

High School Students' Perspectives About Misbehavior

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Abstract

This study explored student misbehavior from high school students' perspectives. Data were collected from 39 participants (21 females, 18 males) through (a) critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954), (b) semi-structured interviews, and (c) class observations. Data were triangulated across methods to identify common themes of student misbehavior. Participants defined misbehavior as either doing what the teacher said not to do or not doing what the teacher said to do. Participants reported several types of misbehavior, several ideas for preventing misbehavior, and various contextual factors that influence misbehavior. In summary, student misbehavior was associated closely with teacher actions and how students responded to those actions.

Within every classroom teachers hold two major goals: learning and order (Doyle, 1986). The learning goal is achieved through student engagement with an instructional task system that teachers design. That is, teachers provide instruction to facilitate students' learning of material. The order goal can be developed and maintained through a managerial task system, for example establishing rules and procedures and controlling misbehavior. Learning and order are thus the teaching products, whereas the instructional and managerial task systems are teaching processes which yield these two major outcomes (Doyle, 1986).

Student misbehavior is one of the major issues within the managerial task system that both preservice and inservice teachers encounter (Hoy, 1969; Luke, 1989). Some teachers have even attributed unsuccessful teaching to the amount of misbehavior with which they have been con-

fronted (Borko, Lalik & Tomchin, 1987; Fernandez-Balboa, 1991). The higher the rate of misbehavior teachers faced, the less successful they felt.

Conducting class smoothly with a low rate of misbehavior (i.e., maintaining order) is a goal for most teachers. Both experienced and inexperienced teachers are concerned about how to create a teaching environment which is free from student misbehavior (Housner & Griffey, 1985). Even though the absence of misbehavior does not guarantee high student achievement, it allows an opportunity for learning to take place. Some teachers are aware of and prepared to succeed in minimizing misbehavior. In contrast, other teachers do not think addressing misbehavior is part of their teaching responsibilities; as a result, they struggle and continue seeking appropriate strategies for handling misbehavior throughout their teaching careers (Fernandez-Balboa, 1991; Templin, 1981).

Teacher effectiveness is frequently judged or evaluated by themselves and others (such as administrators or parents) on the ability to handle misbehavior and maintain appropriate student behavior (O'Sullivan & Dyson, 1994). Teachers who lack the ability to cope with student misbehavior may perceive themselves as unsuccessful, burn out, drop out, or even get fired from their job (Brooks & Hawke, 1987-1988).

Many studies regarding student misbehavior from teacher perspectives have been conducted in classroom settings, while only a few have been investigated in a physical education setting (Fernandez Balboa, 1991; O'Sullivan & Dyson, 1994; Templin, 1981). Not many of these studies take student points of view into account in any way (Lesley, 1981; Stinson, 1993). Since

classrooms are places where both teacher and students exist together (their teaching/learning environment), student perspectives are as important as teacher views (Kounin, 1970). As a result, studies about misbehavior from student perspectives are needed.

Although the nature of physical education requires students to play actively and participate, student misbehavior still exists at rates comparable to other subject matter classes (Hardy, Hardy & Thorpe, 1994; Siedentop, 1991). What causes students to misbehave is unclear and researchers do not yet have enough information to explain causes from student points of view (Lesley, 1981; Stinson, 1993). Students may or may not perceive misbehavior in the same ways as their teachers. Therefore, it is worthwhile to learn more about misbehavior from student perspectives. Such information could promote better understanding about why students misbehave and could help teachers better prepare for, prevent, and handle misbehavior more effectively.

Returning to Doyle's ecological analysis of classrooms, student misbehavior can be understood in terms of how well teachers gain and maintain order and how well they keep students focused on learning tasks. The reciprocal influences of teachers and students are critical to understanding student misbehavior, and it is time to identify student perspectives on misbehavior. The purpose of this study, then, was to explore high school students' perspectives about misbehavior.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Participants were 39 volunteer high school students, 26 from Starlight High School (SHS) and 13 students from Moonlight High School (MHS), aged 15-17; the group included students who did and did not typically misbehave. All class participants gave informed consent for data

collection. Six physical education teachers taught these classes, their teaching experiences ranging between 5-25 years (see Table 1). Class sizes varied from 20-33 students. Activity units offered in each school (including softball, tennis, track and field and flag football, approximately equal number of observations per activity) lasted about 4 weeks, classes meeting 2-3 times a week for approximately 50 minutes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in both schools took place during one academic year. Each class was observed several times. Data were collected from the students using (a) critical incident (CI) forms (Flanagan, 1954) (N = 39), (b) semi-structured interviews (N = 14), and (c) observational field notes (see Table 1).

