Primary school children’s reflections on Physical Education lessons: An attributional analysis and possible implications for teacher action

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**Abstract**

The thoughts and feelings of preadolescent children attending three primary schools in the West of England about reasons for doing well or not doing well in Physical Education lessons were explored by means of an open-ended set of questions drawn from attribution theory. A further aim was to seek suggestions from the children of ways in which Physical Education (PE) lessons could be improved and refer these to the attention of teachers. Striking differences were found in the attitudes and attributions of girls and boys, with the latter more likely than the former to identify success in terms of some form of physical demonstration of ability. Whilst both sexes identified a positive attitude as associated with success, boys were more likely to look for signs of health or physical fitness, whereas girls were more impressed by effort and evidence of a learning orientation. These attributions held also for perceived lack of success. However, the notion of effort itself seems likely to hold different meanings for boys and girls. Although lesson enjoyment was seen by a significant number of children as a key factor leading to success, the pupils, on the whole, tended to attribute both success and failure to internal, changeable, controllable factors.

1. Introduction

Much of the research into thinking has tended to concentrate mainly upon the activity itself rather than its area of focus. A major consequence of this is that the bulk of articles in journals such as *Thinking and Creativity* describe investigations into different aspects of thinking or results of attempts to improve thinking skills and strategies. Relatively few articles are directed towards what people are thinking about. It can be argued, therefore, that an important dimension of the thinking process, i.e. its outcomes, is in danger of being overlooked. This is true at every level, including an area of potentially great significance in the thoughts that children have about their development and educational experiences. One current example of the value to be gained from asking children their views is demonstrated by the findings of the research carried out by the present authors and others into children’s reflections on the transition from primary to secondary school (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005, 2007).

An increasing number of research studies are beginning to indicate that children’s thoughts about different curriculum subjects can help to throw light upon ways in which the teaching of these subjects can be made more meaningful (Walker & Logan, 2008). As a study by Burden and Nichols (2000) revealed, even attempts to introduce the study of thinking into the curriculum can be improved as a result of student feedback. Similar outcomes have resulted from studies into student reactions to mathematics (Prawat & Anderson, 1994), literacy (Atkinson, 2006) and a variety of other curriculum areas (Erickson & Shultz, 1992). The study to be described here will be concerned with primary school pupils’ thoughts about

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Physical Education, as this is an area of the curriculum that has received considerable interest in the media and at government level (DfES, 2004; Green, 2008), but which has been relatively under-researched.

The most common approach to issues of this nature has been to construct multiple-choice questionnaires and administer these to large cohorts of young people, usually at secondary school level or beyond (Dismore & Bailey, 2004; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). This approach can produce valuable results but is also limiting in that the questionnaire items themselves are specified by the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the actual or predominant thoughts of the recipients, especially those of a younger age. In seeking to carry out a more open-ended form of enquiry, a more ‘grounded’ approach was considered necessary, whereby a specific psychological perspective was taken to exploring the sense that primary school children were making of their PE lessons. In this instance the theoretical perspective that has been chosen is that of attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), which seeks to throw light on the reasons that people attribute to their successes and failures on various activities.

2. The current status of Physical Education in the English National Curriculum

The Association for Physical Education (AfPE, 2008) has defined Physical Education as the ‘planned, progressive learning that takes place in school curriculum timetabled time and which is delivered to all pupils. This involves both ‘learning to move’ (i.e. becoming more physically competent) and ‘moving to learn’ (e.g. learning through movement, a range of skills and understandings beyond physical activity, such as co-operating with others). The context for the learning is physical activity, with children experiencing a broad range of activities, including sport and dance.’ According to AfPE (2008) the aim of Physical Education is to develop physical competence so that all children are able to move efficiently, effectively and safely and understand what they are doing. The outcome—physical literacy (see Whitehead, 2007) is as important to children’s overall development as literacy and numeracy.

