

Examination of Discussion Board Opinions about Grading in Physical Education

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Abstract Grading practices in physical education are often more controversial than in other subject areas. Opinions about appropriateness and fairness are diverse and often strongly held. Attitudes and opinions can relate to student participation in physical education and should be better understood. Discussion boards have been used effectively to gather information about individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions in a variety of settings. The purpose of the current study was to explore opinions regarding grading in physical education through examination of discussion board posts. A generic inductive method of examination of 11 publicly available discussion threads found on seven different sites yielded three major themes. The first encompasses beliefs that traditional grading methods in physical education are unfair; the second involves beliefs of how grading should be done; and the third includes the opinions that physical education grades should be based upon skill or fitness outcomes. The data showed that many individuals have negative views of physical education and that their views on grading are not consistent with best practices. However, there were some constructive criticisms. Understanding such criticisms and adjusting grading procedures accordingly could be a positive move, as many of the suggestions are actually supported by the literature.

Keywords Physical Education, Grading, Discussion Boards

1. Introduction

The process of establishing grades for students in physical education can be problematic for teachers and confusing for students[11]. Presumably, the establishment of clearly understood, fair, and valid procedures for grading will improve the teaching/learning process; however, opinions differ as to what constitutes fair and valid, especially in physical education. Grading issues in general are often very contentious, but when related to physical education, such issues can elicit even stronger disagreements. Physical education has often been set apart from other subjects as a "nonacademic" course due to a focus on developing motor skills and physical fitness. While physical education grades should be fair and valid, reaching a consensus on how to achieve that end has proven difficult.

Discussion boards are a relatively new technology, but they are being used more frequently by a diverse and growing population. Researchers have reported that cancer patients use them effectively for social support and advice, organizational employees use them to vent frustrations, and educators use them to promote exchanges of ideas. While the facts presented in discussion board posts are often in dispute,

researchers have found the opinions espoused are generally sincere and helpful. Ebenezer, Lugo, Beirnacka, and Puvirajah[13] concluded that discussion boards can be effective tools for honest dialog. Similarly, discussion board users have reported finding "useful" information through participation[16],[22]. Researchers have even found the information on some boards accurate and reliable enough to use the data in place of focus groups[6],[24].

Student perceptions are an important factor in physical education achievement[49], and an understanding of the opinions about grading held by students, parents, and the general public may prove extremely helpful for physical educators. First, armed with such knowledge, physical educators should be able to reflect on current grading-related teaching practices. Second, if they are aware of areas for potential conflict, teachers may be able to address those areas early and be able to give a reasoned explanation for the use of various grading procedures. The purpose of the current study was to explore opinions regarding grading in physical education through examination of discussion board posts.

2. Method

2.1. Data Collection

A series of Internet searches was performed using three popular search engines: Google, Bing, and Yahoo. Multiple search attempts using a variety of combinations of words

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such as *physical education, grading, gym, grades, assessment, and PE*, yielded 11 relevant discussion threads housed on a total of seven discussion boards. Before one is allowed to add a post or comment, all of the discussion board sites require users to register an account, which generally consists of submitting a valid e-mail address and creating a username. During the registration process, new users are required to indicate that they agree to follow the discussion board terms of use, which typically prohibit advertising, profanity, and various forms of incivility toward other users. Of the sites that listed a minimum age limit for users, 13 years was the youngest, but no apparent mechanism for enforcement was found.

Amirite[2] is a discussion board site that does not appear to target a select niche. The site's help section proclaims, "Amirite is the premier opinion-based social network where people from all around the world discover, debate and discuss today's hottest issues (para. 1)." Users are invited to "interact with like-minded individuals on breaking news, hot topics and controversial issues now!"

College Confidential[43] is a site clearly designed for high school students preparing to enter college. The *About Us* page contains the following greeting: "Welcome to the leading college-bound community on the web!" The site also is billed, at the top of the page, as "the Web's busiest discussion community related to college admissions . . ."

The Straight Dope[7] website contained little detail regarding a purpose or mission. The site consists mainly of columns and responses to viewer questions from a man calling himself Cecil Adams, who claims to be the "world's most intelligent human being (faq, question #1)." The tagline under the site name reads, "Fighting Ignorance since 1923 (It's taking longer than we thought)." As for the discussion board portion of the site, there is but one guiding principle: "Don't be a jerk."

According to the Answerbag website[3], "we're all about answering your questions! All of them—whether you're looking for facts, opinions or simply entertainment." This site contained relatively few posts.