Two critical incident forms, good behavior and misbehavior, were developed, each requesting a detailed description of a single occasion, including the context and student and teacher behaviors. Results from both misbehavior and good behavior forms were read, information was extracted from each form, and sorted into categories. For example, Jen (SHS) wrote on her misbehavior form:

We were outside doing track. My friends and I were supposed to be practicing for discus. But instead, we were standing around talking about what we were going to do after school.

The italicized sentences provide context for the incident. The boldface sentence describes talking rather than doing the assigned activity; therefore, this behavior was extracted as a misbehavior and labeled "talking". The CI categories were compared and combined with results from other data gathering methods.

Formal semi-structured interviews (averaging 40 minutes, conducted at school with volunteer students at the end of activity units) included follow-up probe questions. All participants were asked similar questions, such as "Why do you

think students misbehave in gym class?” or “What should teachers do when misbehavior does occur?” All interviews were transcribed and analyzed through constant comparison with observation field notes. Constant comparison includes scanning data for common categories, classifying common themes, placing data into common categories, and establishing explanations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

Additionally, 56 classes were observed and 12 of these were videotaped, depending on weather and teacher lesson plans (see Table 1). The camera was set up in a corner to provide maximum coverage of the entire class. Class observations were recorded as brief field notes focusing on observed incidents of misbehavior and particular contextual details. Field notes were elaborated in a word processing program after each observation with observer comments added separately.

Data from all methods were triangulated. As a result, a number of common categories of student misbehavior were identified.

Results

Generally, these students had clear ideas about what went on in their physical education classes. Results will be reported in four sections: definitions of misbehavior, types of misbehavior, factors associated with student misbehavior, and preventing misbehavior.

Definitions of Misbehavior

The meanings of student definitions of misbehavior centered around doing something that the teacher said not to do or not doing what the teacher said to do. Joan (MHS) mentioned, “misbehavior is when students do something wrong or something we are not told to, or they are doing something that they know they are not supposed to.” Dick (SHS) emphasized (CI), “misbehavior is when students goof off, refuse to do what they are told by the teacher.”

Types of Misbehavior

Results from all data sources showed many kinds of misbehavior in physical education classes (see Table 2). Some types of misbehavior were common (e.g., cheating, fooling around, and not participating) and can be seen in most physical education classes, as Jen (SHS) emphasized: “The problem didn’t happen under specific teachers or under specific classes. They [students] were also messing around during volleyball, flag football, archery, or whatever.”

Other misbehaviors that students mentioned frequently included hurting peers, criticizing peers, and discrimination. These three types of misbehavior can be more broadly categorized as harassment. Based on student examples provided in this study, harassment refers to a physical or verbal behavior through which people abuse/attack other(s) by means of putting them down, making them feel bad, or hurting them.

This “harassment” category is highlighted because participants reported these types of misbehavior in most physical education classes in both school settings and clearly felt strongly about these particular misbehaviors. Students identified numerous harassment incidents and requested that teachers do something to address this issue seriously.

Criticizing Peers. Data from all sources showed that students criticized peers frequently. Some incidents were difficult to observe because students criticized quietly, whereas others were obvious since student(s) shouted or yelled at the target student(s), putting others down or making them feel bad very publicly. An example in a frisbee class indicated that some students criticized the opponent’s team many times while they were playing against each other. Lesley (MHS) said during a game, “You’re a jerk... You stupid loser... A moron....” Jim (MHS) added,

She’s [Lesley] always trying to be funny or loud or yelling at people, making fun of people, passing her judgment... Other kids just get pissed off because she al-

ways does that... She made the person who got shouted at really mad.

Lesley (MHS) herself realized that she made fun of others during the frisbee games. She said during her interview,

I was yelling at people who were running in the track and playing in the field. It's not my job to yell at people. I don't think people want to listen to my yelling... I was being rude. I just want to get the frisbee for my team.

Mr. Anthony (MHS), who taught the class, tried to stop students from criticizing others many times. He said repeatedly, "stop it... cut it out... knock it off... that's not a polite word, don't say it again...." His actions only stopped students temporarily. Field notes indicated that some students continued these misbehaviors again and again.

Besides telling students to stop, these teachers did not punish students or respond in other ways. One time when a male student said, "A f. . king ball", the teacher stopped the game and said, "next time you will be sitting out." Unfortunately, observation field notes indicated no one ever sat out because they criticized their peers.

