Incidence of Student Support for and Resistance to a Curricular Innovation in High School Physical Education

Gary D. Kinchin
University of Southampton

Mary O'Sullivan
The Ohio State University

While there have been frequent calls for reform in secondary physical education, little research has focused on the implementation and assessment of curriculum from the perspective of students. Drawing upon the theoretical frame of student resistance, the purpose of this study was to describe how high school students demonstrated support for and resistance to implementation of a 20-day curricular initiative termed a Cultural Studies unit. This approach consists of an integrated practical and theoretical study of sport and physical activity. Data were collected through student focus group interviews, student journals, nonparticipant observations, and informal conversations. Students responded favorably to the principles of Sport Education and the opportunities to critique issues of social justice. Such content was considered appropriate for physical education. Resistance to some aspects of the unit was both overt and covert. Meticulous and careful planning of content and choice of pedagogy to facilitate delivery is crucial to positioning a Cultural Studies unit in a high school program.

Key Words: student resistance, cultural studies, issues of social justice

There is a paucity of research on how students experience the curriculum (Erickson & Shultz, 1992) and respond to curricular initiatives (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Mac-an-Ghaill, 1992; Ruddock, 1986, 1991; Ruddock, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Shanks, 1994; SooHoo, 1993). Some have advocated the use of a qualitative paradigm to seek learners’ perspectives on new curriculum content (Corbett & Wilson, 1995).

Several studies have focused on the perceptions of students on issues of schooling (Denscombe, 1980; Mac-an-Ghaill, 1992; Nieto, 1994; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Ruddock et al., 1996; Shanks, 1994; SooHoo, 1993; Stinson, 1993). While some adolescents value teachers who care about and acknowledge them as learners (Phelan et al., 1992; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Stinson, 1993), some high school curricula are at odds with the experiences and backgrounds of many students (Nieto, 1994). Students speak of a passive role in learning and complain that teachers rely too much on textbooks. Research in physical education has revealed
that a number of students are alienated or bored and want teachers to make the content meaningful and coherent (Carlson, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Ennis & McCauley, 1996).

Secondary Physical Education Curricular Reform

Little research has focused on students' perspectives on the implementation and assessment of curriculum in secondary physical education. Secondary physical education has been criticized on the following grounds: the lack of relevance or meaning (Cothran & Ennis, 1999; Kirk, 1997; Tinning & Fitz Clarence, 1992); focus (Rink, 1993); inequity and dominance of the higher skilled and of males (Ennis, Cothran, Stockin, et al., 1997; Evans, 1993); and poor program quality (Locke, 1992). Several curriculum models have shown promise in their attempt to reform secondary physical education. Many students have spoken positively of Sport Education (Carlson & Hastie, 1997; Grant, 1992; Hastie, 1996, 1998; Siedentop, 1994). The Sport for Peace model, as an extension of Sport Education, has had a favorable reception among previously resistant and marginalized groups of students (Ennis, 1999; Ennis, Solomon, Satina, et al., 1999). There has emerged an interest in postmodern curriculum to provide students with the knowledge and skill for assessing inequalities in physical activity settings (Kirk & Tinning, 1990; Tinning & Fitz Clarence, 1992), though less is known about student responses to this format.

Student Resistance

The concept of resistance has been used to explain and interpret various student behaviors reflecting tension and conflict between school and the world beyond (Alpert, 1991). While some scholars have examined student resistance among the upper middle class (Alpert, 1991; Spaulding, 1995), most studies on resistance have centered on the oppositional behaviors of working class students to the norms and values of dominant societal groups (Erickson, 1984, 1987; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). From a neo-Marxist perspective, education and schooling are perceived as productionist (Giroux, 1983), and some students do not believe that education promises them a good future (Sun, 1995).

Student resistance to schooling and school reform has been identified as an important issue in contemporary education (Brookfield, 1991; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Sun, 1995). There is general agreement that resistance affects student performance in school (Anyon, 1981; Sun, 1995) as well as teacher instruction and attitudes toward learners (Alpert, 1991; Spaulding, 1995). Students have resisted activities they disliked, or activities that lacked challenge, were too difficult, or were perceived as boring (Cusick, 1992; Pauly, 1991; Spaulding, 1995). Larson and Richards (1991) spoke of resistant students skipping school or class, making fun of the teacher, or disrupting lessons.

