

Why Do Some Students Who Are Good At Physical Education Dislike It So Much?

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Research on adolescents' with negative attitudes toward physical education has been limited. A recent study by Carlson (1995a) examined a cross section of students and their attitudes towards physical education. The study demonstrated that the majority of students did not regard physical education in the same way as they do many of their other subjects such as math or geography. Carlson (1995a) found that students attitudes were often linked to their expectation of the subject. The students expressed that they saw physical education as a break from their other studies, not as a "real subject" that would aid their likelihood of getting a good job or a place at university and thus, not as important as other subjects. Other studies (Carlson, 1995b; Portman, 1995; Smith, 1993) focused on special populations of students, such as those of low ability or those socially isolated or alienated. However, there has been very little in-depth examination of competent students and their attitudes towards physical education. Teachers tend to recognize those students who are talented and try to encourage and stimulate these students to receive their full potential. The assumption of most teachers is that competent students enjoy and like physical education. Thus equating ability with attitude. However, Bain (1980) found that students needed to be

positively socialized into physical education to have positive attitudes towards it.

Bandura (1977, 1986) in his social cognitive theory, states that adolescents form their attitudes from influences around them. In early adolescence they are primarily influenced by their parents but as the student matures during adolescence they tend to become more influenced by significant others, like teachers, coaches and peers. Figley (1985) suggests that teachers influence their students attitudes towards the subject that they teach. Some studies have demonstrated that environment can affect attitude formation. Henry (1993), Hawkins and Catelano (1990) and Rovegno (1994) in their studies, described how the school community and school ethos can affect the attitudes of the students within it. For example, students who did not relate and adapt to the school's environment developed a negative attitude towards school. This would suggest that environment can be a powerful influence on student attitude formation.

Many factors seem to influence attitude formation. Langer and Warheit (1992) provide an inclusive framework of how attitudes are formed. Their model incorporates a myriad of biopsychosocial factors that influence attitude formation. These biopsychosocial factors (biological, psychological, and social factors) interact to determine the knowledge and beliefs that each individual student will have. They believe that there is no set prescription for attitude formation as each individual will have their own unique

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experiences based upon the interaction of their biopsychosocial factors and their unique perception of what different events mean to them. Since little research has focused on competent students who have negative attitudes about physical education this study set out to examine the factors that influence the formation of neutral or negative attitudes in physically competent tenth grade students toward physical education and physical activity.

Method

Pilot Study

As an integral part of the study design, a pilot study was conducted to test the proposed student selection procedure and to determine if students with neutral or negative attitudes towards physical education existed within the class situation. The researcher observed a class of 10th grade students during a regular physical education lesson. At the end of the observation period a cross section of ten students were asked if they would fill in a one page Likert questionnaire to assess their feelings toward physical education and physical activity. After examination of these questionnaires and observations the researcher gained parental permission to interview four competent students to confirm whether they held neutral or negative attitudes towards physical education and activity. The researcher found that even with this small sample group, students with neutral or negative attitudes toward physical education could be identified, and consequently felt confident with the proposed identification process.

One important finding from the pilot study was that if students felt dissatisfied with the content of their physical education program this greatly influenced their attitude towards physical education and activity. The researcher concluded that it would be important to find a school with a physical education program that offered a wide variety of activities popular with students, in

an attempt to minimize the influence of the physical education program on students' attitudes.

Context

Hengeo High School was chosen because of its balanced physical education program, which exposed students to a wide variety of different physical activities. The physical education department provided their students with a choice in their activities. This provided students with the opportunity to gain experiences in a wide variety of sports and recreational activities comprising of team, small groups and individual activities. Students, who are required to take one year of physical education, were able to choose from three strands of physical activity: "Fitness", "Combined", and "Lifetime". All three strands focus on providing typical lifetime sports and educating the students in lifetime physical activity, through both team and individual sports and recreational activities. The lifetime sports strand provided the most comprehensive experiences in a number of different physical activities.

