

## PEDAGOGY

# Physical Education Teacher Education Majors' Perceptions and Opinions of Social Skills in Physical Education Class

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## Abstract

*The world requires that people interact with those they work with, live with, and play with. Because of these interactions with others, it is important that people exhibit proper social skills to get along and be successful in everyday activities. Within an educational context physical education (PE) class is a prime place for students to learn social skills and interact with classmates and their teachers properly. Research has been conducted in the context of PE with populations of K–12 students and PE teachers. Yet there is a paucity of research with physical education teacher education (PETE) majors regarding social skills in PE class. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate PETE majors' perceptions and opinions of social skills in PE. For this study, 30 PETE majors (5 males, 25 females) from a private university in the Western United States were surveyed regarding their perceptions and opinions of social skills in PE class. It was generally found that PETE majors feel they will play an important part in teaching students' proper social skills, sportsmanship is an important aspect in PE class,*

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*and PE class is a great context in which to teach social skills compared to other content areas.*

Physical education (PE) makes the claim that students are educated in the psychomotor, cognitive, and affective domains. In the psychomotor domain, students learn motor skills to be used throughout life. Skills such as throwing, catching, striking, and kicking are taught throughout the curriculum. The cognitive domain generally has student learning focused on acquisition, comprehension, and evaluation of knowledge. Within the affective domain, students develop attitudes and appreciation for participation in physical activity (Lumpkin, 1998). All three domains when implemented in K–12 PE foster the development of physically literate students. Yet, of the three domains, the affective domain is not typically associated with PE. PE is a great environment for educators to promote the development of appropriate behavior by teaching social skills (Vidoni & Ulman, 2012). Specifically in a PE context, appropriate social skills include give your best effort, respect of self and classmates, cooperation, compassion, being responsible, listening and following directions, and using proper language (Vidoni, 2007; Vidoni, 2020; Vidoni & Ward, 2009).

Because these characteristics can be learned in PE class, they provide an opportunity for educators to highlight social and emotional learning (SEL), which has come to the forefront of PE pedagogy, in this educational context. Zins et al. (2004) described SEL as a process through which students can better manage their emotions, feelings, and care and concern for others, as well as solve problems and have positive peer relationships. Research in school settings dealing with SEL promotions has found improved academic performance (Wang et al., 1997; Zins et al., 2004), reduction of antisocial and aggressive behaviors (Losel & Beelman, 2003), reduction of depressive symptoms (Horowitz & Garber, 2007), improved mental health (Durlak & Wells, 1997; Greenberg et al., 2001), and positive youth development (Catalano et al., 2002). These studies used different intervention strategies, different student populations, and other variables, reaching similar conclusions that school-based interventions are generally effective. The literature has discussed that SEL in PE can be effectively carried out to the benefit of students. Ang and Penny (2013) studied the effects of a Sport Education unit of Ultimate Frisbee. One

of the purposes of Sport Education in PE classes is to promote fair play and increased positive peer interactions. One result was that students' self-concept and ability to handle stress increased as they participated in the Sport Education unit of Ultimate Frisbee.

For K–12 physical educators, there are materials available that help inform their teaching appropriate social skills in their PE classes. The first is the National Physical Education Standards (SHAPE America, 2014). Standards 4 and 5 describe the importance of social skills in a physical activity setting. Standard 4 states, “The physically literate individual exhibits responsible personal and social behaviors that respect self and others” (p. 12). Standard 5 states, “The physically literate individual recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction (p. 12). These two standards emphasize the importance of including lessons and activities that teach students appropriate social skills for use in the physical activity setting and beyond. The appropriate instructional practices (AIP) guidelines created by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c) explicitly address the importance of designing and implementing opportunities for students to develop social skills in PE. An example of an AIP dealing with social skills in PE is

Physical educators design activities throughout the program that provide students with opportunities to work together, for the purpose of developing social skills (cooperative and competitive) and learning responsible behavior (e.g., “good sport” skills are encouraged instead of trash talking). Situations are designed purposefully for teaching these skills; they're not left for “teachable moments” only. (NASPE, 2009b, p. 19)

An example of an inappropriate practice dealing with a social behavior skill in PE is

Physical educators fail to systematically enhance students' affective development. They don't use activities and instruction strategies such as choice of equipment, peer teaching and class involvement in establishing rules that foster cooperation, social skills and personal responsibility. (NASPE, 2009b, p. 19)

Two examples of appropriate practices in PE from a previous AIP document (NASPE, 2000) are “Bullying and inappropriate student remarks and behaviors are dealt with immediately and firmly” (p. 9) and “Class members may make negative or sarcastic comments about individuals or groups in the class” (p. 12). These instructional practices highlight the PE class to be a place where students can be exposed to, learn, and execute positive social behaviors.

