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Perceptions of PE and Sport in Singapore - some preliminary findings

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Abstract

1364 students (687 girls and 677 boys) completed a 26 item attitude scale using a Likert scale format. The questionnaire assessed attitudes towards the status of PE, intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of sport, winning and losing, excellence, and the importance of activity. It was found in this pilot study that PE is ranked more important than ECA, Religious Knowledge, Geography, Art, Commerce, Music, and Literature, but less important than English, Maths, Science, Second language, and History.

The perceived importance of PE amongst males and females declines markedly between the ages of 12 and 16 years. Amongst males the decline is less apparent than amongst girls however. At the pivotal age of 16 years, when most take external exams, the boys re-new their interest.

There is a conflict between the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the sample and the focus on winning in sport. It is concluded that there is an over-emphasis on extrinsic rewards in schools in Singapore.
PERCEPTIONS OF PE & SPORT IN SINGAPORE - SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

by N G Aplin
CPE
PERCEPTIONS OF PE & SPORT IN SINGAPORE - SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

A 26 item attitude scale using a Likert format was administered to a Secondary School. The sample represented 94.4% of the population. The questionnaire was developed to assess the attitudes of pupils towards a number of topics including PE, intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of sport, winning and losing, excellence and so on. See appendix 1.

Being a relatively short scale with so many topic areas, there can be no claim for content validity. The format was shown to two colleagues for appraisal.

In addition to the attitude scale, an attempt was made to elicit the pupils' perception of the status of PE within the School curriculum. Each respondent selected the six subject areas perceived to be the most important from a list of fifteen. See appendix 2.

The results of this pilot study are examined in their own right, and it is hoped that the process of data collection and analysis will provide the basis for a more valid study of other schools and sporting institutions.

Discussion relating to PE and the results of Question 1.

1. Regard for PE is high relative to a number of examination subjects, eg. Literature, Religious Knowledge and Geography. See appendix 3.

2. There appears to be no significant difference in the perceptions of boys and girls taken as whole groups.

3. The Principal of the School attributed the results to recent 'awareness' activities, ie. the visit of guest speakers during a Health and Fitness week, and to the diligence of a largely CPE trained PE Department, who had been establishing a new programme over a period of two years.

4. The Sports Secretary, in part, attributed the results to a factor of determination to treat the subject seriously, and in part to the maintenance of discipline. If the teachers show they mean business, then the pupils begin to acknowledge the importance of the Subject. To sustain the programme there was a need for ECA to complement PE.

5. Perceptions of the importance of PE change with age. See appendix 4. And there may be differences between the sexes. A longitudinal study over a period of 5 - 6 years would be necessary to properly confirm or disprove the findings.

(i) Early enthusiasm (42-50% in Sec 1) gradually drops, though more for the girls than the boys. Is this because the attitudes are being shaped by contact with older students, teachers and parents who see less value in PE than they do in exam subjects?
(ii) To what degree does PE serve to reinforce society's definition of adolescent gender roles? Are boys more likely to sustain their interest because the tasks and challenges of PE fit the male model of development as typified by assertiveness, competitiveness, group cohesiveness, confidence, etc? When the girls reach the age of 16, are they concerned with developing and presenting traits usually associated with femininity, traits which they feel rightly or wrongly run counter to those which can be developed in PE?

(iii) According to the Sports Secretary, the low male figures at 14 and 15 might be attributed to the effect of streaming and a lopsided balance of numbers in a class creating a difficult learning environment for the two sexes.

(iv) Additionally the pupils at the higher secondary levels, not having benefitted as much from the change in PE programme, may have hardened some negative attitudes towards PE during their period at school.

(v) Are girls more exam oriented at this age? Are they more task oriented and single minded than the boys are about exams?

(vi) From the age of 17 onwards the sample size decreases rapidly, but there does seem to be an upswing in positive response to PE. The boys may becoming more aware of the approach of National Service and the need for fitness.

CONCLUSION

From the data and the informal interviews with staff and Principal, there is evidence to suggest that this secondary school ('average' - in the words of the Sports Secretary) is confronting the problem of promoting a valuable non-examination subject, and is aspiring to develop a functional and progressive system of PE.

It will be interesting to see whether the data here provides enough information to establish a 'model of PE status' which is capable of being used to predict the situation in other schools.

Discussion relating to sports and the results of Question 2.

INTRODUCTION

Examples can be quoted from recent sporting events in Singapore that bring to light a clear difference in attitudes towards the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of sport.

(i) A rugby team is instructed by the coach to lose a preliminary round of a tournament in order to gain entry into a division where success, ie. winning a trophy, is seen to be more likely.
(ii) A squash team puts a 'sacrificial lamb' in to play against the strongest seed in the opposing team.

These 'strategies' are adopted with the objective of winning a contest, or of proceeding to a further round. Sometimes the plan works and sometimes the plan backfires.

I would like to support the notion that regardless of the actual result, sport and the development of young players is harmed by these practices, which can erode the intrinsic foundation of sporting participation (Lepper and Greene 1975) by over emphasizing:

a) the idea of winning which therefore becomes synonymous with excellence and success; and

b) the search for reward and enhanced status.

Instant gratification but withering satisfaction seems to be the combined products of this approach.

Individuals and teams learn to attribute their successes and failures to external, unstable factors like luck (Weiner 1974) as they do not get the chance to demonstrate ability and effort. The coach's game plan may deny the player the chance to fulfil playing potential, and may also reduce the motivation to perform.

Winning is a pleasant experience, and the reward of a trophy or prize seems desirable. But the benefits may be short lived. Rewards need to flow in regularly to sustain behaviour, but if for some reason, reward ceases then so can the desire to continue with the activity.