Outside the Physical Education profession some people still think of Physical Education as gymnastic activities typically taught in a gymnasium or school hall or simply sporting activities, essentially a series of practical activities. However, a good quality Physical Education curriculum even in the primary curriculum involves children actively engaged in planning, performing and evaluating through a range of activities including dance, games, gymnastic activities, swimming, and if possible athletic activities and outdoor and adventurous activities (DfES, 1999). This wide ranging curriculum is very challenging for primary school teachers to deliver (Talbot, 2008) particularly because limited time is devoted to initial teacher training, a situation once described by Evans, Davies, and Penney (1997) as a national disgrace. Today the situation is no better (Caldecott, Warburton, & Waring, 2006), with some trainee teachers experiencing fewer than 10 h of Physical Education in their initial teacher training programmes.

Recent considerations of the value of Physical Education (Green, 2008; McNamee, 2005) have comprehensively covered the fundamental issues involved in understanding the nature and purposes of Physical Education as a school subject. As Green points out, the debate is captured and typified in official documentation which underpins the curriculum in state landed in this world they might be surprised that pupils play any part in the learning process as there is such a dearth of evidence of pupils’ views on Physical Education in the literature. However, since 2002 the Education Act has required all schools to consult with students and, more recently Ofsted inspectors have as part of their brief to report on the degree to which schools seek and act upon the views of learners (Ofsted, 2006). Moreover, the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) has indicated a number of significant reasons for pursuing learner voice initiatives, including raising achievement, increasing learner engagement, encouraging responsibility and improving the quality of teaching (Hudson, 2007).

3. Pupil perceptions on the learning process

It has been increasingly recognised that pupils’ views on schools and their learning experiences within them can provide valuable insights into the process of education. Writing just before the turn of the century, Laws and Fisher (1999) reiterated Dyson’s earlier claim (1995) that students are rarely consulted about their views on education despite their central position within it. As Moyles et al. pointed out, ‘The need arises to recognise the voice of the child, the learner, the majority group within education, the actual consumer of educational resources, and the group with no formal power to influence the curriculum!’ (1998, p. 219). Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2002) wonder why adults in many cultures have kept children isolated and have been reluctant to regard children’s views as worthy of respectful consideration. Indeed, Dyson (2006) reminds us that if aliens landed in this world they might be surprised that pupils play any part in the learning process as there is such a dearth of evidence of pupils’ views on Physical Education in the literature. However, since 2002 the Education Act has required all schools to consult with students and, more recently Ofsted inspectors have as part of their brief to report on the degree to which schools seek and act upon the views of learners (Ofsted, 2006). Moreover, the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) has indicated a number of significant reasons for pursuing learner voice initiatives, including raising achievement, increasing learner engagement, encouraging responsibility and improving the quality of teaching (Hudson, 2007).
Although by no means an avalanche, more recently a number of studies have begun to explore the attitudes of pupils across a wide range of ages and abilities towards various aspects of the curriculum and its implementation (Atkinson, 2006; Blatchford, 1996; Harris, Wallace, & Ruddock, 1995; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Ruddock & Mc Intyre, 2007; Flutter, 2007). As yet, however, studies of pupils' thoughts and feelings about Physical Education in the primary phase appear to be few and far between, since most studies of students' attitudes toward Physical Education have been conducted with students in the secondary phase of education. Following an early small-scale study by Birtwistle and Brodie (1991) of the attitudes of primary aged children towards the outcomes of the subject, Shropshire, Carroll & Yin, 1997 investigated the attitudes of almost one thousand primary school pupils, looking at pupils' general interest in the subject, how the teacher of Physical Education was perceived by the children and the organisation of the curriculum. They noted gender differences and found that at the age of 10–11 years the boys were significantly more interested in the subject than the girls and that they were less affected by environmental factors such as cold or physical discomfort. The girls in this study had more positive attitudes toward the teacher than the boys and were less concerned about the organisation of the curriculum.

A cross-cultural investigation by Dismore and Bailey (2004) into the attitudes of over three thousand children between the ages of 7 and 18 in three different countries (England, Japan and Columbia) towards PE and School Sport (PESS) found that the vast majority of the respondents in each country expressed positive or very positive feelings towards the subject. The main aims of the study were to gain information on student feelings towards PESS and whether these changed as they grew older, their perceptions of their own ability at the subject, how important they considered PESS to be compared with other school subjects, and what they felt they gained from participating in PESS. Data were collected by means of a brief questionnaire directed towards obtaining student perceptions related to these aims.

