up doing basketball. When I asked the girls if it was all right if the boys joined us, they said “okay, but don’t bother with aerobics, the boys won’t like it. (Teacher interview)

The most frequent comment from both students and teachers about the learning environment focused on the enjoyment of being with classmates with similar interests and skill level. For example, one student mentioned how she felt more comfortable in PE where everyone was “sort of at the same level, not like in PE 10 where all the jocks showed off.” A teacher identified the absence of the “winning and losing saga” of team sports, and suggested that this change added to the positive atmosphere, and students tried “just as hard – not to win the game, but learn the skill.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to look into senior elective PE courses that have a documented enrollment of at least 50 per cent female students. The document analysis, interviews with teachers, and written questionnaires from students provided a plentiful resource to gain understanding into the features that contributed to the success of these courses. In particular, these findings are consistent with the factors Beane (1995) associates with curricular coherence. Notably, efforts to make the PE courses relevant to the everyday lives of the students are evident throughout the themes, including use of student input and authentic assessment. These findings also support the earlier research on factors that encourage young women to participate in senior PE classes. In particular, the

attributes of girl-friendly PE suggested earlier by Felton et al. (2005), Pate et al. (2005), and Ward et al. (2006) are apparent throughout the themes.

"Focus on Lifetime Physical Activities," one of the most dominant themes in this study, characterizes much of the research in the field. Not surprisingly, the physical activity content is the major driving force underlying success of these courses for female students. However, it is important to note that, although this is a significant theme, teachers used a variety of ways to incorporate lifetime physical activity into their courses. It was evident that even with similar content, no two courses were alike. This difference emphasizes the necessity of having a curriculum guide that allows a teacher the flexibility in choice of options to develop a coherent PE curriculum.

The importance of a curriculum guide that affords teachers a range of possibilities to accommodate student needs and interests is also central to the second theme "Student Input in Course Development." Consistent with Ennis (2003), Gibbons and Gaul (2004), and Humbert (2006), teachers and students alike highlighted the significance of utilizing student input. Because the major intent of PE is to promote lifelong physical activity behaviours, incorporating student input seems essential to the design of a successful PE course.

The teachers in this study appeared to embrace the opportunity to design courses to meet the needs of their students. Fortunately, their provincial curriculum guide explicitly encourages the use of a range of options to fulfill the prescribed learning outcomes. Specifically, the British Columbia Ministry of Education *Physical Education 11 & 12 Integrated Resource Package* (1997) recommends "teachers work with students to develop programs to meet student needs and interests" (p. 1). Other provinces have taken a similar approach in their senior PE courses. For example, to support Manitoba's implementation of mandatory PE kindergarten through grade 12, the policy for implementation of senior PE states,

[P]arents, students, and schools are encouraged to work together to determine what will work best in their specific situations to help young people take ownership of their own physical fitness. By doing so, they will discover interesting, rewarding activity that help them establish active lifestyles that will persist into their futures. (Manitoba Education, Citizenship & Youth, 2007, p. 15)

The focus on authentic assessment in both Theme 3 and Theme 5, "Value-Added Options," continues to strengthen the concept of curricular coherence by providing further insight into the value students place on learning relevant skills. When students viewed course content as pertinent to their lives, evaluation seemed to be less feared and better understood.

The theme "Gender as a Course Design Feature" highlights the complexity of using gender to guide course development. The teachers in this study expressed obvious concern to find better ways to meet the needs of their female students. However, they struggled with how to avoid using what they referred to as gender stereotypes (e.g., all girls like dance) to guide course decisions. This theme highlights several sociological issues that have had an impact on the development of PE programs for many years. First, PE has long been identified as a stronghold for the protection and preservation of hegemonic masculinity (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006). Related to hegemonic masculinity is the longstanding systemic power imbalance in PE between males and females (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002). Both issues, evident throughout this theme, demonstrate notable influence on attitudes, whether it is the concern of a student that she may be enrolling in an inferior PE course because it caters to the interests of girls, or the teacher who hesitates to offer a course that may be perceived as less physically rigorous. In each instance, the masculine view of what is acceptable PE continues to hold a dominant position. From a promising viewpoint, the statements in provincial curriculum PE guides, such as those mentioned in earlier discussion, present concrete expectations, and credible support for teachers who are attempting to change the status quo without the intimation of inferiority. However, Fraser-Thomas and Beaudoin (2004) caution physical educators not to expect policies to automatically translate into practice. If changes in practice, especially those that challenge a dominant practice, are to be successful, strong professional development and leadership must support them.

The final theme "Positive and Respectful Class Environment" impresses upon physical educators the importance of the social milieu in which students are expected to learn. It also reminds physical education teachers that students base their education decisions on more than

course content. In this study, to learn effectively, these female students needed to feel a sense of safety and respect. On one hand, importance of these concepts should be considered self-evident. However, given that references to the social environment of PE classes appeared frequently throughout the questionnaire responses, it presents the possibility that their experiences in PE have not always been sufficiently safe and respectful. Humbert (1995), Gibbons et al. (1999), and Lenskyj (2003) have documented girls feeling both humiliated and unsafe in PE classes as a result of harassing behaviour from their male classmates. The harassment girls experience from their male classmates along with an expression of resignation highlights the deep roots of masculine hegemony in PE. Lenskyj and van Daalen (2006) use the term "femininity requirement" to explain the powerful feminine hegemony that is also impacting the struggle of female students to find their place in PE. Not only are girls feeling intimidated by a strong masculine expectation in PE, they are also pressured by an enduring societal expectation of what it means to be feminine. From a pedagogical perspective, this theme reminds teachers to make certain that they utilize inclusive teaching strategies and have clear behaviour expectations of their students.