Participant Selection

All 10th grade students enrolled in the lifetime sports strand were observed by the researcher to assess which classes appeared to contain competent students with neutral or negative attitudes towards physical education. Competency was assessed through the observations of students within their physical education environment. The researcher observed the students performance of tasks set by their teacher. Those students who were able to perform these set tasks with some degree of accuracy, at normal speed, and consistency were defined as being physically competent

Negative behaviors were initially identified through the observation of neutral (avoidance of participation, student neither likes or dislikes subject) and negative (blatant dislike for the subject, disrupts class) be-

haviors within their class. The researcher identified four classes out of the six observed, which contained students who displayed neutral (avoiding participation in the class by pretending to be engaged in the tasks) or negative (blatant non-involvement in the class demonstrating low interest in the activity) behaviors as described by Griffin (1985, 1984). A one page Likert questionnaire (Table 1), designed by the researchers, was administered to these four classes, which a total of 120 students completed. The questionnaire contained direct questions about the students' personal perceptions of physical education and physical activity, and parental attitudes to physical activity. All the questionnaires (n = 120) were analyzed and those students (n = 36) who seemed to hold neutral or negative attitudes

towards physical education and activity were given letters for parental consent. Parental consent was gained for a small sample of students (n = 6). Ten introductory interviews were conducted to ascertain the nature of the students attitude toward physical education and their feelings toward participating in the study (where parental consent had not been received, the principle's permission was obtained). As a result of these interviews the researcher identified three students, Frankie, Penny, and Stephen. These students were classified as "physically competent but had either neutral or negative feelings towards physical education", were willing to take part in the study, and also had parental consent.

Data Collection

The researcher believed that traditional quantitative methodology would not give the rich description necessary to fully incorporate the myriad of influences and complex relations that help to determine neutral or negative attitudes towards physical education (Merriam, 1988). The use of individual case studies seemed to be the most appropriate methodology (Bogden & Biklen, 1992; Erikson, 1986; Merriam, 1988; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1993), where the researcher forms a complete case study of the selected individual students.

Observations. The three students were observed in their physical education setting and in other settings, e.g. biology, health and recess, for triangulation purposes (see trustworthiness). Physical education observations were made once or twice a week where possible over a 19 week period. These observations were conducted to note any behaviors or events that seemed to indicate the nature of their attitude, follow up interviews addressed such events and behaviors to identify if they were enacted as a result of the student's attitude. Observations were also made of the student in other subject/

Table 1: Physical Education Questionnaire

Name.....	Age.....
Grade.....	Gender.....
For the following statements, please indicate by circling the appropriate number if you:	
(1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Don't Know, (4) Disagree, (5) Strongly Disagree.	
I like being physically active	1 2 3 4 5
I do not think I am very good at physical education	1 2 3 4 5
I like my physical education classes	1 2 3 4 5
I think physical education is very important	1 2 3 4 5
There should be more time allotted to physical education in school	1 2 3 4 5
I would rather be doing something else other than physical education	1 2 3 4 5
I think physical education should be abolished	1 2 3 4 5
I prefer participating in individual physical activity not team sports	1 2 3 4 5
I like participating in sports after school	1 2 3 4 5
I only participate in physical activity in school	1 2 3 4 5
My parents never participate in physical activity	1 2 3 4 5
My whole family participates in physical activity together	1 2 3 4 5
Being physically active is O.K.	1 2 3 4 5
I feel it is very important to be fit and healthy	1 2 3 4 5
My parent often encourages me to be physically active	1 2 3 4 5
I only like team sports	1 2 3 4 5
I do not think my home life promotes physical activity	1 2 3 4 5
I would rather do something else than go out and play sport	1 2 3 4 5
I often play sports with my friends in my neighborhood	1 2 3 4 5
I participate in physical activity through a private club/class	1 2 3 4 5
I do not like competing against other people	1 2 3 4 5
I find physical activity relaxing	1 2 3 4 5

school settings to assess if they displayed different attitudes towards their subjects, in contexts other than that of physical education.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with each student, their parents (where possible) and their physical education teachers, to increase trustworthiness. Students were interviewed, when possible, after each observation. The interviews were held in a private location on the school site to ensure the confidentiality of the students. The following items were discussed throughout the study to determine their relationship toward attitude formation: events observed during the lessons; past experiences which may have affected their attitudes; their parents' attitudes; past physical education experiences; physical activity levels; participation in community recreational activities; family influences; teacher influences.

Each student's physical education teacher was interviewed. Interviews were completed to confirm if the teacher also perceived the student to be physically competent and to gauge if the teacher's perception of the student was visible in their actions during class. The researcher described a number of students to the teacher so that they would not know exactly which students were being studied.