Despite the complex nature of the responses to this questionnaire, particularly with regard to the differences between sex, age and nationality, what emerged clearly was the generally positive attitudes expressed towards PESS across ages and genders, the tendency for boys and younger children to rate their physical abilities highly, in contrast to the lack of importance attributed to PESS in comparison with other curriculum subjects. Whereas few students from any country credited PESS with contributing to their success in other subject areas, a general consensus was expressed that PESS contributed to the students' health and fitness, preparation for sports competitions, and lifelong physical activity as potential outcomes.

What each of these studies has in common is an implicit set of beliefs that attitudes are important in influencing people's behaviour (viz. Ajzen, 2002; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and that gaining insight into pupils' attitudes about different aspects of PE can be a valuable means of finding enhancing those pupils' learning experiences and accomplishing the aims outlined above.

With this in mind, the study to be described here is part of a wider study aimed at exploring the attitudes of pupils at both primary and secondary school level towards Physical Education, with regard to its popularity in comparison with other curriculum subjects, and its perceived broader value in children's lives. More specifically, a further aim was to investigate the reasons that pupils attributed to their perceived successes and failures in PE and what, if anything, they felt might be done to help them improve, and to consider how this information could be of potential value to those designing and implementing the Physical Education curriculum.

4. Attribution theory

The fundamental premise of attribution theory is that people are constantly seeking to make sense of their lives and to find explanations for why they do or do not do well in activities that they consider to be worthwhile. The reasons to which they attribute their successes and failures are assumed to have a subsequent effect on their future performance in similar activities. In his early writings, Weiner, one of the originators of the construct, suggested that most people's attributions could be subsumed under four headings, ability, effort, task difficulty and luck (Weiner, 1986). At the same time, each of these attributions was considered to be affected by whether a person saw them as fixed or open to change (the flexibility dimension) and whether they considered them to be controllable or not (the controllability dimension). If an attribution aspect was considered controllable, there could also be a variation in whether they saw the control as being internal or at the mercy of some outside force (the locus dimension). Thus, ability might be conceived as being fixed and uncontrollable, as has been the case, for example, with IQ testing, or as flexible and internally controllable, as is the case with more recent views on intelligence (Dweck, 1992; Feuerstein & Falik, 2000; Feuerstein & Kozulin, 1995). A later addition to the theory has added the further dimension of globality, whereby an attribution might be viewed as relating to all aspects of an activity or merely to some specific aspect. For example, some people might consider themselves lacking in all sporting ability whilst others might see themselves as lacking ability in some sports but not in others (Biddle, 1993).

The basic tenets of attribution theory have been applied to a range of endeavours, including sport and different aspects of education (Bar–Tal Goldberg & Knaani, 1984; Biddle, Hanrahan, & Sellars, 2001; Biddle & Murie, 2001; Farmer & Vispoel, 1990; Grove & Pargman, 1986; Whitley & Frieze, 1985; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). One research finding of significance has been that males and females tend to differ in their attributional styles, with females typically demonstrating self-deprecating attributes and males demonstrating self-enhancing attributions (Deaux, 1985; Farmer & Vispoel, 1990; Gaeddert, 1987; Hendy & Boyer, 1993). There appears to be a tendency for females to make internal attributions for not doing well at an activity, whereas males make more external attributions (Wisniewski & Gaeir, 1990). By contrast, males have been found to show a tendency to make internal attributions for their success whilst females are more likely to make external attributions (White, 1993). Moreover, although age is likely to be an important variable in
the development of attributions and attributional style (Williams & Burden, 1999; Wisniewski & Gaier, 1990), few studies appear to have carried out systematic research on this factor.

We were therefore interested in exploring whether preadolescent children were capable of reflecting upon their PE lessons and explaining coherently why they felt that some people responded better than others to this important aspect of the curriculum. More specifically, we wished to discover whether the ‘self-deprecation’ tendency of females found in previous studies operated from an early age. Finally, we wondered whether the pupils themselves could suggest helpful ideas to their teachers as to how their PE lessons could be improved.