Finally, the focus of this investigation was on examining how teachers have developed senior elective PE courses that appeal to female students. Nevertheless, there is indication that dissatisfaction with PE among female students in Canadian schools starts as early as middle school or even elementary school (Fenton et al., 1999; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Olafson, 2002). Younger girls are identifying similar features in PE classes to those identified by older girls. If this is the case, physical educators are ill-advised to wait until the senior years to include those features noted in this study. Further investigation is warranted to examine how the features valued by female students in the senior PE courses may or may not be applicable to PE programs in the lower grades.

The six resulting themes in this investigation are consistent with a statement by Gibbons and Blacklock (1998) that a positive PE learning environment for female students is one in which they "feel safe, find value, and feel valued" (p. 3). It follows that the more effectively educators can incorporate the needs of female students in the design of PE

programs the more likely they will be motivated to initiate and continue their involvement.

Summary

School PE programs are well positioned to have a positive impact on the physical activity behaviours of students. Despite this opportunity, educators struggle with the challenge of providing meaningful PE programs for female students. It is well documented that many young women become disillusioned with their PE experience in their high school years. For this reason, the purpose of this investigation was to identify the characteristics of senior PE courses that have successfully maintained a high enrollment of female students. Interviews and questionnaires from teachers and students, and written course materials provided a rich source of data.

The findings of this study revealed six characteristics associated with course content, course structure, and teaching and assessment strategies. Course content emphasized inclusion of a range of lifetime physical activities, along with other opportunities to develop relevant life skills (e.g., CPR certification). Characteristics associated with course structure included the option of all-female classes, as well as the use of student input as part of course design. The concept of authenticity was evident in both the teaching strategies and assessment strategies, with a definite focus on skills and topics that hold significant relevance for teenage women. Finally, the importance of a positive and inclusive learning environment was a critical characteristic of the PE courses with a high enrollment of female students. In general, these characteristics provide guidance for the design of relevant and effective courses, which have great potential to increase the participation of female students in secondary school PE and possible life-long benefits.

CONCLUSION

The results of this investigation provide evidence that it is possible to design senior elective PE courses to facilitate the participation of female students. The teachers who responded in this study are having success in designing senior PE courses that are meaningful for adolescent girls. From a conceptual perspective, Beane's (1995) four factors associated

with curricular coherence are valuable in helping to better understand and interpret various aspects of the themes in this study. The PE course outlines submitted for this investigation, supported by comments from teachers and students, incorporate all four factors associated with a coherent curriculum.

These findings present several promising avenues for future actions. First, the concept of curriculum coherence provides a solid framework to guide PE program development. Although consistent features occurred across different outlines in this study, each course was unique and designed for a specific circumstance. There does not appear to be one simple and singular solution, but rather a range of multi-faceted possibilities. Considering the range of geographic context alone represented in this modest sample, from small, isolated rural schools to large urban schools, it further negates the possibility that one size will fit all. The consequence of formulating PE curriculum guides to allow for flexibility in meeting learning outcomes cannot be underestimated.

It also follows that given the challenge of the complexity of the course design, there is a need to provide support for teachers throughout the development process. Many of the teachers in this investigation commented on the effort and energy required to develop their courses. Professional development assistance including release time and the opportunity to meet other teachers who are teaching similar courses would greatly facilitate the sustainability of such courses.

Although this study focused on teachers involved in professional practice, all six themes provide important reminders for physical education teacher education. From a systemic perspective, making change in the PE curriculum without addressing the preparation of PE teachers diminishes the potential for any sort of enduring success. Therefore, similar to the professional development to support teachers who are making change in PE programs, an equivalent program is necessary for those making change in teacher education programs.

Finally, if female students do not find value in their PE programs the evidence is clear that they will most likely leave PE when they find the opportunity. However, this investigation identifies some promising steps that with concerted attention have the potential to meet the needs of fe-

male students and increase the chance that physical activity will become a regular part of their lives.

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Appendix A
Sample Questions and Probes from One-on-One Interviews with
Teachers

1. I would like to know about the origins of this PE course.
- What prompted the creation of the course? Major reasons?
- How many times has the course been offered?
- What resources did you use to develop the course?
- How did you decide on course content? Expectations? Evaluation?
- What sort of changes have you made as the course has evolved?
- What part did the PE 11 & 12 IRP play in course development?
- What other senior PE courses are offered?
2. I would like to know about challenges you have faced with the course.
- How did colleagues and administrators respond to this course? Barriers?
- Describe the logistical challenges you have faced (e.g. financial, facilities).
- Has this course impacted other PE courses you offer? If yes, how?
- Were there any challenges that surprised you? Please describe.
3. I would like to know about successes you have experienced with this PE course.
- How have female students reacted to this course? Male students?
- Describe the enrollment trend of female students in PE.
- How have you documented success of this course?
- Have you noticed changes in the physical activity of female students since offering this course?
4. I would like to hear your thoughts about the future of this PE course.
- Will the course be offered next year?
- Are you planning to make any changes?
- Has the grad portfolio requirement impacted this course?

Appendix B
Sample Questions on Student Questionnaires

1. List the major reasons you signed up for this PE course.
2. What are the things you like about this PE course? Things you don't like?
3. When you are talking about this PE course to friends, how do you describe it?
4. If this PE course were not offered would you have signed up for another PE course? If no, why? If yes, which one?
5. What did you know about this course before you signed up?
6. List the physical activities you liked the most in this course. Disliked?
7. List anything you would like me know to know about this PE course.
8. What did you like about your PE courses in junior high/middle school? Things you disliked?
9. If you could change anything about this course, what would it be?