The literature has investigated social skills in PE class with many variables and populations to help positively affect students’ social skills and behaviors. Patrick et al. (1998) studied social behaviors while elementary students participated in a modified volleyball game. Student volleyball teams scored points when exhibiting appropriate social behavior as they competed in a class volleyball game. It was learned that the modified volleyball games were effective in reducing inappropriate social behaviors and increasing appropriate social behaviors. The modified volleyball game helped students who had fewer appropriate social skills and behaviors, thus exposing them to students who exhibited appropriate social skills and behaviors. Students could see and hear appropriate social skills and behaviors in a game context. Another study investigated the effects of an instructional strategy, integrating the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model in middle school PE (Vidoni, 2007). For this study, the PE teacher instructed and modeled for the students the levels of TPSR (Hellison, 2003). During the class activity, the PE teacher had students’ self-grade the social behaviors they individually exhibited to that point in the class. At the end of class, the PE teacher had a debriefing with the students regarding their levels of behavior throughout the class. Here again, students self-graded. This study found that integrating TPSR levels of behavior with instruction and prompts had positive effects increasing students’ appropriate behaviors and decreasing inappropriate behaviors. Vidoni (2007) concluded that the PE teacher should know what social behaviors are right and appropriate for students to use during class activities. Thus, the PE teacher needs to create an environment in the class that will promote and encourage appropriate social behaviors.

Another line of research in social skills in PE class comes from Mosston’s teaching styles (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994). The teaching style is known as the reciprocal style or Style C. For this teaching

style, the PE teacher pairs students together while learning a skill. In the pair, one student is the doer and the other is the observer of the student performing the skill activities. The observer has a criteria sheet to help give feedback to the doer. After the doer has completed the skill activities, the doer becomes the observer and the observer becomes the doer, working on the skill activities (Barney & Christenson, 2009). The reciprocal style heavily relies on students being able to use social skills—giving positive and/or corrective feedback—that will help their classmates learn the given skill. Chatoupis (2015) studied third-grade students who were paired with a friend and later paired with a nonacquaintance. Students participated in a 30-min lesson of dribbling a soccer ball. This study revealed that the friend group had a favorable perception related to giving and receiving feedback. Over time, the friend group data decreased, showing a favorable perception, and the nonacquaintance group increased. Chatoupis suggested the nonacquaintance pairing could over time be socially beneficial. Yet the friend group yielded improved motor skill performance and positive social skill interactions in the paired group.

Research on social skills in PE and with populations of K–12 students and PE teachers has been conducted. One population that has not been studied is PE teacher education (PETE) majors. This population is the up-and-coming professionals who have the opportunity to implement appropriate social behaviors. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate PETE majors' perceptions and opinions of social skills in PE.

## Method

### Participants

Participants for this study were 30 PETE majors (5 males, 25 females) from a private university located in the Western United States. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 30 years of age. The PETE majors in this study were starting their first semester in the major. The university institutional review board (IRB) approved the study before data collection. As well, participants provided their informed consent to voluntarily participate in this study.

## Instrument

A literature review failed to identify an instrument related to PETE majors' opinions and perceptions of social skills in PE. We constructed an 11-item survey from the literature regarding social skills in K–12 PE. The survey instrument consisted of nine open-ended statements regarding social skills in PE and two demographic statements (Table 1). Content validity on the open-ended statements was established with five PETE majors not involved in this study and three experienced K–12 PE teachers. The K–12 PE teachers averaged 8 years of teaching experience. Having PETE majors' and experienced K–12 PE teachers review item construction assisted us in readability of items to address social skills in PE. The instrument was pilot tested with 10 PETE majors who did not participate in the study.

## Procedures

Upon IRB approval, a sample of convenience was employed for data collection. We proposed the study to the PETE majors in two Motor Learning classes. All students were assured that their voluntary decision to participate or not to participate in the study would not affect their grade or standing in their class. Before survey administration, we secured signed informed consent from the participants. Completion of the survey document took approximately 15 min.

## Data Analysis

For the open-ended questions, we read and reread the PETE majors' responses to the survey questions until common themes became evident (Mueller & Skamp, 2003; O'Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992). We utilized a qualitative thematic content analysis to determine relevant survey themes. Sarvela and McDermott (1993) defined qualitative thematic content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." Thus, content analysis is a strategy for studying the content of messages.