Parental interviews were also conducted to determine how accurate students' perceptions of their childhood were compared to their parents and to also gauge the attitude of the parent towards physical education and activity.

Questionnaires. Teachers who taught the students in other subject areas were given questionnaires. These questionnaires were designed to gain an insight into the teacher's perceptions of the student to see if the student was viewed differently in more aca-

demically compared to physical education.

The study also attempted to investigate the influence of certain factors on each case study such as:

The schools' physical education program. An overview of the program was determined from a variety of sources to gain perspectives from the student, teachers, administrators, parents and community leaders. Data was collected from interviews with the physical education teachers, other subject teachers, administrators, students parents and community recreation leaders. The researcher also personally formed a perception of the physical education program during the weekly observations throughout the semester and through general interactions with the department as a whole.

The family unit. Through interviews with the students and their parents, data was collected on how the family influenced the students' attitude towards physical education and activity.

The community environment. Information was gathered on the facilities available to the students in terms of physical activity and recreation, outside of the school in the Hengeo community.

The school community. Interviews with teachers from other subject areas and administrators were conducted to gauge an understanding of the ethos of the school and the school's attitudes towards physical education. In addition, a number of social events within the school were observed and various documents from notice boards and school handbooks were analyzed.

Their influential others. These were people identified from the student interviews as

those who played an influential role in the student's life.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began on the evening of the first day and continued throughout the study. From the moment that data was collected it was analyzed in relation to the purpose of the study. The researcher noted any questions that arose from the ongoing data analysis in a methodological log. Through the process of "working back and forth between the field and the merging analytical framework, refinement of categories and gradual development of reliable constructs" were formed (Locke, 1989,p.8).

All responses and interviews were conducted in confidence. As a result of these observations and interviews the researcher built a case study of each student, cross checking the case studies with the students as they were formed. All interviews and observations were transcribed and then coded to highlight significant themes. The codes and themes were checked by another researcher for inconsistencies and researcher bias, and to check that the researcher had not missed any themes (Bogden & Biklen, 1992).

Trustworthiness

Data reliability was ensured through creating trustworthiness (Locke, 1989). Trustworthiness was sought through cross checking information, the realization of some degree of researcher bias, regular meetings with another researcher to reduce the researcher's bias, source checking and member checking (Bogden & Biklen, 1992; Locke, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Rovegno, 1994). Trustworthiness between the researcher and the students was created through interviews over a six month time period. The longer a study continues the less likely a student is "to give misleading ac-

counts to protect themselves or please the investigator" (Locke, 1989,p.8).

Results

Hengeo is a city in the Northwest of the USA. Hengeo is the only high school within the city with student body of 1,200 and staff of 65. The school caters for students in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Students mainly come from the cities two junior high schools, but also from many of the small outlying communities. Consequently, Hengeo is a large school. For those students involved in the school life and its many activities, Hengeo seems to have a warm school environment.

The school portrays a high level of school spirit and pride, especially for the many athletic events which are well publicized and supported by the administration. The administration seemed to be very supportive of the physical education department and its teachers. The majority of the teachers who were interviewed felt that the physical education department at Hengeo High School was very strong and did a very good job of physically educating the students. From what they had seen over the past few years and from what they had heard from the students, all teachers interviewed felt that the physical education department had made serious endeavors to improve their program. They now provided a program of excellence, offering a wide variety of choices in an attempt to provide positive learning experiences. All of the physical education teachers interviewed were very proud of the program that they had developed and all held similar philosophies about the purpose of high school physical education; that high school physical education should promote lifetime physical activity and provide students with the skills needed to participate in such activities.

From the results a model was formed for each of the three students Frankie, Penny,

and Stephen, to identify the individual factors which had influenced their neutral or negative attitude towards physical education and physical activity.