One board with a great number of posts was housed in the discussion forum of Collegenet[10], which is described as, "a Portland, Oregon-based, privately held company providing web-based on-demand technologies to colleges, universities, and non-profits."

Finally, discussion boards hosted by Yahoo[48] and Google[17] were mined for content. Both sites are familiar to most Internet users as they also contain popular search engines. As with most discussion boards, threads would evolve and occasionally some participants would get off topic.

The leading threads, the questions that initiated the relevant discussions, were similar. These three examples are representative: "Should teachers grade students in physical education? Why or why not?" "Grades in PE?" "The grading system in physical education should be based on effort, not athletic ability, amirite?"

2.2. Data Collection

The data were analyzed following a generic inductive approach, which is described by[46] as one that primarily uses "detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher (p.238)." A five-step process guided the data analysis. First, the raw data were prepared for examination by standardizing the formatting of all posts and affixing them to index cards. Second, the index cards were read thoroughly three times by the investigator. Third, numerous categories were created in the form of notes and memos. Fourth, the categories produced in the previous step were revised as redundant categories were collapsed and insignificant categories were omitted. In the fifth and final step, each remaining category was reviewed multiple times for subtopics, contradictions, and linkages until a few major themes remained.

2.3. Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, a method of triangulation across sources was employed[47]. Viewpoints expressed in one discussion board were verified against viewpoints in all other discussion boards. The content, and even the tone of the posts, were highly similar across all seven discussion boards. Additionally, stakeholder checks were conducted with the aid of three experienced high school physical education teachers. The major themes were explained and an illustrative post excerpt for each was read out loud. The teachers confirmed that such attitudes and opinions were consistent with their past experiences.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Results

While the majority of the results are of a qualitative nature, limited quantitative data exist in the form of frequency counts and descriptive data. For instance, the discussion board on Amirite had a poll feature accompanying the question that started the thread. "The grading system in physical education should be based on effort, not athletic ability, amirite?" was the question first posed. Other participants could respond in the affirmative by clicking the "YEAH YOU ARE" button or disagree by clicking the "NO WAY" button. Those agreeing with the statement outnumbered those in opposition by a count of 890 (96%) to 35 (4%). Moreover, as the data from all the different discussion boards were prepared for inspection on index cards, they were evaluated for general tone toward physical education. Many posts reflected a clear negative or positive impression of some aspect of physical education. Such cards were grouped and counted. Of the 178 posts that were transferred to index cards, 22% had positive impressions, 65% had negative impressions, and 22% had neutral/unsure impressions.

3.2. Qualitative Results

Upon analysis of the data, three main themes emerged and were given the following titles: That's not fair, Ought to be, and Stop your whining.

3.2.1. That's not Fair

The most prominent theme describes mostly negative opinions regarding the typical grading systems whereby letter grades (A,B,C,D, or F) or numeric averages (0–100%) are used in physical education classes. While many board participants expressed beliefs that such grading is appropriate and fair for courses such as math or history, they did not consider it fair to use those grading practices in physical education courses. Many posters believed that physical fitness and athletic ability should not figure into a physical education grade because such abilities are attributed to a genetic lottery. Often coupled with the discussion of genetics was the notion that low physical education grades are especially damaging to highly intelligent students seeking academic awards or accolades. The following quotes typify this theme.

Example 1: "I think that it would be unfair to lower someone's grade in gym because they can't run as fast or do as many pushups. The aspects that students can be fairly graded on, such as being on time and prepared, trying your best, participation. . ."

Example 2: "If you try hard and still are not good you should not be penalized. Some people just have a natural talent for sports. Even though gym is as important as any other class the way they are grading it now should remain the same."

Example 3: ". . . gym isn't an important class. So it shouldn't affect you that way. Your basically saying that being athletically inclined will give you a better grade then someone who isn't. Being athletic is genetics, being good in math or English comes from good teaching."

Several reasoned that traditional grading is unfair because physical education, as typically delivered, is unimportant and lacks educational value. As evidence, board participants noted that there are many ways and places to get fit in the community and there are many opportunities to get involved in athletics through interscholastic and community-based leagues. Given that, how important can physical education be? Prevalent was a belief that if physical education is to be included in the school day at all, it should merely be as recess. Board participants even cited the lack of professionalism displayed by physical education teachers as evidence that physical education is not a necessary or serious educational endeavor.

Example 1: "In most schools across the US, gym is a joke of a class, where students don't really do anything. Gym is really not a serious class. And the teachers are not that serious about it either. Once again, who cares? Since when did gym grades matter, anyways?"