**Table 1**

*Social Skills in PE Class*

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Please take a moment to answer the following questions dealing with YOUR opinions, perceptions of teaching and incorporating positive social behaviors in your PE class. In PE appropriate social skills are defined as cooperative, being responsible, listening and following directions, and using proper language. When writing your responses to the statements, please discuss your role, your perceptions, and your thoughts about social behaviors in your PE class. There are no wrong answers.

1. Gender: M \_\_\_ F \_\_\_
  2. Academic Year: Freshman \_\_\_ Sophomore \_\_\_ Junior \_\_\_ Senior \_\_\_
  3. What do you feel your role is in teaching positive social behaviors in PE?
  4. In your mind, what do proper social behaviors look like in a PE class?
  5. Do you feel if students exhibit positive behaviors, they will give better effort/be more persistent with class activities?
  6. Do you feel as a PE teacher you can teach students positive social skills?
  7. How do you feel PE class and activities can teach and/or reinforce social skills?
  8. Do you feel PE class has the potential to develop a student's social skills?
  9. How do you feel a student working with a classmate(s) affects their social skills?
  10. How important do you feel having students exhibit positive social behaviors in your PE will be?
  11. Do you feel music being played during PE class, can affect students' social behaviors positively?
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## Physical Education and Social Skills Themes

We read and reread interview transcripts and identified key themes and phrases. From the survey responses, the most frequent PE and social skills themes were (1) PETE majors feel they need to be proper examples to their students, (2) importance of good sportsmanship, and (3) PE class, compared to other content areas, provides educators the opportunity to teach and reinforce proper social skills (Table 2). Participants' names in this study are pseudonyms.

**Table 2**

*List of Major PETE Majors' Interview Themes  
With Subcontent Factors*

<b>Major interview themes</b>	<b>Subcontent factors</b>
PETE majors being proper examples	Being a good example to create a good environment  PETE majors' words and actions teach proper social skills
Importance of good sportsmanship	Being kind Teamwork Proper language
PE class can reinforce proper social skills	PE class is different from other classes to teach social skills  Social skills can be taught every class period

## Results

### Being Proper Examples

The PETE majors felt they needed to set a good example for their students by exhibiting proper social skills in PE class. Within this theme, the PETE majors felt that their example would create an environment that would help students during PE class. Lori stated,

I set the tone for the class in the way that I treat my students. If I teach and interact with my students in a positive and kind way, it will go a long way. I also choose what is acceptable in my class when I call out students who are not interacting with others or in a class in a positive way.

Joe stated, “I think as a teacher my role is to create an environment where positive behaviors is the expectation. To do this I would need to lead by example.” Melanie said, “I feel like I can set a good example. I can also create an environment where students feel safe enough to be themselves and bullying isn’t tolerated.”

Also within this theme, the PETE majors felt their words and actions teach proper social skills. Jason stated, “I believe it is my role to model by what I say and how I act by showing positive behaviors, as well as encourage and facilitate them.” Phillip stated, “I feel my biggest role is as an exemplar, show the students what positive social behaviors are, like in how I speak and act around them.” Sally stated,

I believe that as the teacher it is my role to set the tone of the class. If I want my students to be respectful, encouraging, and make my class a safe space, then I need to set that example. By modeling the positive social behaviors you want the kids to use and giving reinforcement when they do, your class will follow suit.

## Importance of Good Sportsmanship

A second theme that emerged from the data was students can exhibit good sportsmanship in PE class. From this theme, three elements of good sportsmanship were mentioned: being kind, teamwork (working with others), and proper communication. Statements from PETE students about being a good sport in class included “Everyone is kind to one another and motivates each other to be their best. No one cares whose team they are on (Robert),” “Being kind to everyone and participating in the class effectively without distracting others (Julie),” and “Be kind to everyone, including students on other teams” (Kathy). PETE students responses for teamwork

included “Teamwork and cooperation, not getting angry about losing or something the other team did that you don’t like” (Jason), “Passing the ball to other teammates, include everyone” (Phillip), and “Proper social behaviors are things like being positive and supportive to your teammates. There is no talking down to others due to skill differences” (Lori). Statements regarding proper communication included “Students talking nicely to each other. No put-downs or bullying or cliques” (Julie) and “Working together, not yelling at your teammates, including all classmates, positive encouragement, if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all” (Kathy).

### **Reinforce Proper Social Skills**

The final theme regarding social skills in PE was PE class can reinforce proper social skills for students. From this theme, the PETE students felt that PE was different from other content areas in school. Jennifer stated, “PE class gives students the opportunity to interact and work together. Students don’t have that chance in a math class.” Jean stated, “I believe PE helps students grow friendships that wouldn’t have been formed in any other class. It pushes the students out of their comfort zone to meet and talk to new people.” Amber said, “PE is one of the most social classes that allows the most teamwork and peer relations to happen. You don’t see that in other classes.”