The main source of motivation in schools PE and ECA programmes should not be extrinsic rewards and reinforcers but intrinsic motivation.

Competency and Self-determination are the key ideas (Deci 1975) and the teachers should seek to set challenges through goal setting for example, as a means of encouraging these concepts to evolve and develop.

The data collected from the secondary school survey would seem to indicate that a conflict exists between the use of extrinsic rewards and attitudes towards winning. See appendix 5. The conflict leads to confusion and may in fact tend to distort a balanced view of the nature of sport.
On the one hand the response indicated that the pupils disagreed with the statement that winning is the most important part of playing games. Perhaps indicating that playing for intrinsic reasons such as satisfaction, challenge, self determination, involvement, loss of self-consciousness and the absence of extrinsic rewards (Czikszentmihalyi 1975) are the main motivators. On the other hand the pupils agreed that more prizes should be given to winners.

These results seem contradictory to me.

It should be emphasized at this point that a clearer and more objective evaluation must be attempted with a larger inventory and a wider range of questions to enable a factor analysis to be completed.

I agree that in certain circumstances extrinsic rewards may add to intrinsic interest. If a reward conveys information about competency then intrinsic motivation increases. However the excessive use of plastic prizes, which serve as consolation to the runners-up, decreases intrinsic motivation, because the message is given that you are not as good as the winner. The instant or immediate gratification is short lived.

Finally extrinsic rewards may convey information to the recipient that they do not have direct control or responsibility over personal behaviour. This also serves to decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci 1975)

In my opinion, society and that includes the schools in Singapore, seems to be overemphasizing the use of extrinsic reward to motivate students to play and perform. As in many countries the notion of 'win at all costs' is spreading through all levels of education. Excellence should not become synonymous with the pursuit of material gain and status.

The leading editorial in the Straits Times, 1 March 1990 acknowledges the need for better balance.

"... excellence is, in itself, an intrinsically worthwhile goal to pursue ....... excellence should be pursued for its own sake. In striving to be the best that one can be, the concern should be the pride in doing a job well, not just the reward that comes with it."

".... getting Singaporeans to be at peace with themselves without being too concerned with material reward and how they compared against another person is not easy. The switch will take time."
References

Deci, E.L. (1975) Intrinsic Motivation
New York: Plenum

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975) Beyond Boredom and Anxiety
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Lepper, M.R. & Greene, D. (1975) Turning play into work

Morristown, N.J: General Learning Press
A survey undertaken at a Secondary School

Age Range 12 - 21

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Enrolment

Population 711 734 = 1445

SAMPLE 687 677 = 1364

SAMPLE = 94.4% of Enrolment
1. Look at the list of subjects below.

Art  Commerce  ECA  English  Geography  History  Home economics
Literature  Maths  Music  PE  Religious knowledge  Science
Second language  Technical subject

DRAW a CIRCLE around EACH of the SIX most important subjects.

2. Each of the statements below has FIVE possible responses, ie:-

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<th>Neutral (N)</th>
<th>Disagree (D)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (SD)</th>
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Please CIRCLE ONE response only. There are NO right or wrong answers.

a) PE is the most popular subject in school

b) Winning is the most important part of playing games.

c) The risk of injury is worth it when I think about the enjoyment I get from sport.

d) PE is a very important subject.

e) When I leave school I will play more games and sports.

f) I do not enjoy PE.

g) More time should be devoted to PE in school.

h) PE should be made into an 'exam' subject.

i) More prizes should be given to winners of games and competitions.

j) Girls enjoy PE just as much as boys do.
k) PE is the period when I can get fit and healthy.

l) One day I would like to represent Singapore in a sport.

m) Team games are dangerous.

n) I enjoy swimming at the beach.

o) Gymnastics is harder to do than long distance running.

p) My parents do not like me to play ball games for ECA.

q) What I have learned in PE will be of great value to me when I leave school.

r) I look forward to my PE lessons.

s) Playing team games is not a good way to become fit and healthy.

t) Learning to swim is not important.

u) Playing sport only creates conflict and enemies.

v) Learning about human movement in PE is just as important as learning Maths or English or Science.

w) Competition is only satisfying when you win.

x) PE is not important in the eyes of most students.

y) PE should be 'fun'.

z) When I leave school I would like to become a PE teacher.
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Change of Perceived Importance of PE With Increase in Age

% of Sample

Age

male = x
female = o
"Winning is the most important part of playing games"

No. of Responses

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<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<th>Disagree</th>
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"More Prizes Should be Given to Winners of Games and Competition"

No. of Responses

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<th>Agree</th>
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"PE is the most popular subject in school"

"PE is a very important subject"

"I do not enjoy PE"

"I look forward to my PE lessons"

"PE should be fun"

"More time should be devoted to PE in school"

"PE is not important in the eyes of most students"

"PE should be made into an exam subject"
"Winning is the most important part of playing games"

"More prizes should be given to winners of games & competitions"

"Competition is only satisfying when you win"

"The risk of injury is worth it when I think about the enjoyment I get from sport"

"Team games are dangerous"

"My parents do not like me to play games for ECA."
"One day I would like to represent Singapore in a sport"

"When I leave school I would like to become a PE teacher"

"Girls enjoy PE just as much as boys do"

"Gymnastics is harder to do than long distance running"

"Playing sport only creates conflict and enemies"

"Learning about human movement in PE is just as important as learning Maths, English or Science"
"PE is the period when I can get fit and healthy"

"Playing team games is not a good way to become fit and healthy"

"I enjoy swimming at the beach"

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