Example 2: "When I graduated HS the difference between Valedictorian and Salutatorian was PE. Specifically 10th

grade PE which was taught by some idiot who gave grades based on who he liked. Other years, grades were pretty much 'show up and get an A.' Most of my college classmates were amazed that we got letter grades for PE at all."

Example 3: The following are shorter segments of posts relating to the professionalism of physical education teachers or their ability to grade: ". . . I was cheated—how can one teacher watch and accurately grade 30 students at one time?" ". . . gym teachers are fat, sexist and don't care. . ." "Is anything as arbitrary and subjective as the grading system of a given PE teacher?" "I think it is unfair to have a teacher arbitrarily decide what's going to constitute a particular grade . . . biased toward the athletes." ". . . a couple of the PE teachers were just about the only HS teachers I encountered with whom I was not impressed." "Of course it shouldn't count. At least not until they actually weed out all the sadists that wind up as PE teachers."

Lastly, a smaller but notable number of board participants expressed the view that it is wrong to grade PE like an academic course because low grades will negatively influence attitudes toward physical fitness and physical activity. Those participants reasoned that the negative attitudes and lowered self-esteem will discourage students from pursuing a physically active lifestyle in the future. Still related to the idea that physical education grades are closely tied to genetics, some argued that students will realize improvement is futile and that better PE grades are out of reach. As reasoned, those students would "give up" and be less likely to engage in a physically active lifestyle.

Example 1: "PE could be hard for some people and if a person is trying their best and isn't doing as well as another student then they should not feel bad for getting like a C or low grade."

Example 2: "Assuming the goal of PE is to promote general fitness, the best way to do that is to make the students like getting exercise. Treating it as serious business is just going to make the unfit kids resent the class."

Example 3: "I think some of these things they try to get the kids to do makes them hate it. When I was in elementary school I loved PE for the most part. It was when we got older and they are telling us we have to run a mile in this amount of time because it is 20% of our grade and things like that made me hate it so much . . . Pressuring them doesn't make them like the class."

3.2.2. Ought to be

Many of the data consisted of suggestions for improving the system of grading. Board participants that were critical of traditional grading also offered solutions for righting a broken system. Even participants who indicated no dissatisfaction with a letter or numeric average grade scales in physical education often offered solutions for improving the experience. The overwhelming majority of posts describing how physical education *should* be graded were in favor of grading based upon effort, improvement, or behavior, or some combination of the three.

Example 1: "... students can still be graded on their effort, participation, sportsmanship, and things like that. Not everyone is a sports star, so the graded things should only be things everyone can do."

Example 2: "Personally, I think it would be just fine if schools offered a period where students jogged/ran/walked briskly or took some kind of aerobics class and as long as they participated fully, they got an A. The goal is to get the heart rate up for health purposes . . . not to "be competitive" or better skills, the way that the goal is to better skills in English or math class. As long as that goal of getting the heart rate up is met, it really doesn't matter that Suzie takes 15 minutes to run a mile whereas Johnny does so in 8 minutes, or that Suzie will never be a good volleyball player."

Example 3: "You are educated about how to be physical. If you bring your gym equipment, pay attention, demonstrate your knowledge of what you've been taught, and do your best, you should receive a good grade even if you're the fattest student out there."

Other opinions expressed by board participants on how physical education ought to be graded dealt with the concept of choice. Suggestions were made that grading would be fairer if students were allowed choices with respect to placement, grading scale (pass/fail vs. traditional), or course content. In fact, while some indicated they did support grading on ability under the current physical education system, they also indicated they might change that opinion if students were able to choose the type of physical education classes they take. These excerpts feature such thinking:

Example 1: "The academically inclined students often have the chance to take AP classes where they have more challenging work, middle of the road students take college prep, and students with difficulty take remedial classes. It is not one size fits all. Physical education classes that grade on ability do not factor in natural ability or make a distinction of 'highly able' students vs. students that are not. In academic classes the benchmark for letter grades are not the same. When you start breaking down PE classes for Varsity athletes vs. students who are less athletic, then grade them the same way."

Example 2: "GPA is basically indicative of effort and not ability anyway and so for a class that is graded purely on effort then I have no problem with it being counted. If multiple levels of PE were offered for students of a wide range of physical abilities then I think grading on ability could be considered, but not when everybody is thrown into one class."