Another area within this theme PETE students mentioned was proper social skills can be taught every day in class. Sam stated,

In PE, students must work with others to accomplish a common goal. Anytime this is required, students learn to work with others. PE is special because not only are they learning social skills, but also learning in a fun game-like environment every day in class.

Mason said, “Every day in class students learn from interacting with each other such as learning how to become supportive teammates, self-control when it’s a team effort, patience, and compassion for others can be learned in PE.” Claire stated, “PE is a totally social class. Every class the students have to work in teams or with a partner which means communicating and working with others.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate PETE majors' perceptions and opinions of social skills in PE. The qualitative results revealed PETE majors were of the opinion (1) they need to set the proper example to their students concerning social skills, (2) sportsmanship is an important aspect of social skills in PE class, and (3) PE class is a good context for educators to reinforce proper social skills for students.

The first theme was the PETE majors being responsible for their actions and words they model to their students. Vidoni (2007) studied PE teachers integrating levels (TSPR) of positive behaviors with instruction and prompts to increase appropriate behaviors and decrease inappropriate behaviors. The researcher found that students could follow and comply to the PE teachers' instructions and prompts to manifest proper social skills in PE class. PE teachers were a critical element to teach proper social skills in PE class. In our study, Roberta stated, "My role in teaching positive social behaviors is the other half of the job." The results showed that a majority of the PETE majors felt they needed to set a proper example for their students. Yet one participant stated, "I can help, but each student still has personal accountability to show proper social skills in PE." Jan succinctly concluded, "I need to lead by example."

The second theme was sportsmanship is an important aspect of proper social skills in PE class. The literature has stated that sportsmanship looks like respect, cooperation, compassion, responsibility, and proper communication (Vidoni, 2020). In our study, the PETE majors' responses aligned with the definition in the literature. For example, Joan stated, "[Students] learn such behaviors as being a good teammate, self-control, team effort, compassion for others, and patience." Many of the participants described sportsmanship with phrases such as "Learning to work with people," "Students have to communicate with each other," and "Being kind to everyone that is playing."

The final theme was PE class is an appropriate context to reinforce proper social skills for students. The national standards created by SHAPE America for K–12 physical educators outline proper social skills in a physical activity context in two standards. Standard 4 states,

“The physically literate individual exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others” (SHAPE America, 2014, p. 12). Standard 5 states, “The physically literate individual recognizes the values of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction” (SHAPE America, 2014, p. 12). These national standards provide to the K–12 physical educator guidelines and reminders that proper social behaviors can be taught and achieved in PE class. The data from our study concur with the national standards. Claire stated, “PE allows kids to be super interactive with one another, which leads to working on skills they normally wouldn’t get to in a typical class.” Along these same lines, Mason stated, “Of course students can learn good social skills in PE. They don’t learn these skills in math or biology class.” This statement emphasizes that PE class is an appropriate context in which students can learn and that reinforces proper social skills.

## **Limitations**

This study has two limitations. First, the participants came from one university. Second, this research study was conducted at a private university. The sample may not be a representative sample of participants from other colleges or universities, public and private, or of geographic regions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The conclusions and implications are limited and perhaps mostly applicable to participant demographics. Thus, further research with a broader demographic would give a richer data set to ascertain the generalizability of the conclusions and implications found in the study.

## **Implications for Physical Education Teacher Education**

The results of this study should inform PETE faculty that instructing PETE majors of the importance and impact of proper social skills in PE in a student’s PE experience is very important. PETE faculty can use the results in their preparations of their PETE majors. PETE faculty can impress upon PETE majors their role in establishing a class environment that is conducive to teaching and emphasizing proper social skills. PETE faculty can also emphasize to PETE majors that in some cases they will have to teach and model proper social skills, just like teaching and modeling a physical skill

to their students. Then as students exhibit proper social skills, PETE majors can point out to their students that those are sportsmanship behaviors to be shown during class games and activities. The teaching and implementing of proper social skills can have lasting effects upon students. Most prominently for K–12 students is lifetime physical activity. Lori stated, “If we as PE teachers can teach our students good social skills, [students] will be able to use them in many situations throughout their life.” One last implication to this study is PETE faculty and K–12 PE teachers emphasizing that PE class is an important part of a student’s education. The human aspect (social skills) of PE class can benefit not only the individual student but also those who interact with this student throughout their life.

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