Brookfield (1991) identified four reasons why students might resist change: (a) learning something new can be unsettling; (b) the teacher's expectations may be unclear; (c) the learners do not support the teaching method; or (d) the learning activities seem to have little connection or meaning for their own interests and concerns. Such perceived lack of relevance can annoy learners and lead to frustration, antagonism, and off-task behaviors including "goofing off" (Everhart, 1983).
Higginbotham (1996) classified student resistance into three types while examining their responses to multicultural and diversity issues. Vocal resistance occurred when students openly questioned or challenged the lesson content. Covert resistance occurred when students remained silent but disagreed with in-class issues. Absent resistance suggested an unwillingness to learn or an avoidance of the learning environment. Alpert (1991) identified several forms of student resistance including reluctant participation, not responding to the teacher’s questions, and arguing with the teacher. Students were observed expressing dissatisfaction with the teacher’s instructional approach and criticizing the teacher’s perception of content and evaluation policy. Resistance occurred due to tension between school and the adolescent student culture, as teachers had become alienated from the social and cultural elements of youth. Spaulding (1995) conceptualized modes of student resistance as either passive or aggressive. Passive resistance included interruptions by students, topic changes, ignoring the teacher, and partial student compliance, whereas aggressive resistance was more confrontational. Spaulding claimed that passive resistance served to delay or distract instruction whereas aggressive resistance prevented instruction.

Student Resistance in Physical Education

The concept of student resistance has rarely been the subject of inquiry in physical education. Some high school students expressed dissatisfaction with their physical education experiences, which led to alienation and avoidance of activity (Carlson, 1995), while some low skilled students chose not to participate at all (Ennis, 2000). Rovegno (1994) described one preservice teacher’s encounter with continual talking and off-task behavior among 11th- and 12th-grade students. The teacher retreated to a “curricular zone of safety,” limiting what content the teacher was willing or permitted to teach.

Using student resistance as a theoretical framework, the purpose of the present study was to describe ways in which high school students demonstrated their support for or resistance to the implementation of a new curricular initiative, termed the Cultural Studies unit, into their physical education program.

Method

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at an alternative high school in a low socioeconomic neighborhood in a large metropolitan midwestern city. At the time of the study approximately 630 students were enrolled in Grades 9–12, of which 53% were African American. The school mission is to prepare students for formal postsecondary education. Over 40% of students graduate with a grade point average of 3.0 and above, with 90% annually being accepted into 4-year college degree programs. The school operates on a block schedule consisting of four 77-minute periods. Physical Education is a required subject and each student attends 4 days a week for one semester in the 9th and 10th grades. Students receive one-fourth credit and a letter grade.

Students from one 9th- and one 10th-grade class were asked if they would volunteer for the study. They were informed that participation was voluntary, they had the right to refuse and, if so, they would still complete all educational require-
ments in the class but would not be interviewed or have class assignments used as data. Twenty-five students voluntarily participated in the study, 10 from Grade 9 and 15 from Grade 10. Fifteen students were African American and 10 were Caucasian. Informed consent was obtained from all students, the principal, and the school district. The study complied with the university's policies for conducting research with humans. To protect the identity of participants and settings, all names in this study are pseudonyms.

Unit of Study

One class of 25 ninth-graders and one class of 32 tenth-graders experienced a 20-day curricular form termed a Cultural Studies unit. The objectives and characteristics of this unit are listed in Table 1.

This approach consists of an integrated practical and theoretical study of sport and physical activity. Just over half the 20 sessions are devoted to physical activity. The practical component was delivered using Sport Education (Siedentop, 1994) with volleyball as the activity choice. The teacher placed all students on similar-ability teams of 5 to 6 players. The following roles were included: captain, vice-captain, coach, manager, warm-up leader, and statistician. All features of the Sport Education model were present except formal competition. In concert with Sport Education was a theoretical investigation of issues of sport in contemporary society (gender, body image, media representation of sport) and attention to the historical developments and geographical patterns of sport participation.

