

Increasing Participation in Girls Physical Education in Middle Level Schools

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### **Abstract**

Play like a girl! During the winter quarter of 2016, our research team completed a qualitative research project at Oakland Bay Junior High and Olympic Middle Schools in Shelton, Washington.. To better understand the participation rates of girls in the schools' physical education (PE) programs, we collected data through participant observation and interviews of teachers and students. Our essential research question asked: how do the school culture and staff responses affect girls' dispositions in physical education? Our research team broke into two groups, with two members working at Olympic Middle School while three members were at Oakland Bay Middle School. Splitting into to these groups allowed us to expand our research and be able to compare our principle findings. Through our research, we found that girls' dispositions and participation in physical education were influenced by the positive and consistent support they received from teachers and mentors.

*Keywords:* girl's physical education, K-12 competitive girls sports, girl's self-esteem

### **Introduction and Research Question**

In the state of Washington, each school has to follow education laws. According to our state policy, “School district boards of directors shall adopt policies that restore discipline to the classroom. Such policies must provide for at least the following: Allowing each teacher to take disciplinary action to correct a student who disrupts normal classroom activities, abuses or insults a teacher. Disciplinary action may include but is not limited to: Oral or written reprimands; written notification to parents of disruptive behavior, a copy of which must be provided to the principal.” (Washington State Legislature Classroom Discipline Policies, 2016). Last quarter, we completed observations and had evidence of teachers who did not follow this policy.

Now we want to expand our knowledge and see what other policies the schools are following because it does affect the student's behavior. If the teachers do not take disciplinary actions seriously, those students who are acting out in the classroom will carry those behaviors outside of that setting as well. As a result, our research question asks: how do the school culture and staff responses affect girls' dispositions in physical education? A disposition is a person's “usual way of feeling or behaving; the tendency of a person to be happy, friendly, and anxious (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english>).

### **Qualitative Research Methods**

During the course of our qualitative research at Olympic Middle School this winter quarter, we observed that the teachers are strongly engaged in their students' education. When a specific student is having trouble,, the teachers tend to separate students into small groups so they would discuss and help one another. Sometimes when volunteers visit, teachers try to include them by having them assist those that are behind. The school population consists 29.7% Latino/a, 3.4% American Indian / Alaskan Native and 60% white, with 52.3% male and 47.7% female. 68.3%

students are on free or reduced-price meals. Fifty-five percent of Olympic Middle School teachers have their Master's degrees (WA Office of the Superintendent, 2016).

While participating at Oakland Bay Middle School once a week, we also observed female students in their physical education (PE) classes. A problem a teacher brought to our attention was that the girls at the school have a hard time playing sports because it is not perceived as “feminine.” Three members of our research team are women basketball players (Gabi, Linda, and myself), so we hoped to observe that the teacher meant by that. We observed the gym classes and basketball practice. What we noticed was that the girls in gym class tend to play it safe when the boys were around, but when practice starts it was a whole different story. The girls were more aggressive. We also observed the boys a little bit, to see what they were up to. It appeared to us that at their age (12-15), the boys could be inconsiderate to the girls.

While volunteering at Olympic Middle School, we observed many different student behaviors. Some of the kids were very competitive, whereas some were not. We noticed that some students get very angry if they were not winning. For example, when they were playing tournament badminton, if you won, you got to advance and if you lost, you moved down on the list. Some of the students were very engaged in the sport, but others could not have cared less. There were just a few kids that seemed to give attitude to their teachers, but most of the others were very respectful to their faculty. The kids attending Olympic interacted with each other quite well. There were very few occurrences that involved bullying. Although, some kids did get made fun of by others. Overall, the kids seemed to get along pretty well and were fairly respectful to their teachers. They want to do well in PE because if they exceed standard, they get a “seal” which gives them the option to go to certain trips with the school, such as Wild Waves Water Park.

### **Literature Review**

According to Linda Darling-Hammond's research, she found that African American and other minority students in the United State schools are greatly separated and unequal. A few states have equal funding and access to the key educational resources needed for learning. This article discusses current disparities in educational access and proposes reforms needed to equalize opportunities to learn. It touches on the issues of social and economic challenges, educational gaps, importance of resources, access to good teachers, and a high quality curriculum. To find answers for answers, Linda Darling-Hammond used multiple methods such as interview, observation and field notes. She interviewed teachers, had them talk about their experience. She visited schools that are underfunded talked about her observation. She also took field notes and researched on the internet.

Women who have not finished high school are much more likely than others to be on welfare, while men are much more likely to be in prison. Nearly two-thirds of minority students attend predominantly minority schools, and one-third of Black students attend intensely segregated schools (90% or more minority enrollment), most of which are in central cities (p. 267). Public schools have no windows, playgrounds, biology labs have no laboratory tables, or usable dissecting kits. Meanwhile, children in neighboring suburban schools enjoy features like a 27 acre campus, an athletic program featuring golf, fencing, ice hockey, and lacrosse, and computers. Shortages of funds make it difficult for urban and poor rural schools to compete in the marketplace for qualified teachers as well as to provide the equipment and learning materials students need. When they don't find qualified teachers, they assign the least unqualified person. Darling-Hammond found out that money does make difference.