Example 3: "Team sports-Individual sports-Coordination activities-Kinesiology. If they were split-up like that, I could see having grades count. But when it's a generic "PE," it doesn't make sense to give grades. That's like having one class called "math" where everything from $1+1=2$ to calculus is taught."

3.2.3. Stop You Whining

This theme captures those posts that seemed to support the

practice of grading physical education like other subjects—*academic* subjects. Respondents opined that physical education is a worthwhile component of the curriculum and, as such, it should be graded like all other subjects. Not doing so only perpetuates beliefs that physical education is not worthwhile. Also suggested was a theory that high standards and a robust grading system are the only motivators for many students to give effort. A common response to those in the *That's not fair* assemblage centered around the idea that all abilities are shaped by both nature and nurture and those excelling in the physical arena deserve to be rewarded just as those who excel in the academic arena are. Similarly, the argument was made that a low physical education grade for an academic standout does not punish one anymore than a low math grade punishes an athletic standout. Some examples are as follows:

Example 1: "Let's equate it to a regular class. If I try really hard on a test, should that give me an A, regardless of if I can do the work? PE has very general levels of fitness that you need to reach—things that people should be able to do in order to demonstrate physical fitness. They aren't asking you to be hurdlers, high jumpers, or sprinters. If a sedentary life has left you unable to do these, then you need to accept that. You can either skate by with your B (which is still fine), or work hard to get that A next class."

Example 2: "Sorry, but plenty of people who are not naturally gifted at something manage to excel, or at least become proficient, because they work their butts off. You think Jim Abbott was a naturally gifted athlete despite having one hand? Even people like Michael Jordan have to practice all the time to be successful. Being an athlete is one of the most difficult jobs there is. Genes and natural talent only get you so far. Most of what separates normal people from the few among us that can do it for a living is relentless drive and dedication. Far more drive and dedication than the average engineer or architect. Those qualities, even when they don't rise to the threshold of the pros, should be rewarded. I would imagine that you, like most people, didn't try hard enough because you were discouraged, or because it was not important enough to you. Can you honestly tell me you spent as much time practicing any sport as you did an academic subject you enjoyed? Probably not. That's the main reason why classes like PE should be included in one's GPA. If a person can't be bothered to push themselves in an area where they are not naturally gifted, it says a lot about their character. Colleges should definitely be concerned with such character flaws. Anyone can show promise at a sport if they are committed to do so. That's not to say the average person could become a professional, but they can become good enough that they won't fall behind in the average gym class. The standards, for the most part, are not that high."

4. Discussion

The primary goal of the research study was to explore opinions related to grading practices in physical education

courses. The analysis of content found on multiple discussion boards leads to the discovery of three major themes: (a) That's not fair, (b) Ought to be, and (c) Stop your whining.

Board participants repeatedly expressed a belief that the typical academic grading procedure for physical education is erroneous. The theme *That's not fair* had the greatest amount of supporting data. The body of physical education research tends to corroborate the opinions expressed by many of the participants. As noted by McCullick, Belcher, Hardin, and Hardin[28], when watching television or movies, it is not uncommon to see physical education teachers depicted as incompetent and unprofessional. If such media depictions and some of the experiences described on the discussion boards are true, the physical education experiences of many students are probably substandard. Teachers have an enormous amount of influence on student enjoyment in physical education[4],[34],[41]. The low regard for teachers is but one problem. The value of the subject matter and the rigor of course requirements are often mocked and belittled as well. Many physical education students hold negative attitudes toward physical education resulting from experience[20]. Simply put, many believe that physical education is not worthy of being graded in the same way as academic subjects[42]. This view is so prevalent that the largest, and arguably most influential, physical education professional association has published an advocacy document specifically to rebut the notion[33].

Some board participants were opposed to traditional grading in physical education based on the notion that it adds too much pressure and causes students to hate physical education. This criticism should not be dismissed. As many researchers have reported, negative attitudes toward physical education are held by many students, of all ability levels[9],[35],[44].