Volleyball also provided the context for this theoretical investigation. One feature of the unit was the development of critical consumers (Siedentop, 1995), that is, students who are aware of the "structural and social inequities in their local, regional, and national sport cultures" (p. 23). In achieving this aim, students had opportunities to present and defend their ideas on social justice through journal writing, class discussions, and projects. Complete or partial lessons devoted to

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<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Literate sportsperson</td>
<td>To become a critical consumer of sport and physical activity</td>
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<td>Competent sportsperson</td>
<td>To gain a local, national, and international perspective of sport</td>
<td>In-class discussion</td>
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<td>Enthusiastic sportsperson</td>
<td>To gain a historical appreciation of the development of sport</td>
<td>Teacher lecture and discussions</td>
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<td>Seasons</td>
<td>Student projects and homework</td>
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<td>Team affiliation</td>
<td>Student journal writing</td>
<td>Student presentations</td>
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Table 2  Outline of Two Sample Lessons From the Cultural Studies Unit

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<td><strong>Sport Education Session</strong></td>
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<td>• Student-led warm-up.</td>
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<td>• Teach the set.</td>
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<td>• In teams and practice setting (led by coach/captain).</td>
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<td>• Develop 3 v. 3 team practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Complete journal entry.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical Session</strong></td>
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<td>• Volleyball and sport media.</td>
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<td>• What is the role of the media?</td>
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<td>• What impact does the media have on the presentation of sport?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Complete newspaper assignment in teams on the coverage of sport (including volleyball) during the 1996 Olympic Games. Summarize findings and present to class. What do you notice?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Analyze and discuss findings related to sports covered and athletes featured in the newspaper by race, gender, and physical activity.</td>
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<td>• Whole-class discussion on newspaper assignment.</td>
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<td>• Set homework assignment.</td>
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<td>• In teams, discuss and plan attack and defense formations in lead-up to Festival.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Complete journal entry.</td>
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Theoretical concepts were conducted with students in their Sport Education teams either in the classroom, bleachers, gym floor, or an adjoining cafeteria where the teacher employed multimedia presentations, lecture, cooperative group work, and whole-class discussions. Outlines of two lessons are listed in Table 2.

All students were required to make presentations from three homework assignments: (a) a volleyball flyer; (b) a reaction to a volleyball article of their choice; and (c) a final project on an issue of social justice. All students kept a private journal to record their thoughts and observations during class.

The Teacher

A female physical educator delivered the unit. She had a master’s degree and 23 years of teaching experience. She had contributed to professional organizations, had teaching responsibilities in science, and had been the subject of several research studies on teaching and learning in physical education. She was the only physical educator in her building and had helped design the Cultural Studies unit.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered over 8 weeks using semistructured student focus-group interviews (Kreuger, 1988), student journal writing, nonparticipant observation of lessons, and informal conversations. Students were interviewed in seven focus
groups that convened prior to, at the midpoint, and at the conclusion of the unit. Focus groups comprised 2 to 5 members and interviews lasted 30 to 40 minutes. Six focus groups remained intact for the duration of the study. Exit interviews with two absentees from one group were held after a school vacation. The first interview enabled students to describe and critique prior physical education experiences. In later interviews the students offered their reactions to the new unit, commented on their in-class interactions with their teacher and peers, and discussed the teaching methods and content of the lessons. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

Fieldnotes were taken each day of the unit (Patton, 1990) and included a detailed description of the setting, the people, and an account of student reactions to the unit. Where possible, direct quotations or some substance of what people said was noted. Observer comments were placed in the margin relative to feelings, hunches, and initial interpretations, which continued after the lesson (Merriam, 1998). The teacher's grade book provided information on attendance and whether assignments were turned in. Students completed 17 journal entries in class, stimulated by questions on Sport Education, photographs or videotape of athletes, newspaper headlines, and sport ads. Informal conversations before or after class sought further reactions to the unit that might support or contrast observational, journal, or interview data. Responses were added to the fieldnotes.

Data gathered from interviews, journals, and fieldnotes were analyzed inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Repeated examinations of the data summarized segments of the data into preliminary categories (Merriam, 1998). Based on a comparison of the categories, a number of major themes emerged (Patton, 1990). Care was taken to ensure that all emerging themes were supported by the data while nondiscriminatory cases were also noted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the interpretation.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research must establish trustworthiness (Patton, 1990). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) stated that multiple data collection methods contribute to the trustworthiness of the data. The data were cross-checked to verify findings from more than one source. Time at the research site, time spent interviewing participants, and building sound relationships with individuals all contribute to trustworthy data (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). During the 8-week period most of the day was spent in the setting. In addition to observing approximately 25 hours of instruction, time was spent in informal dialogue with students before and after class, in the boys' locker rooms, and in the cafeteria and hallways during recess and lunch breaks. Member checks (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) were conducted three times. Participants were given copies of interview transcripts. The accuracy of the transcripts was verified and no substantive changes were suggested.