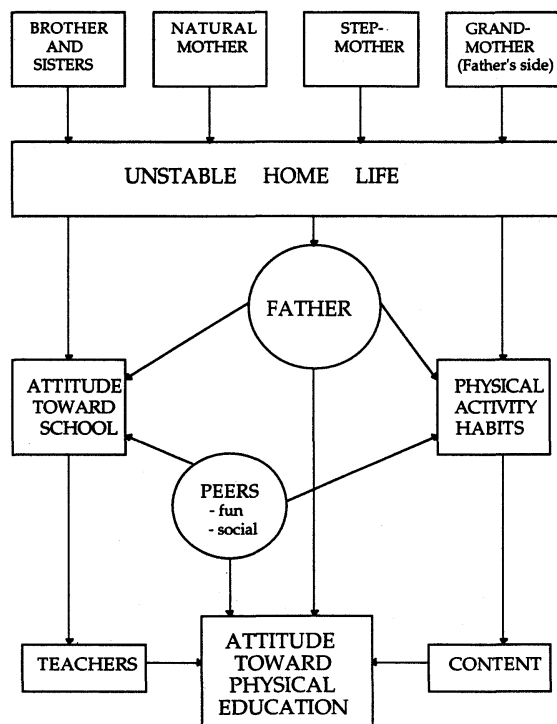


Figure 1: Influences affecting the formation of Frankie Shaw's attitudes toward physical education

Frankie

Frankie was 15 years of age when the researcher first interviewed her, but turned 16 as the study progressed. She was living with her father and stepmother, although she spent periods of time during the study living with her grandmother (the father's mother) and at the end of the study was about to go and live with her natural mother for a while. Frankie did not get on with her step-mother, although she felt that she had tried her best to do so. She was very fond of her father, but got upset because he went away on business a lot and would leave her alone with her step-mother.

I hate it, I don't know it just makes me so mad and I know he has to go away on business trips and stuff, that's his job, but he's always gone, and I don't want to have to stay with my step mum.

In physical education classes Frankie often seemed to be lacking in energy and enthusiasm. The researcher asked her on one occasion if Frankie thought her lack of energy was due to feeling unwell or just due to life in general? "Part of both, a little of both. My Dad's been gone a lot too, recently"

Frankie enjoyed some of her physical education classes more than others, often due to the activity. Her father had bought a volleyball set and during the summer they would play together and have a lot of fun. "I like, um if it was volleyball yes, probably, I love volleyball a lot". Frankie enjoyed physical education when she perceived the acts to be fun.

We don't want to do drills and you know we're not going to be perfect, no matter how many drills we are going to do we are not going to be perfect and we want to play. We've been doing drills for weeks, forever it seems like forever.

Frankie just wanted to be able to play and have fun, she was not interested in improving and learning the proper techniques, she just wanted to enjoy herself. Frankie was often observed goofing around and not putting much effort into her physical education classes. The researcher asked her why it seemed that she did not want to improve her skills and work hard. "I don't know coz I um, It's not really important to me I guess, because I'm not a serious athlete, I'm just like um OK"

There are two major influences on Frankie's attitude toward physical education; the physical education program and her father. Her expectations and beliefs about the purpose of the physical education program were in conflict with the content and structure of

the program at Hengeo. She would like to have even more choice than the program provides in the activities that she participates in. She wants to have fun with her class mates, without the pressure of competition.

Frankie does not seem to get any encouragement at home to actively pursue anything. She lacked motivation in many aspects of her life. The need for her father's attention, plus her unstable home life were important influences in her attitude toward school and specifically physical education. It seemed that Frankie perceived that her father did not really care about what she did at school, therefore neither did Frankie.

though the older brother was not currently living in the area. Her mother was completing her final semester at university, seeking a degree in counseling, and her father was a self-employed floor covering fitter. The Jacobs had lived in a number of different locations during Penny's childhood. Thus, Penny attended five different schools, making it difficult for her to form long lasting friendships. The family appeared to be a very close unit.

Penny did not look back at her past physical education experiences favorably. She felt that she had enjoyed physical education more when she was little, but had very negative memories of physical education especially at her junior high school. Penny did not elect to take physical education in the seventh or eighth grade, which she now regrets. Penny said that they were all graded on how well they did, but not on how well they tried. After not having any physical education for two years, and also putting on a lot of weight, she found physical education very demoralizing. When dividing the class into teams the teachers would sometimes choose two captains to pick their teams. "That's not really fair because the last person feels, very like ooh, I'm not very important". Her weight has caused her a degree of embarrassment, increased self consciousness and affected her participation in physical activity.