Hurting Peers. In most team sports observed, students sometimes hurt others on opposing teams. In some incidents, it was difficult to judge whether students intended to hurt the others or not, whereas other incidents were easy to determine. For example, during a speedball class at SHS, Kim explained, "I and the others were fighting for the soccer ball... He tried to grab the ball from me, but I was stronger. I wiped him out. I didn't give him the ball; instead I threw it out and their team had to go and get it."

Instances of hurting peers happened in a variety of activities, such as basketball, speedball, frisbee, field hockey, and others. Some students pushed, pulled, kicked, tripped, hit, or threw the ball toward the opponents. Teachers usually saw the incidents because they always refereed the games while students were playing. Some

teachers responded more than others and it was difficult to determine what criteria they used for ignoring or reacting to those misbehavior incidents, since the teachers were not formally interviewed. Data sources showed that teachers who responded to such incidents tended to have lower rates of these events than teachers who ignored them. Thus, teachers seemed to have a great impact on the amount of student misbehavior in their classes.

Discrimination. In some physical activities, male students created an atmosphere of discrimination for females. For instance, Cathy (MHS) described her flag football unit (CI):

The first day of football, our gym teacher gave a brief introduction, but he did not explain the rules. The guys already knew how to play football. We began to play. The game was touch football not tackle, but the guys were big and rough and the girls got pushed around. We [the 3 girls] became intimidated by the rough guys and we began to stand on the edges, trying to stay out of the push and shove that went on in the middle. It didn't matter; the boys refused to include us anyway. One of them made an un-called for comment that was to the extent of, "Well, girls don't know how to play sports anyway". I began to hate going to gym class, whereas before I had looked forward to playing soccer. Gym had become a place of discrimination instead of a fun thing.

Helen (SHS) explained a similar situation in a different flag football unit at SHS. She said, "The guys refused to pass the ball to us anyway [flag football]." Mary (MHS) said (CI), "usually in regular gym [basketball] class, I don't really do any real physical acting because I am not very athletic and most of the boys in my gym class play all the games and leave the girls on the sidelines."

Observation data corresponded to what students reported in critical incident forms and

interviews, showing that instances of such discrimination occurred in both schools in different activities (e.g., basketball and flag football). Unfortunately, the teachers of these units (one at MHS and the other at SHS) did not seem to be aware of how they provided unequal opportunities for male and female students to participate in physical activities during their classes.

Factors Associated with Student Misbehavior

Students reported several factors related to student misbehavior. The three factors that most students mentioned were peer group, type of activity, and enjoyment of activity.

Peer Group. Most students reported that peer groups had great impact on misbehavior. For example, students were likely to misbehave or behave well in accord with the majority of their social cliques. They tended to act out more in front of their friends or do something that would make them fit into peer group standards, such as talking when they were supposed to be quiet or cheating in order to win the game. The peer group usually put a lot of pressure on them. Pete (MHS) explained,

If you are around your friends, you do things that you wouldn't do when you are by yourself because people try to show off for their friends. Or your friends pressure you to do something new. If the group tends to play, I tend to play more. If the group just sits and talks, then I do what they do.

Bob (SHS) also emphasized the significance of peer groups:

Like a certain group of kids do not like the activity they are doing and are not participating and the gym teachers want them to. That makes you feel like..., should I stay with the kids who aren't doing the things or should I stand out from them and do what the teacher said? It's kind of getting you stuck in the middle sometimes.

Type of Activity. Data indicated that two main characteristics of activities are linked to misbehavior. First, activities in which students have to be together in a limited space (such as playing basketball in a gymnasium) or playing a team sport with many players on each team (such as soccer) increased the likelihood of students misbehaving. Generally, the larger the group, the more misbehavior and conflict that arose.

Second, activities in which students are interested and in which they have great opportunity to engage provided less time for students to misbehave. Lisa (MHS) explained the connection she saw between misbehavior and types of activity.

If the activity keeps your interest, I guess you will be less likely to misbehave. I guess for certain students, some activities are more interesting than others. If you get a game where everybody is involved more often, then they are not likely to misbehave, but if you have a game with a few people playing and you can't get everybody in the field as much as they want, then you will get people misbehaving at the side.