Results

The purpose of this study was, first, to identify ways in which students supported aspects of the Cultural Studies innovation, and second, to describe incidences or forms of resistance which became evident during the implementation of this initiative.
Support for the Cultural Studies Unit

Four major themes emerged: (a) Authenticity and meaningfulness of the experience; (b) Time for learning; (c) Relevance to life beyond school; and (d) Student ownership of their learning.

**Authenticity and Meaningfulness of the Experience.** Students expressed their support for several Sport Education outcomes they considered authentic. Rochelle claimed that working and playing together on her team was “how a professional team would [work] together” (Jnl. #15). A number of students referred to the inclusion of roles and the opportunities for leadership they presented:

> It is different in that you actually feel that you have a role to perform and that you are actually there [in class] for a purpose... it is nice to have responsibilities instead of just having to do your work, do the volleyball lesson. (Renee, Int. #2)

Michelle supported sustained team membership:

> I have really learned what a team is like... and since I have the role of captain I have learned leadership and I have learned that patience is really a virtue... I like the team idea. You know you have to be a team in order to accomplish something... I have learned I can work in a team. (Int. #2)

Students addressed the theoretical content they found most relevant and meaningful:

> I am glad Mrs. Littlemead gave us time to discuss this issue [gender]. It is a part of reality. It was something that needed to be addressed... it degraded women. (Nae’Nae, Int. #2)

Tim remarked:

> Because there is always going to be discrimination and there is always going to be problems arising... it is just when we were talking about the conflicts like the funding and the discrimination issues, sexual discrimination, racial discrimination... I mean we also touched on sexuality. I mean these are problems that you deal with in everyday life. When you turn on the TV, and there they are not just in sports but in the workplace. (Int. #3)

The lesson on body image also evoked some positive responses. Jeannette said she enjoyed “the last one [body image] because everybody was involved in it and you felt part of it in that the boys were sharing their opinions and the girls giving their opinion” (Int. #2). Otis said the body image volleyball lesson “showed us women are more like models when it comes to sport... I was not aware of this... and did not pay attention to how women’s outfits are kind of skimpy” (Int. #3).

Students discussed how discrimination in sport mirrored other contexts including their school. Some referred to lunchtime basketball:

Jaimee: Right now there are probably all guys out there [in the gym] playing basketball.

Teresa: If there is a girl out there, she is probably having a hard time trying to play.
Jaimee: If she [points to Keesha] was out there... I mean you should see the way she dribbles.

Keesha: If I do play with the boys, they say “pass it to the girl”... Why can I not be just another player instead of being the “girl?” I don’t like that. (Int. #3)

Jaimee discussed this matter in relation to the workplace:

I think that all the things we have been talking about with volleyball, like the way that women are treated, really apply to almost every sport. But it is also in the workplace. They always talk about how guys are promoted before girls and that they get paid more than girls. So I think that they [social issues] apply to all places and not just volleyball. (Int. #3)

Time for Learning. Many students indicated how the longer unit and sustained time with their team fostered their learning:

In the beginning it was like, “OK, let’s play, and we are on a team” [sardonically], but near the end everyone... it was like, “OK we need to do this and we are going to get it right. People realized that if someone couldn’t do something good as someone else, then we would pick up on that and help them with it and then this will make the team better. So I think we worked better... much better... in the second half.” (Tim, Int. #3)

Students talked of getting used to each other and feeling more comfortable:

At the beginning, we did not want to talk with each other, we did not really know each other, and after a while you got to know everybody and then you start to tell them what they needed to improve on and that was good. (Tamara, Int. #3)

For others, the persisting team membership had a positive impact on their skill improvement. Cassie noted.