Penny enjoyed feeling successful in physical education. The researcher observed her light up on one occasion when one of her peers commented on a good move that she had made while playing soccer. However, Penny did not find Football as enjoyable, and from observations she did not seem to try so hard to be successful. In response to this observation Penny said "Well, when your ah run and everything you have to be fast and I'm not fast so"

Similarly, her weight consciousness affected her participation in soccer. Penny really wanted to try out for the school's soccer team.

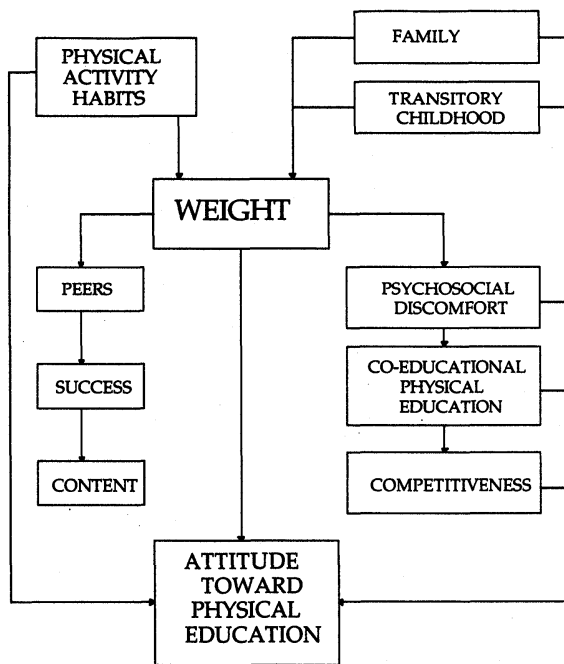


Figure 2: Influences affecting the formation of Penny Jacobs attitudes toward physical education

Penny

Penny was 15 years old at the beginning of the study, turning 16 just after the completion of the study. She is the second eldest in a family with four children al-

On one occasion when the researcher was at the family home, her mother was trying to encourage her to try out for the team. Penny said that she did not want to. "Probably the uniforms [she laughs nervously] I don't want to wear them, that's probably what stops me". She felt self-conscious about whether she would fit into the uniforms and even if she did, whether she would feel uncomfortable playing in it anyway. "Well sometimes I feel uncomfortable playing in front of others [pause] there are people on the teams and stuff that you know. . ."

Although she has tried very hard to overcome her self consciousness, her weight constantly affected her behavior. The researcher could see her pulling her T-shirt down during class to try and cover herself up. Penny told the researcher that she really wanted to lose weight and had tried on many occasions, but she felt uncomfortable to exercise at home because her father, sister, and brother teased her about it. "I think it's real important, but I just don't really do it very often. Um I just don't like exercising with other people, it gets kind of embarrassing". Penny's teacher Mrs. Humphries was also very conscious of Penny's weight. "She's not in very good shape and it's her weight. . . . I think it plain slows her down because she is packing so much, which is a real problem for her".

Penny did not feel that her family helped her in her endeavors to loose weight. The researcher asked her mother if she thought it was important to exercise.

Mother: "I, I think we should incorporate it and um lately because you know there is a need, there is a need [pause] um [she looks over to Penny and says] I'm not saying a word, I'm not saying a word"

Penny: "I don't care go ahead"

Mother: "OK, I'm out of shape, the girls are out of shape, their Dad is out of shape"

Penny looked very uncomfortable as her mother spoke. Her weight was a factor that

influenced much of her life not just in physical education but also in her relations with her peers. Although most students were friendly towards Penny she only seemed to have a couple of friends, that she rarely saw outside of school. She would usually stay at home with her family.

Penny's life has been greatly affected by the many moves that her family has made. The time at which Penny moved back to Hengeo coincides with the time that she put on most of her weight. Penny would come home from school and eat cookies and sweets that her grandmother kept at her house. Her physical education experiences at her junior high school have also had a large impact on her present attitude towards physical education. She did not like the grading system there, or the way they picked teams, which caused her to feel even more uncomfortable about her weight. Although Penny is very close with her family, she felt that they did not help her in her endeavors to lose weight. She would like to be more active but finds this difficult as none of her school friends live near by, so she feels that she has no-one with whom to exercise.