Enjoyment of Activity. When students perceived that the activities were not enjoyable, they were more likely to act out in a variety of forms, such as not participating. Ben (MHS) thought table tennis was not fun so he did not want to play. He said (C1), "Ping pong sucked. It's not active at all and most people didn't want to play, like me. I think teachers should ask what we want to do." Similarly, Rich (MHS) did not see the enjoyment in his aerobics unit. He stated (C1), "During aerobics, it's really boring watching ugly girls on the television screen trying to show us aerobics activities. I didn't feel the need to participate."

Preventing Misbehavior

Most students believed that there are several ways for physical education teachers and students

themselves to prevent misbehavior. The classes in which teachers were more strict and provided more structure were those in which students were likely to behave. Helen (SHS) mentioned:

I think when you have a good teacher and a good structure. Not just "OK, go play tennis and have fun." They will show you how to serve. They will show you how to do things and they are with you there the whole time. They are watching and helping you. ... I think that helps when the teacher tells you how to play and everything.

If teachers set up clear rules and consequences, appropriately group students by dividing out high-skilled and low-skilled players, and expect everyone to engage in the activity, students are likely to cooperate, behave, and become involved in the assigned tasks. Nancy (SHS) made this point about class rules: Probably going back to the rules and guidelines. Like make the rules clear and talk about the consequences. For example, if you don't change, you are going to get zero in the class."

Students also thought that if the teacher divided students into small groups, students were more likely to participate. Joan (MHS) suggested, "I think when they [teachers] split kids into smaller groups, it works a lot better." Students themselves have a great impact on whether their peers will misbehave during physical education; they can either stop or spread misbehavior to others. If everyone pays attention when the misbehavior occurs, the person will continue misbehaving again and again. Joshua (SHS) gave an example: "Sometimes it's cool to misbehave because if your friends do it, then you have to do it, too. Or if someone throws the ball at me, I will throw it back to him."

On the other hand, actions that help stop their peers from misbehaving include these: if everyone actively participates in assigned tasks, motivates or helps their peers engage in the activity, tries to stop their misbehavior, shows them that

they are not impressed, and does not give them attention. Bob (SHS) raised an interesting point:

You keep alert, keep interested in what you are doing. If someone's goofing off, you are not paying attention to them. Try to mainly just participate and keep interested in what you are doing. When somebody is misbehaving to try to impress the other people, you can show them that you are not impressed by ignoring them.

Students think that a teacher should respond to misbehaving students, at least to let them know that he/she is aware, or warn them before applying other strategies to stop the behavior. How a teacher addresses disruptive students depends on the types of misbehavior. For example, Frank (SHS) explained,

Well, it depends on what kind of misbehavior. I mean obviously if something is going on like physical violence, hitting or something, then definitely the teacher should intervene and stop it. "I think like teasing people, yelling at people, making them feel bad and stuff, the gym teacher should definitely say something. He/she may not necessarily take them out of the class, but definitely make a point of it, and say something or at least say that you notice this. You are not going to let that happen. Not like just let it go.

Discussion

Findings from this study revealed that these participants defined misbehavior as students doing what they were *not* supposed to do (e.g., talking) or *not* doing what they were supposed to do (e.g., not listening). Based on this definition, students reported several forms of misbehavior that they had noticed in physical education classes. Some types of misbehavior, such as talking and not complying, were commonly reported in previous studies as well (Duncan, 1992; Fernandez-Balboa, 1991; Pestello, 1989; Templin, 1981). Others, such as harassment, also happened frequently but have not received enough attention

in physical education classes as in other subject areas (Lee, Croninger, Linn & Chen, 1996).

Findings confirm that discrimination still exists in coed physical education classes, providing male students with more opportunities to practice and participate in physical activities than females. Recent studies have shown similar results (Satina, Salmon, Cothran, Loftus & StockinDavidson, 1998; Treanor, Graber, Housner & Wiegand, 1998). Criticizing and hurting peers was targeted to both male and female students. A strategy such as having same-sex physical education classes (Treanor, Graber, Housner & Wiegand, 1998) may not be a practical solution for harassment misbehaviors because it may not decrease same-sex incidents.

Training preservice and inservice teachers to be aware of different forms of harassment in physical education and teaching strategies to address these situations are more practical than arranging same-sex physical education classes. Promoting positive learning experiences for all students in physical education is critical since literature indicates that people who are harassed (victims) are more likely to avoid the situations, classes, or people who harass them (Lee, Croninger, Linn & Chen, 1996). Reducing or eliminating harassment in physical education is necessary if students are to learn and continue participating in physical activities as part of their lives.