5. The present study

The purpose of this small-scale study was to investigate children’s ways of construing what it meant to be good or not at PE in school and what they perceived to be the reasons why some of their peers were more successful in this aspect of their schooling than others. We also wanted to explore how far young children saw this open to change and how this might be achieved. Children attending three primary schools in the south-west of England were asked to provide up to three written responses to each of the following six questions. Parental permission was first obtained for the children to take part in the study, but each child was also informed that participation was entirely voluntary and completely anonymous. Sixty-eight pupils (37 girls: 31 boys) aged between 10 and 11 provided between one and three responses to each question. The questions posed were as follows:

- How can you tell if someone is good at PE?
- How can you tell if someone is not good at PE?
- What are some of the reasons why people do well at PE?
- What are some of the reasons why people do not do well at PE?
- How do people get to be good at PE?
- What can teachers do to help children get better at PE?

The final set of responses was analysed independently by the researchers and grouped according to the method of constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1968; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The groupings were then compared and a 95% concordance rate achieved. Ambiguous responses were allocated to specific groupings as a result of discussion or were set aside. In this way the numerical allocations and percentages shown in the following tables were arrived at. No attempt has been made to carry out any form of statistical analysis due to the qualitative nature of the responses and the process of analysis, but trends have been noted where these appear to be in a significant direction.

6. Results

6.1. Indications of doing well

In response to the question of how the pupils could tell if someone was good at PE, by far the majority of their responses made reference to some form of demonstrable ability or prowess. Nearly 40% of the boys’ responses to this item indicated this as compared to 25% of the girls’ responses. Taking a positive attitude was also viewed as important by both girls and boys (just under 20% of responses), and a similar percentage cited visible health and/or fitness. This was more clearly seen as an attribute by boys (22.1%) than by girls (15.3%) however. The girls were much more impressed by observable effort than the boys (16.7: 10.5%), and, even more by the perception of some kind of involvement in the learning process (16.7%) than were the boys (4.6%). A small number of responses of both girls and boys (6.3%) referred also to some form of group orientation.

6.2. Indications of doing badly

Indicators that a person was not good at PE were seen to be more open to change in that lack of effort (31.4% responses), identified almost equally by both girls and boys, and showing a negative attitude (23.4%) were seen as more significant than poor health or obvious lack of ability. However, twice as many girls’ responses cited a negative attitude or unwillingness, to learn, whereas a much greater percentage of boys’ responses identified poor health/lack of fitness. Only one in 10 of the total responses indicated that an obvious lack of ability was seen to be a reason for lack of success in this area.

These results indicated that these preadolescent students are clear in their perceptions of what it means to be good or not at PE. However, rather different emphases are placed upon indicators for doing well or not, i.e. they are not seen as opposite sides of the same coin. Moreover, clear-cut differences also emerge here between the perceptions of girls and boys.

A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveal that whereas demonstrable ability is seen as the main indicator of doing well at PE (an internal and apparently fixed attribute), but more significantly by boys than girls, failure to do well is much more likely to be attributed by both boys and girls to lack of effort (an internal, flexible, controllable attribute). Attitude towards the subject and health/fitness are seen to be significant indicators of both success and failure, but a different emphasis is placed
upon each of these sets of attributes by girls and boys. It would appear that boys are more likely than girls to emphasise physical attributes, whereas girls focus more on the need for cognitive involvement in the set activities.

6.3. Reasons for doing well

Further light is thrown on these success/failure indicators by the student attributions provided in response to the next two questions. Both girls and boys view effort as the main reason for doing well, with more than half the responses citing this as the main route to success. This suggests that ability in PE is likely to be seen as a flexible and controllable aptitude, in sharp contrast to more traditional perspectives which view ability as immutable. If replicated, this kind of finding could be both helpful and enlightening to teachers attempting to bring about positive changes in their students’ understanding of and involvement in PE.

However, it should be noted that a closer analysis revealed that effort itself is a complex construct which needs to be regarded in somewhat different ways. Firstly, there is the general aspect of trying harder, identified more or less equally by both girls and boys in 36% of the effort related responses. This is in contrast to more focused effort directed towards some form of activity training (21% of effort related responses), compared again with effort which is more strategy focused (listening, focusing, concentrating), indicated in 26% of effort related responses. In these respects the girls were much more likely to refer to strategy focused effort than the boys, who tended more to cite general effort and training.