Stephen

Stephen is the only child of a single mother, his father left them when he was small. Stephen and his mother have been living in Hengeo since he was six. When they first moved to Hengeo they lived with Stephen's mother's parents as they were elderly and needed help around the house. Stephen had the misfortune of watching both of his grandparents die. He spent a lot of time with his grandmother during the last months of her life when she was confined to her bed. His mother was forced to leave the two of them alone together when she went out to work, which was a lot of the time as his mother was the only working member of the family.

Stephen has a very nonchalant attitude towards life, school, and physical education.

off when this is pursued. Stephen would prefer to have a different type of physical education program, one which allows him to participate in the activities he chooses and not to have to practice skills and drills. Physical education, to Stephen, meant having a break from his other classes and having fun.

Stephen's childhood has impacted his attitude to life and physical education. His home circumstances when he was younger, the absence of his father and a general lack of attention seems to have resulted in his lack of interest in his future. This is shown through his laid back attitude to school and grades. Stephen's various illnesses and injuries have also affected his participation in physical education. He perceives that his teachers have no empathy for how his injuries have affected his participation and effort in physical education.

Stephen's mother is very protective of Stephen and noted how much she initially worried about how he would get on at Hengeo high school, it being such a large school. However, she did not seem to be worried by his lack of direction in life, or about his lack of interest in his school achievements. Like many of his other school subjects, physical education has little meaning to him, and he is not concerned about the grade that he gets, just as long as he passes and is not required to take it again.

Summary

The study found a number of different factors that can influence students attitudes towards physical activity. The primary factors that influence these students in developing negative or neutral attitudes toward physical education were issues relating to the physical education program, the family, the community, and the individual.

From the case studies it is apparent that students come to physical education classes to have fun. Carlson (1995a) also found corresponding results, that students see physical education as a break from their more im-

portant academic subjects. However, the physical education teachers at Hengeo had additional expectations, they wanted their students to learn skills and improve the effectiveness of their physical performances. This conflict in student/teacher expectations influences the attitudes of students towards physical education because they are not receiving the content that they desire.

The case studies all highlight that competent students also need attention and reassurance. When low ability students struggle with the set tasks, we give them extra encouragement and attention. Highly skilled students, particularly those that show a positive attitude, learn quickly so we give them extra attention to keep them focused and occupied. What about the competent students who show a negative attitude? They still need feedback and attention, but are they sometimes forgotten because of their ability or appearance? It appears that Stephen's attitude gave him limited attention and feedback from his teacher. She saw him as a passive student who wanted to quietly do the bare minimum to get by, and not a student who wanted her attention. In Penny's case her appearance caused her teacher to perceive her as being too overweight to be able to participate fully in physical education, which is not necessarily the case.

The case studies describe the myriad of events and issues that affect today's students' lives. For some students, such as Frankie, school is a refuge from their home life. When Frankie's father is away and she is at home with just her step-mother, school is one of the only places she can be herself. Although it is impossible for teachers to have sympathy for every student, it is important that the students feel that their teachers have empathy for their situations and an understanding of what they are going through. From this study it became apparent that some teachers know very little about the home lives of their students.

Some parents have a strong influence over their child's behavior and attitude, often without realizing it themselves as in Penny's and Frankie's case. Although this influence is often indirect, it is necessary that teachers and administrators recognized this, and consequently encouraged increased levels of parental involvement in their children's education. Perhaps the answer to why students display certain behaviors may be found in their parents beliefs and attitudes.

Society has changed, but has the role of the physical education teacher changed accordingly? Is it our job to teach a variety of team games? Is it our job to teach students how to recreate and use their leisure time? Is it our job to encourage students to be physically active for life in order to maintain their health? Is it our job to find out about each students background and home life? Is it time to re-develop the physical education program and the role of the physical education teacher to meet the needs of today's students? Although it seems that it would be impossible to address all of the issues in the gymnasium, the important thing to remember is that all students are individuals, with very different needs. Tannehill, Romar, O'Sullivan, England and Rosenberg (1994) state that "physical education programs must meet the needs of the youth within a changing environment" (p.407) and that physical education teachers and curriculum developers need to be sensitive to the students needs. If teachers can demonstrate to students that they recognize this and are there to help them through life and not just teach them how to spike a volleyball with perfect form, then maybe all students will begin to feel more positive towards their teachers and consequently physical education and activity. Students feel despondent about the activities within their programs; usually not of their choosing. This raises the question, should we give students the support to design their own activities at the high school level?

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