We know each other’s weaknesses and we help each other get better and we encourage each other. All of us can serve now. In the beginning only two of us could serve, but now all can but one and she is working on it. (Jun. #13)

Relevance to Life Beyond School. Several students saw long-term relevance in their opportunities to cooperate as a team:

I think that you don’t just use some of these skills that we have learned here for sports. You will learn and use them in everyday life, like cooperating and working together. (Tamara, Int. #2)

Don Juan was the most skilled student in the 10th-grade class. Initially reluctant to help his peers, he summed up how his experiences would help him:

I talked to a lot of people that I did not know before... I made some new friends... I probably learned about kindness... I have learned to be more positive dealing with other people... At first I did not want to slow down for them because I just wanted to win everything I do... like toward the end I started giving good comments and stuff like that... that was cool. (Int. #3)
A Curricular Innovation

**Student Ownership of Their Learning.** The progressive transfer of responsibility and the ownership for learning within teams were positive factors as, "it got all of the kids involved and it was not like anybody was not doing anything" (Ralph, Int. #3). Tim, talking about his teacher, added:

Yes she kind of gave us the basic facts and then retracted herself and then let us learn on our own... we did a lot more student stuff by that I mean we did presentations, the tournaments. It was basically us running them... it has been a lot more student focused with the teacher kind of being taken out of the equation. (Int. #3)

**Forms of Student Resistance**

Forms of student resistance observed during the unit were divided into two categories: public forms of resistance (PuFR) and private forms of resistance (PrFR). The former consisted of indiscreet within-class student actions observable to the teacher and/or most of the students. The latter comprised discreet student actions which were typically covert and were not noticed by the teacher or most of the students.

**Forms of Public Resistance**

Three form of public resistance emerged: goofing off/talking out, interrupting the teacher, and overt completion of unrelated work.

*Goofing Off/Talking Out.* Students described goofing off as "making bad jokes," "making remarks about other people," "acting immature," "playing around," "not paying attention," and "flirting." Goofing off was a nonaggressive behavior which tended to occur when sitting:

Yeah. Some lessons when we have been doing bookwork, there have been times when we haven't nothing to do... there is time to mess about, talk, and fool about. (Craig, Int. #2)

Goofing off was also more common during some theory-based lessons: "Like I would be sitting talking with Craig or be messing with him or something like that. I would not be looking at the teacher" (Jason, Int. #3). Students claimed that conversation was rarely connected to the lesson:

Tim: Me and Maureen just filled that [computer presentation] with social time.

Researcher: What do you mean by that, Tim?

Tim: I was just sitting back there talking because I had seen it [computer presentation] a million times.

Researcher: What were you talking about?

Tim: What did you do last night? How was your weekend? You know, stuff like that. (Int. #2)

According to Tim, he was still able to follow the lesson:

Oh yes. I do it all the time. That was my entire middle-school career. They put us into little... our desks were in formations of, like, six... I would talk
and the teacher would notice I talked, but I also knew what was happen­
ing... when I was in classes they would say, "Tim what did I just say?" and I would repeat it exactly back to them. They got really angry... so it was doing one thing in one ear and listening to the teacher in the other. (Int. #2)

For Emmett, goofing off and talking out had been a regular feature of his schooling:

I have done it [goofing off] all my life, so I guess it is easy for me now... when she’ll pay attention to me, then it is hard... Just don’t get caught.... I just know how to do it. (Int. #3)

Interrupting the Teacher. Students interrupted the teacher more often during seated periods in the first half of the unit. Interruptions broke in on teacher-directed activity or instruction and temporarily disrupted the continuity of these lessons. When a student interrupted the teacher, others would begin talking. Interruption was then met with teacher desists and reprimands. When students persisted with interruptions, a number of the teacher’s sentences went unfinished:

[The teacher sends students to stretch] “You should be in your... [teacher is interrupted and does not finish her sentence. Multiple conversations are heard. The teacher tries to speak again and stops mid-sentence]: “Don’t forget, captains you... [does not finish]. If you need to know what your role is... [again she does not finish]. Students collect folders as the teacher moves to her office. (Fieldnote Lesson #5)

Talking among students was most common: (a) when the teacher stepped into her office or the equipment closet; (b) when students sat listening to the teacher talk; (c) when students completed assigned work; or (d) when the teacher was engaged in unrelated conversation with students. Interruptions were less common when students were watching videos, listening to their peers, or engaging in class discussions on social issues.