Ability, on the other hand, was not identified as some form of inborn immutable trait, but more in terms of effort related activity such as physical ‘wellness’ or fitness, which was seen by both girls and boys as being a major factor in whether or not they did well. This was considered as both internal and controllable, but seen by the boys as open to be affected by specific training for an activity, together with a healthy lifestyle, compared with girls’ focus on the learning process itself, coupled with a positive attitude. These findings should provide fair warning against the common practice in some attribution studies of drawing a simple dichotomy between ability and effort as if these were homogeneous, narrowly defined constructs, when they are likely to be complex, may well be closely associated and even overlap.

Secondly, the specific activities that are provided, or are on offer, play a significant part in these older primary school children’s reasons for why they performed well in PE. Two key elements here were whether the activities were seen as enjoyable (identified more or less equally by both girls and boys by 17% of the responses) and whether they involved group work of some kind (identified by 10% of the responses). Attitude and mood were also seen as playing a significant part in the success of a slightly higher proportion of boys’ than girls’ responses, but rewards or praise were mentioned by a rather more girls than boys girls (although the numbers here are small), and the quality of teaching was not mentioned at all (Table 3).

The pupils’ attributions for failure were very different. The major factor identified here (more or less equally in 24% of the responses) was lack of fitness. The girls were much more likely to identify general lack of effort or lack of focused effort for their perceived failures. The boys, by contrast, were more inclined to suggest that their failures were more likely to be due to their lack of preparation for specific activities, such as insufficient training. Both girls and boys cited poor group/teamwork also as a contributing factor to lack of success.

### Table 1
How can you tell?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability demonstrated</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/fitness</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observable effort</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning process evident</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group orientation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further light is thrown on these success/failure indicators by the student attributions provided in response to the next two questions. Both girls and boys view effort as the main reason for doing well, with more than half the responses citing this as the main route to success. This suggests that ability in PE is likely to be seen as a flexible and controllable aptitude, in sharp contrast to more traditional perspectives which view ability as immutable. If replicated, this kind of finding could be both helpful and enlightening to teachers attempting to bring about positive changes in their students’ understanding of and involvement in PE.

### Table 2
Negative indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of effort</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attitude</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health/lack of fitness</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obvious lack of ability</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwilling to learn</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Connected with both effort and preparation was again the amount of enjoyment gained from the activity. Low levels of enjoyment lead to lack of effort in participating in the activity or in preparing for it. Poor attitudes were identified more or less equally as leading to failure, and there were a few mentions of lack of skill and poor teaching or task setting.

Thus, the main reasons for not doing well at PE are explained by this group in terms of internal, changeable, controllable factors, such as not being fit, not making enough effort, not concentrating and not preparing, relating to the level of enjoyment gained from participating in any activity (Table 4).

### 7. Possible steps to success

In considering ways in which success in PE can be achieved, we can see that about one third of the pupils’ suggestions relate to focussed effort such as training or practice, but again this is more prevalent in boys than in girls. By contrast, girls are much more likely than boys to indicate that paying attention to how to learn is an important means of improvement. There is little difference in the number of suggestions in favour of general effort, such as trying harder, but whilst girls were slightly more likely to favour taking a positive attitude, boys tended to favour developing a healthy lifestyle. Only a small proportion of both sexes identified better teamwork as a way forward.

Here it would appear that boys are more likely to take an approach that is internally oriented and proactive (develop your own skills, become fit and healthy), whereas girls tend to see the way forward as depending upon the teacher, from whom they expect to learn how to improve, as well as taking a positive attitude towards the subject (Table 5).

When it came to considerations of what teachers might do to help their pupils improve at PE, both boys and girls considered it to be most important for the teacher to explain well and teach necessary skills, but boys were more likely than girls to prioritise this. Both sexes are equally likely to emphasise the importance of good organisation and a positive attitude on the part of the teacher, but whilst boys are more likely than girls to favour training and practice sessions, girls
Table 6
What can teachers do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach skills, explain</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize well</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a positive attitude</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give personal attention</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice, train</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make interesting/enjoyable</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

want PE lessons to be fun, and demonstrate a strong need for the teacher to give them some form of personal attention. A small proportion of both sexes identified also the need for more time to be devoted to this aspect of the curriculum. What seems to be emerging here, therefore, is a greater sense of independence on the part of the boys, with the girls being more dependent on the teacher for support and direction (Table 6).