How teachers set up a managerial system to support the instructional system seems to be a key element to control misbehavior (Doyle, 1984; Lund, 1992; Tousignant & Siedentop, 1983), although these participants reported other factors that influence misbehavior as well. These students reported that good rules and routines were major strategies for preventing them from engaging in misbehavior and helped them distinguish between appropriate behavior and misbehavior, as has been emphasized in previous literature (Fink & Siedentop, 1989; O'Sullivan & Dyson, 1994; Siedentop, 1991).

These high school students were aware of the significance of rules and routines. Teachers may wish to consider getting students involved in setting up rules and routines, as well as discussing what behaviors are to be expected. Rules and routines that students help teachers design will be more meaningful so that students remember and comply with them better than those established solely by the teachers.

These students also indicated that students were less likely to misbehave when teachers monitored the class and addressed misbehavior. Most teachers recognize the importance of holding students accountable (e.g., actively monitoring classes, applying appropriate strategies for handling misbehavior) because failing to hold students accountable means that students may engage in tasks only to the extent of their own interest (Doyle, 1984; Hastie & Saunders, 1991; Siedentop, 1991). This confirms Doyle's (1984; 1986) assertion that holding students accountable is an underlying premise for maintaining order which, in turn, helps strengthen the learning environment.

These participants reported that they expect teachers to help them to learn, not just simply tell them to play games. Classes in which teachers provide a variety of instructional tasks not only promote student learning but also help students behave appropriately because students are actively engaged in activities. These results replicated previous research findings that effective teachers present instructional tasks in many different forms to keep students' attention and help them learn (Brooks & Hawke, 1987-1988; Siedentop, 1991).

These students' criteria for determining a well-behaved class (participation and cooperation) were similar to the busy, happy, good concept that some teachers consider when they plan physical education classes (Placek, 1983). The enjoyment factor also played a significant role in student perceptions of misbehavior. If students thought that certain classes were not enjoyable, they were

likely to pay less attention to what they were doing or to engage in something that was not relevant to assigned tasks. When participants labeled a class as “fun”, they were motivated and actively participated. These findings support our understanding that enjoyment is one important element that students expect from physical education (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987; Griffin, Chandler & Sariscsany, 1993; Supaporn & Griffin, 1998).

Peers influenced student misbehavior, particularly among groups who were friends. If the group misbehaved, members of the group would more likely do the same in order to be considered part of the group, as noted in earlier research (Allen, 1986; Carlson, 1994). Social aspects, including peer interactions, need further investigation since physical education classes are social by nature (Carlson, 1994; Hastie & Pickwell, 1996; Siedentop, 1991).

Students discussed most misbehavior incidents as contextualized accounts involving what teachers did in classes and how students responded. Although this study investigated misbehavior from the student points of view, teachers who taught these classes played a major role in what happened in each class session (Carlson, 1994; Doyle, 1986; Kounin, 1970; Siedentop, 1991). Participants always referred to how their teachers conducted classes or assigned tasks. In other words, effectively developed instructional and managerial tasks greatly influenced how students behaved or misbehaved in class (Doyle, 1986). Therefore, further research should focus on particular physical education classes in which data from both students and the teacher are collected. This will allow researchers to gain better understanding about student misbehavior in context.

In conclusion, participants recognized several types of misbehavior from mild (e.g., not complying) to more severe (e.g., harassment). They preferred to be in class environments where they felt safe, supported, and comfortable. Thus, teachers may need to teach students directly how to support, accept, and affirm each other.

Teachers could encourage students to be active in developing safe, supportive classes because such positive class environments, in turn, strengthen learning and help maintain order (Doyle, 1986). This collaborative strategy thus serves as a foundation for promoting communication between students and their teachers.

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Table 1. Data Collection Methods

Schools	Critical Incident Forms	Interviews	Observational Field Notes
SHS 26 Ss (11M, 15F) 3 Ts (2 M, 1 F)	26 Ss (11M, 15F)	7/26 Ss (4M, 3F)	26 classes
MHS 13 Ss (7M, 6F) 3 Ts (2M, 1F)	13 Ss (7M, 6F)	7/13 Ss (3M, 4F)	30 classes

Table 2. Categories of Students' Misbehavior

Categories	Associated Behaviors
Harassment	Criticizing peers Hurting peers Discrimination
Not paying attention	Fooling around Talking Using inappropriate language
Not complying	Not participating Not following class rules Not following activities rules Objecting to activities
Others	Cheating Fighting Smoking