The more funds schools receive the easier for them to assign teachers that have their master's degrees. Class sizes tend to be smaller and we know that smaller schools and smaller classes make a difference for student achievement. Poor districts have a higher chance of hiring unprepared teachers. These teachers have had eight weeks of training. This doesn't solve the issue, in fact it increases the inequalities low-income and minority children experience. We are trying figure out why certain student misbehave. These children seemed to live in a poor communities. Darling Hammond's research was very accurate. She used *Savage Inequality* by Kozol as a reliable source. Another reason I trust this article is because she got her information from multiple sources.

What is the relationship between students sense of school community, poverty level, and student attitudes, motives, beliefs, and behavior among diverse elementary schools? According to a study entitled, "Schools as Communities, Poverty Levels of Student Populations, and Students' Attitudes, Motives, and Performance: A Multilevel Analysis" (Battistich Victor, Solomon Daniel, Kim Dong-il, Watson Marilyn, & Schaps Eric (1995), these authors did observation work in 24 schools. The goal was to observe and connect with the kids around the community.

Data collected was useful in trying to find a solution to these problems in the schools. The authors found that, in their view, students experience the school as a community when their needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence are met within that setting. Their basic assumption is that students' feelings of acceptance and support, combined with the feeling that they are making important contributions to the group, help create and maintain feelings, of identification with and commitment to, the group and acceptance of expressed goals and values.

This article is relevant to our research question because we are focusing on the behaviors and the support the kids are receiving at Oakland Bay in physical education. This article helped us tie something from our project to their assumption that the kids would be more successful if they

felt a part of the community and they had some purpose in the school. We agree the students could potentially be more successful if they could receive support from the schools and community, especially if they don't have that support system at home. This article proves that kids could be more successful with the right care and support.

### **Data Collection**

Shelton is very diverse and friendly community. Olympic Middle School is a school of about 500 students in grades six and seven. The students come from Bordeaux Elementary, Evergreen Elementary, and Mt. View Elementary. After they complete their education, these students attend Oakland Bay Jr. High for grades eight and nine. They are located in a newly constructed building that opened in 2004. The school has two parallel hallways, so it is very difficult to get lost. Entering the building during school hours, the distant chatter and horse play echoing down the long halls explain the sense of activities and energy in school. Our research team collected field notes and conducted informal interviews with teachers at both schools.

We worked with Mr. Poland (pseudonyms are used here) a highly energized teacher who consistently tries to help all of his students. His classroom walls are covered with geographical, world and United States maps. There also baseball and basketball posters, as well as inspirational posters that say things such as “Believe in Yourself” or “You Can Do It.” In the back of the class, there are three Apple computers, above them there are shelves filled with books. Mr. Poland seems to only use the chalkboard for daily agendas so students know what to do. They are bright and very curious.

Some students are clearly engaged and often give genuine insight, while others constantly interrupt or bother their neighbors. These kids often have to be separated or repeatedly told on an individual basis that they need to change their behavior. Sometimes they get sent to the hallways or

office. However, when all the students pay attention to Mr. Poland, it is amazing what they are capable of. One specific student usually gets kicked out of class because of his interruptions. He consistently blurs out random things. He sometimes makes fun of his classmates. When this student calms down, he is one of the brightest students in class.

We also observed Mrs. Baysinger, a teacher at Olympic Middle School. According to one of our research team members, Sammi, described one particular field observation in her classroom:

Olympic Middle School was very different than the junior high I attended. There isn't a lot of equipment for the kids to use. The kids were all curious as to who I was. There were 2-3 kids in each class (three classes) that asked me who I was. They came up to me and looked at me with a puzzled look. Several kids commented on my shoes. Watching the kids interact was fun for me, but also disturbing at times. Some of the kids are very competitive so they argue and get angry when they don't win. Several fights occurred between the students because one or the other accused someone of cheating. There was one boy in the class that Mrs. Baysinger informed me about as being trouble because he always got into arguments with children everyday at PE. She said everyday he ends up crying. She discovered that it is worse when she gives him attention when he is upset. So, she lets him get over it by himself. The other kids sometimes antagonize him so that makes him furious. When he gets upset he will talk to himself angrily/make comments to the other kids. Usually, after that, he goes in a corner to hide and pout.

Another member of our research team, Gabi, described her field observations at Oakland Bay Junior High School. She said,

I've been observing the Physical Education classes and the girls basketball team. Our main focus was the girls in these classes as well as the team. First off, the days we go in are known as their Challenge Day. On this day, they participate in a few physical tests. One test that most sticks out is the push-up challenge. Here the boys and girls split and are on opposite sides of the gym. The teacher plays a recording that instructs the kids as they do their push-ups. The count on the recording goes to 10, however, the boys only do 8 and the girls do even less at 5. Not only were the girls required less reps, they also had the option of doing modified push-ups or 'girl push-ups.' This significant gap says a lot about societal views on girls in physical education. But, what I noticed, especially in the second period class we see, quite a few girls do push-ups really well and some even have better form than most boys. I wonder if cutting the number of push-ups they do really affects them?