8. Discussion

Firstly, it is very apparent that certainly by the age of 10 years school pupils have developed clear perceptions of their own as to what constitutes success or failure in PE lessons. As these may not necessarily match the expectations of their teachers, it would be as well for teachers to discuss this as part of the lessons themselves and as an important element of the self-assessment process.

Secondly, the responses of this small cohort of students indicated that they saw ability in PE to be far more open to change than is sometimes recognised and that teachers can do a great deal to improve the success rate of their pupils. Of particular interest here is the finding that whilst boys saw improvement as related to fitness and skills training, girls were more likely to identify the development of positive attitude and acquiring useful learning strategies. If this finding can be replicated with a larger, more representative sample, it suggests that a somewhat differential approach to encouraging greater effort to achieve success may be called for. Whilst health-related fitness is identified as a contributory variable, it plays a relatively insignificant place in these pupils’ minds in comparison with other factors, thereby suggesting that more work may well need to be done in advertising the benefits of PE in this respect. Several writers have suggested that particular benefit could be gained from making the aims and intentions of PE more explicit (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Graham, 1995).

With regard to specific advice on beneficial action that teachers can take, the teaching of skills and explanation of how to carry out routines reinforces the instructional nature of effective PE teaching, particularly if this is well organised and presented in a positive manner. Again it would appear that a differential approach to boys and girls may be beneficial, with boys expecting more in the way of training and practice, and girls requiring more individualised attention.

As has been pointed out before, success and failure are not concrete events (Frieze, Francis & Hansa, 1983); they are complex theoretical constructs which reside in the minds of individuals and vary according to situations, activities, age and even, it would seem, gender. The small-scale nature of the present study and the way in which the data was gathered and analysed makes it impossible to draw valid, generalisable conclusions from it. However, it does raise some interesting issues which may well be worth further investigation.

The results of this study confirm those of many others that Weiner’s original four sets of attributions was far too narrow in conception. Whereas ability and effort were identified by these pupils as important determinants of doing well at PE, only peripheral reference was made to task difficulty, and none at all to luck. Moreover, the concept of effort appears to be open to much wider interpretation than simply that of ‘hard work’, with both the specific nature and direction of the effort required playing an important part. The nature of the task itself is clearly seen as important by these young children, but the emphasis here is more upon enjoyment and group-related activity than upon perceived difficulty. Rather than luck, the participant’s attitude and mood are seen also to contribute to how well a person performs any PE task or activity. Very little mention was made to the quality of teaching nor to the influence of rewards and sanctions, except in so far as girls were more likely to see future improvement to depend upon the teaching-learning process than the boys.

One of the most striking findings arising from these results is that this group of English primary school children’s perceptions of ability in PE, and their suggestions for ways of improving that ability, show marked gender differences. Although the highest percentage of identifying features of success by both boys and girls was in a physical demonstration of ability, this appears to be much more likely to be the case for boys than for girls. Whereas both girls and boys are equally likely to rate a positive attitude towards PE lessons as indicative of ability in this domain, boys are more likely to look for signs of health or fitness whilst girls are more likely to be impressed by effort and by evidence of a learning orientation. Only a small percentage of both girls and boys identified some form of team or group orientation as a further indicator.
This suggests that boys may well be more impressed by behavioural manifestations of physical skill and bodily fitness, whereas girls tend to be influenced by their peers’ willingness to learn and make an obvious effort to do so. Although both the skills development and health-related aspects of PE are identified by the pupils as significant features, as also is displaying a positive attitude, it is noteworthy that only a small minority saw beyond this to recognise the importance of teamwork and group interactions.

As far as negative indicators were concerned, almost a third of both girls and boys were most struck by a perceived lack of effort, but whereas the boys also emphasised poor health and lack of fitness linked with behavioural indications of obvious lack of ability, the girls tended to reach their conclusions based on indications of a poor attitude and a lack of willingness to learn.

It is clear that teachers need to take account not only of the manifest physical ability of their pupils, but also of their attitudes towards and understanding of the values of Physical Education to their future development. Pupils will be more motivated if PE lessons are perceived as enjoyable and purposeful. The value of consulting the pupils themselves on such issues is made manifest here.

References