Overt Unrelated Work. During some theory lessons, some students were observed in unrelated work: reading English literature texts, looking at computer software or teen magazines, reading novels and theater scripts, completing homework, and looking at family photographs. They made little effort to be discrete:

[The teacher is among Ray’s group and is speaking with Renee on the far side of the gym. Nearside, Emmett and Tyrell are reading a magazine] “You finished coloring yours [humanities map] yet?” Emmett asks Tyrell. Tyrell nods and puts his coloring pencils away in front of me with Emmett helping (Fieldnote. Lesson #7)

Forms of Private Resistance

Three forms of private resistance were observed: zoning out, covert unrelated work, and noncompletion of homework assignments.

Zoning Out. Tenth-grade students referred to “zoning out” during the unit:

You are not hearing a word that she [teacher] is saying but you are thinking of something else in your head, but it looks as if you are paying attention. (Tess, Int. #2)
Students admitted that they “would think about what you were going to do after school or what homework you had that night” (Jaimee, Int. #3). Beth zoned out because “It [gym floor] is really uncomfortable... you don’t feel good and that is all you think about... nothing else gets through” (Int. #2). Zoning out occurred more during seated periods in the first half of the unit, in particular during teacher lectures. Zoning out did not disrupt the lesson. Many were seen leaning on palms, tilting the head to one side, staring at the walls or floor, or playing with their fingernails or a watch.

Covert Unrelated Work. Some students would covertly attend to homework or read unrelated material out of the teacher’s sight:

The teacher is on the nearside of the gym with Tyrell’s group. On the far side of the gym Penny’s team are looking at a magazine. The teacher walks over to Penny’s group. Students see the teacher and put the magazine away and look at the worksheet. The teacher helps Penny’s group with a question. As she turns her back and leaves, the magazine appears again. (Fieldnote, Lesson #7)

Emmett shared his secrets on not getting caught:

I can do it [homework] without getting caught... what I do is, when I am working, if I see her coming like this way, I would like put it away and play off like I am doing something else. (Int. #3)

Noncompletion of Homework Assignments. Students were resistant to homework and deemed it inappropriate for physical education. The workload was considered unreasonable for the quarter credit. Whereas Otis believed “gym is like recess” (Int. #3), Jason saw the inclusion of homework as the teacher’s attempt to make “it [PE] like a real class” (Int. #2). Two 9th-grade students did not complete the first and second homework. Six 10th-grades did not complete the first homework and seven did not complete the second. All students completed the final homework assignment but two 9th-graders did not present their work and were absent from school. Many admitted doing the work the morning before the due date.

Discussion

Students responded favorably to several features in the Cultural Studies unit and unfavorably to others. A shift in pedagogy from teacher-directed to student-centered was applauded. An emphasis on personal investment in others, group decision-making, and problem-solving gave students a sense of control and ownership of their learning experiences, and a number of students bought into opportunities for leadership by taking the initiative to plan and organize their own sport experiences when fulfilling their roles. Some previously marginalized students (some girls and the lower skilled) were re-engaged by the positive team cohesiveness and collective support and encouragement (Hastie, 1998).

Affiliation and membership were both highly valued. Efforts to create an authentic sport experience by adopting some principles of bona fide sport were viewed as exciting and “real.” As a persisting group (Siedentop, 1995), many had fun working hard and appreciated the opportunity to get to know each other. In
some cases new friendships were cultivated and individual and team skill performance increased. A further outcome of this regular assembly was an enjoyable and meaningful time in physical education, and the confirmation that cooperating, communicating, and supporting others were relevant and necessary and thus critical to adult life.

The resistant behaviors at the beginning of the unit seemed to be a consequence of new content, the requirement to complete homework, periods of inactivity, and new instructional settings. These observations support Brookfield’s (1991) position on why some students may resist change. Clearly, students here were experiencing a different conception of physical education—sustained affiliation on teams, notions of responsibility, discussing the historical roots, and geographical patterns of participation in volleyball—and such a change in content and instructional climate early in the unit seemed to compound their unrest and heighten their resistance.

Lecture episodes with students having to sit for extended periods of time under uncomfortable conditions resulted in greater instances of PuFR and PrFR. As Alpert (1991) observed.

whether resistance or acceptance will dominate depends upon the teaching approach. Student resistance is likely to appear in classrooms where the teacher emphasizes academic subject matter and a recitation style is typical of classroom interactions. (p. 351)

Early in the unit, students were critical of the teachers’ choice of lecture where some public forms of resistance were most common (Brookfield, 1991). The timing of the lecture and the content being addressed may help explain the severity of their resistance. Lecture, especially in early sessions, was boring and tiresome. Many students lost attention as it opposed how they wanted to spend physical education class time. In hindsight, a sustained focus on activity-adopting principles of Sport Education at the beginning of the unit might have been a better strategy for easing students into the seatwork.