Another big observation I found, quite a few times girls are non-suits. A non-suit means that the person doesn't dress down for class. On all the Thursdays we went, girls would make up most of the non-suits. This also means that they are not allowed to participate in class activities, therefore losing credit. And the girls that are the non-suits, are ones that from first look, care a lot about their image. It just brings me back to the idea of girls and femininity and physical activity.

From the first classes our research team observed at the schools, we started to see a small division during free time (when the class was allowed to split and play whatever sport or activity they wanted). For the most part, the boys take over the main floor for basketball at both ends of the court. The first period we are in, there are little to no girls involved in these activities. However, in the second period, there are more girls integrated in with them. Once we started becoming involved

and playing with the boys, more girls started to join us. By participating, our research team hoped that it showed the girls that it is okay to be active, athletic and to show them that it is okay to be strong.

Another member of our research team, Linda, described her field observations at Oakland Bay Junior High School. She explained:

I have been working in the PE classrooms. My group and I have been primarily working with Mr. Niehl who is also the girls' basketball coach. While participating in the PE classes, there are many observations I have made. First off, every Thursday is test day this is where the girls and boys have to reach set limits of push-ups and sit ups while also running laps. The majority of the time, the Hispanic females consistently don't dress down. I linked this to some information another teacher had given us earlier in the year. Mrs. Close mentioned that the women of Oakland Bay feel they can participate in sports because they have to remain feminine. She specifically mentioned that Hispanic females are less likely to get involved because they have to uphold being feminine for cultural reasons. Another observation, I have made over the course of our work at Oakland Bay is that the boys were more open to talking to us and playing with us.

Since this is our second quarter working in the Shelton community and at Oakland Bay Junior High, we observed a number of interactions in the schools. Mrs. Close (a teacher at OBM) brought to our attention that the girls at the school shy away from sports because they want to be feminine. Since then, we have been observing the girls in the PE classes and we definitely can see what she meant by that comment. The girls look timid, scared, uninterested, cautious, and shy. We strongly believe this behavior is due to the fact that these girls have to be in a coed gym class.

During our interview with Mr. Neihl (gym teacher/girls basketball coach), he believed the girls would be more active and comfortable if they were in an all-girls PE class. For example, before our research team started helping out in the PE classes and girls basketball practices, Mr. Neihl said more girls started to participate. Before that, we observed majority of the girls sitting on the sideline during free time and would occasionally play around with a volleyball. Now, the girls have been trying to play basketball and they do not look as afraid as they once were.

### **Analysis**

In our research, we tried to figure out why some girls don't participate in PE such as basketball, soccer, dodgeball, baseball, catch the flag and other activities.. During PE tests, they do not compete with the boys due to their lack of confidence. The data showed us that both schools have similarities and differences. The students in Olympic Middle School are very competitive. They consistently dress down. One of the female students joined her male peers during PE tests because she wanted to beat another student. In order to do that, she joined the boys and she won. The Latina females students in Oakland Bay, consistently do not dress down. According to Spanish teacher, Mrs. Close explained, "The girls feel like they cannot participate in sports because they have to remain feminine." Specifically, Latina females are less likely to get involved because they have to uphold being feminine for cultural reasons.

Although they have some differences, the two schools have many things in common. The mission of both Olympic Middle School and Oakland Bay Junior High (as part of the Shelton School District) is to reach out and connect with each and one of their students by "fostering trusting and respectful relationships that acknowledge and address and unique needs abilities of each individual." They teach and reinforce the skills needed for academic success and provide curriculum that is both engaging and rigorous. They work with parents and community to inspire

and coach students to reach their potential. Instead of giving up, teachers at both schools search for the ideal way to teach them individually and as a group.

### **Recommendations & Conclusion**

Our findings and conclusions exceeded our expectations. During these past two quarters we have been working with the students, making observations and taking field notes. Our interviews helped us tie our research together. Mr. Neihl made a great comment. He strongly believes that. “The girls would excel more in physical education if they were separate PE classes than the boys.” Mr. Nelson who is a PE teacher at Olympic Middle School, made similar comment. We came to the conclusion that the girls would feel more comfortable, open, competitive, and happier if they were in an all-girls PE class because they would not feel pressured by the boys.

In a study by entitled, “Gender Issues in Physical Education: Female Students Perspectives and Experiences” published by the Health and Physical Education Council (2012) physical education is often required for girls until their freshman year of high school. After that, students can chose whether or not you want to take a PE class. Over 80% of female students do not take PE after the 10th grade. The article continues to reveal why manyt female students do not continue to enroll in physical education.

Many girls are uncomfortable in their PE class. They feel that they are judged by their peers. They feel like not only are they pressured to participate and pass the class from their teachers, but they also worry about their peers. Constant judgment can force girls to close up and not want to participate.

In conclusion, coed physical education classes seem to be the main source of the problem. If we can get the word out about how unhappy these girls are, we could really make a difference in not just their lives but girls after them. This research project really made us want to make a

difference in the schools. It just comes down to how we use this information to make a difference in the Shelton schools.

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