The *Ought to be* theme highlights one instance when public sentiment is in agreement with pedagogical research. Many improvements to the grading system in physical education that the board participants identified are also supported by research. The calls from board participants for more choices in physical education were profound. Researchers have found that students are more engaged and thus more likely to learn when they have curricular choices[12],[36]. Bebik, Goodwin and Orsega - Smith[5] reported that student attitudes in physical education were improved when they were grouped with students of similar ability and when they had choices of electives. Conversely, on matters of grading for effort, research-based best practices are counter to the opinions of most on the discussion boards. Virtually every state has instituted some type of content standards with the understanding that physical education teachers are to assess students based upon achievement in relation to those standards. Be they pass/fail or traditional letter grades, ideally grades should inform parents, students, and administrators of the degree to which standards are met[31]. Contrary to the recommendations of physical education experts and professional organizations,

far too many physical educators already base grades on factors unrelated to content mastery. It is very common for teachers to grade on behavior, effort, attendance, and attitude [19],[26]. The desire to see grades based on effort may be attributed in part to the belief that fitness testing is the major factor in determining grades. The practice of using fitness scores in the grading process is not supported by best practice guidelines[1],[32],[45].

Finally, the *Stop your whining* theme captured the opinions of those who take a more traditional approach to grading in physical education. Many of the posts were responses to those complaining that physical ability was genetically determined and grading on physical ability harmed nonathletic students in a number of ways. Some board participants challenged that premise and countered that sports skills could be learned through practice. Intuitively, most people believe this because they learn motor skills through practice all the time, such as texting, driving, or playing an instrument. One must wonder if they view sports skills differently. Lund and Shanklin[25] showed that the badminton skills of secondary school females improved regardless of the starting ability level when they were informed of the skill on which they would be tested and given adequate time to practice, even in a unit as short as 10 days.

Initially, one might assume that the participants telling others on the board to "get over it" are physically gifted but intellectually inferior. Similarly, from reading the various posts disclosing tales of GPAs ruined by physical education, one might assume that high intellectual achievers rarely excel in athletics or engage in fitness activities. To the contrary, research indicates that physically active students perform better in the classroom and that athletes typically have higher GPAs than non-athletes[23],[29],[37].

The assertion of many posters, that one needs dedication and discipline to excel at a sport or to maintain fitness, is supported by research[38],[39]. Many of the board participants supported the idea of grading based upon ability without using genetic limits as an excuse. However, such support should not be confused with support for current physical education practices. Even though some of the board participants supported grading physical education like other subjects, they still offered suggestions to improve the process. In many instances, they offered the same suggestions as those they were rebutting, such as better teachers and more choices.

5. Conclusions

Many opinions expressed on the discussion boards regarding physical education and grading are linked to the quality of physical education. Certainly, the opinions expressed were shaped by personal experiences, which, it would appear for many, were negative. Because attitudes do influence enjoyment and motivation in physical education, reducing the negative experiences is critical[18]. Even those expressing positive or neutral comments often tended to

describe physical education experiences that were neither educational nor developmentally appropriate. Such opinions should not be written off as mere complaints by couch potatoes. They deserve serious thought, for as McCullick, Metzler, Cicek, Jackson, and Vickers[27] reported, even elementary school-age children have been shown to accurately evaluate the teaching ability of physical educators.

The exploration of the emerging themes yielded some actionable information. A minuscule number of posts called for the abolition of physical education, but many more posters expressed the need to improve fitness levels and reverse the rising obesity trend—and they believed that schools should play a role. The calls for more choices in curriculum, grouping, and grading should be encouraging to physical educators as it signals a desire to improve physical education. Apparently, many parents and students would embrace some of the choice programs supported by the research[12],[20].

As always, there are some barriers that will challenge physical educators. One in particular is the widespread belief that grading in physical education should be based on effort and behavior. It seems imperative that physical educators be able to explain to parents, students, and community leaders that skills can be learned with instruction and practice and then to offer quality instruction and adequate time for practice. With practice, even the most non-athletic person can normally learn to perform fundamental movement skills at the associative phase[40]. It is also important that physical educators instruct and assess skills in all three learning domains[14],[30]. Physical educators must stop grading based on attendance, behavior, dress, and attitude; they must educate students and parents about the drawbacks of such approaches. In addition, physical educators must educate all involved. Instruction and assessment cannot consist of one fitness test or one skill evaluation.

It is to be hoped that a clearer understanding of the opinions and attitudes surrounding grading in physical education will lead to better experiences for all concerned. Perhaps, some of the difficulties faced by teachers as they oversee the grading process and some of the dissatisfaction experienced by students will disappear when the quality of physical education is improved and when the general public has a better understanding of what quality physical education truly is. Some of the problems associated with grading in physical education can be overcome, leading to a more meaningful experience for students[11],[15]. Even as this paper focuses on grading, the hope is that eventually issues related to grading will be minimized so more time and effort can be directed toward a rich curriculum and instruction. Students are more motivated to learn when driven by internal wants and needs rather than by external forces such as grades[21].

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