Some content during seated periods was considerably more attractive (gender, body image, and sport media) and held the students’ attention, and they engaged in far fewer resistant behaviors. Students were more supportive of these classroom lessons, considered them meaningful (Brookfield, 1991), and could see some significance and a connection to their life and future beyond school. Support was particularly noticeable when referring to small-group and whole-class discussions on gender and media issues. This content engaged more students who were willing to contribute and present their views.

The two forms of student resistance (public and private) which were observed in this study further contribute to what is presently known about student resistance in education (Alpert, 1991; Spaulding, 1995) and physical education. Unlike Spaulding (1995), the majority of resistant behaviors during the unit were nonconfrontational, which could be expected given the school climate, student body, and emphasis on academic achievement and college entry. Like Alpert (1991) and Spaulding (1995), interrupting the teacher was observed as one PuFR and served to delay the teacher’s instruction. This behavior was noticeable at the beginning of the unit and when homework was addressed. The behavior resulted in implicit directions at best, and at worst no directions on these assignments. The
lack of clarity in assignment information, as well as the perception that PE was like recess and therefore not a real class, might explain the assignment submission data and why a few students were absent the day presentations were scheduled (Higginbotham, 1996).

A few students indicated that goofing off had been a common feature of their schooling, supporting Everhart’s (1983) remark that goofing off is “one activity ostensibly characteristic of early adolescence in school” (p. 178). Whether the amount of goofing off observed in this unit exceeded that prior to its implementation is unknown. However, goofing off was more common early in the unit where the teacher was challenged by the conditions for classroom work and holding students’ attention. Students’ disinterest in some content prompted boredom and they goofed off or zoned out to escape. Friends provided an attractive opportunity for groups to goof off and achieve “a sense of group solidarity” (Everhart, 1983, p. 184). A few were proud that they had rarely been caught and knew which lessons and instructional arrangements would enhance or deter their efforts. Unlike Everhart (1983), some did not consider goofing off random, unstructured, or purposeless. Seated sessions enhanced the opportunity to goof off and challenged the teacher’s supervisory skills, and some students demonstrated their strategic and creative skills to avoid work or fool the teacher.

Conclusion

The Cultural Studies unit offered students a new conception of physical education with specific features that many grew to like and appreciate. Endorsement of the unit emerged through students’ responses to several principles of Sport Education from across the skill spectrum (Carlson & Hastie, 1997; Curnow & Macdonald, 1995; Hastie, 1996, 1998). Taking responsibility for their learning gave some students a reason to attend class, made others feel more affiliated with peers, and contributed to a sense of attachment and membership (Ennis, 1999). Within a student-centered environment, many deemed the affective outcomes from investment in each other to be worthwhile.

Learning experiences the students considered relevant resulted in considerable approval. Students appreciated opportunities to discuss gender, body image, and sport media, and deemed such content to be significant to their life in school and in the wider society. Physical Education seemed to present an appropriate backdrop to confront these socially significant issues. By drawing a connection between life in and out of school, students were more willing to engage with this content. From their voices, the unit in part met one of its prime objectives, making inroads into developing “student-as-informed participant” and watchful critic (Fernandez-Balboa, 1996).

Several factors contributed to student overt and covert resistance. During early seatwork lessons the students were unclear as to the purposes of the unit and felt unsettled by new expectations for class, particularly homework. Most had a strong preference for movement, which they had come to expect from their time in class. The beginning of the unit included much seatwork, and the choice of instructional space and group arrangements in these lessons served only to foster resistant behaviors, thus disengaging many and challenging the teacher’s supervisory skills.
More research using this approach is needed to better understand the types of learning experiences desired by youth which might reduce and perhaps overcome their resistance while at the same time recapture and sustain their interest in physical education. We have learned that meticulous and careful planning of content and choice of pedagogy to facilitate delivery is crucial to positioning a Cultural Studies unit in a high school program

References


A Curricular Innovation


Kinchin and O'Sullivan


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