

## PEDAGOGY

# Reflective Voices: Understanding University Students' Experiences of Urban High School Physical Education

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** *The purpose of this study was to understand first-year college students' reflections on past physical education (PE) experiences in urban high school settings. Method:* Data collection included semi-structured, open-ended, qualitative interviews. Constant comparison method was used for data analysis. **Results:** Several findings emerged: (a) unfavorable teaching conditions; (b) lack of enthusiasm, teaching, caring, and structure; (c) teacher-coach role conflict; (d) favoritism toward athletic students; and (e) sexism in teaching. **Discussion/Conclusion:** Students desired improvement of urban PE programs, including development of a diversified curriculum in which nontraditional sports and activities are offered, more in-depth coverage of sports that students care about, and provision of adequate equipment and resources to promote student engagement in PE.

Urban schools are becoming increasingly diverse, with 1 in 5 students being of immigrant background, and this ratio is expected to be 1 in 3 by 2040 (Carhill, Paez, & Suarez-Orosco, 2008; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). Hence, urban schools comprise students from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds who speak a

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plethora of languages. As Flory (2015) explained, students in urban schools experience differences in culture and language between school and home settings (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011) and vary widely in terms of learning needs and abilities and in terms of attitudes (Kraft et al., 2015). In James and Collier's study (2011), students considered physical education (PE) curriculum to have little effect or to bring minimal value to their lives but were responsive to meeting goals associated with social activities or tasks. Essentially, there was a disconnect between the students' curricular interests (or what the students considered meaningful) and the teachers' choices (James & Collier, 2011). Schmidlein, Vickers, and Chepyator-Thomson (2014) indicated the need for multicultural curriculum and usage of fitness and standard-based curriculum consistent with changes in student background for urban PE courses. Flory and McCaughtry (2011) and Kulinna, McCaughtry, Cothran, and Martin (2006) explained that teachers need to be aware of dynamics in culture that are connected with family, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In urban areas, teachers encounter challenges in school settings. According to Flory (2015), urban PE teachers face problems associated with differences in cultural backgrounds between teachers and students, among them cultural dissimilarities found in "teachers' biographies, students, and their families in urban communities" (p. 663). Issues of poverty and irrelevant curricular activities, along with students' perception of fear and disengagement (Ennis et al., 1997), influenced student involvement in PE and fueled notions of unresponsive educational policies or curriculum. Flory discovered special challenges in urban schools, among them lack of teaching equipment and facilities, faced by early career PE teachers. In fact, many urban PE programs lack outdoor athletic fields, pools, and gymnasium space, with classes often being conducted in cafeterias, hallways, and classrooms (Montalvo, 2007; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997).

Students living and attending schools in urban environments face many challenges in PE programs such as overcrowded classes, waiting in long lines, repetitive activities, and boring or monotonous curricula (Flory, 2015). Cothran and Ennis (1999) found that large, overcrowded PE classes impeded students' ability to interact with others and allowed students to remain disconnected from class-

mates. According to Dyson, Coviello, DiCesare, and Dyson (2009), middle school students in urban school settings were exposed to repetitive, boring exercises that influenced student participation in PE. However, when supported as a core subject in urban schools, PE helped urban public school children to meet their fitness and physical activity goals (Castillo, Clark, Butler, & Racette, 2015). Thus, one way for PE teachers to improve the learning environment for students in urban high school settings is to listen to students about their experiences. In other words, listening to student voices is an integral way of understanding how to improve high school urban PE. Hunter (2002) studied student transitions to middle school to gain an understanding of their experiences and perspectives. The students argued that the teachers or administrators at their schools did not consult or listen to them. They felt that school was an adult world dominated by adult opinion. Teacher educators, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders can learn a great deal about teaching and learning by listening to student voices (Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Dyson, 2006; Graham, 1995; Pissanos & Allison, 1993). According to Dyson (2006), it is critical for these professionals to pay attention to student voices to understand their motivations for involvement in physical activity.

Few research studies in the field of education focus on student voices (Cook-Sather, 2002; Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Dyson, 2006; Erickson & Schultz, 1992; Hale, 2015; MacQuarrie, Murnaghan, & MacLellan, 2008), but recent studies in the field of PE focus on the beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of middle and high school students (Carlson, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1999, 2001; Dyson et al., 2009; Ennis et al., 1997; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Hunter, 2002; Lineham, 2003; Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009). Unlike previous studies, this study focused on understanding experiences of university students based on the time that they were in high school. The intent of this research was to gain insightful knowledge about urban teaching and learning through retrospective examination of secondary school student voices on the subject of PE. The purpose of this study was to understand university students' experiences through their reflective voices on urban school PE. First-year, first-semester students who self-enrolled in a mandatory college PE course were chosen because of their proximity of having just completed their PE

program in high school. Many participants in this study had just had PE in either their junior or senior year of high school.

The researchers used social cognitive theory to guide their understanding of university students' reflections on their high school PE program. According to this theory, a person's judgment influences his or her social behavior (Bandura, 2004; Young, Plotnikoff, Collins, Callister, & Morgan, 2014). This is rooted in Bandura's (1986, 2000) work on self-efficacy, emphasizing a person's judgments on his or her capabilities. Self-efficacy centers on an "individual's judgment of his or her capabilities to perform a certain action" (Block, Taliaferro, Harris, & Krause, 2010, p. 44). Understanding students' reflective experiences might reveal novel ideas and interactions associated with PE, which might inform program improvement or modification.

This study is significant and will add new content to the literature on student experiences in high school PE. This study also provides new insights and suggestions for revision of K–12 urban curriculum programs, creation of culturally and socially responsive teaching, and selection of excellent teaching strategies and usage of best practices evident from participants' experiences. Student voice research is paramount, and this study adds to its importance in the field of PE.

## **Method**

### **Context of the Study**

This study was conducted at a university in the southeastern United States. The participants were first-year college students enrolled in a PE course who had attended an urban high school. The students were asked questions on reflection, which focused on high school PE programs and experiences.

### **Research Design**

The overall research design was based on qualitative, open-ended, semistructured interviews (Giorgi, 2007). Using qualitative research allows the "researcher to establish meanings of a phenomenon from the view of participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 16), which allows participants to show how "their social experiences are given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). The interview method is a powerful way to gather information that informs human behavior (Fontana & Frey, 2005). See the Appendix for the interview guide. While con-

ducting the interviews, the researcher modified the questions as needed with the participants' responses, but in general tried to follow the questions in order.

## **Data Collection**

After obtaining institutional review board approval and informed consent, the researcher interviewed 16 university students enrolled in their first year in their first semester in a basic PE course, for approximately 30 to 45 min and focused specifically on their urban high school PE experiences, eliciting rich and detailed experiences.

The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. What were first-year college students' experiences of their urban high school PE program?
2. What critical incidents stood out for students about their urban high school PE program?
  - a. What do students recollect about the high school PE curriculum? What did they find valuable? What would they prefer eliminated?
  - b. What were students' experiences of the instructional strategies? Which ones stand out as being useful or effective? Which ones were negatively experienced?

## **Participants**

The individuals in this study were undergraduate first-year students at a southeastern university who were enrolled in a basic PE activity class during the fall of 2013 and who had taken at least one PE class in an urban high school setting. All 16 participants had taken one PE course in high school, and two of the 16 participants had taken more than one PE course in high school. The participants were required to take a PE class in college once during their 4 years to meet graduation requirements. However, the participants had self-enrolled in a PE class in college in their first semester of their first year. First-year or freshman students at university were chosen because of their proximity to having completed high school PE. Many participants had completed their high school PE requirement in their last 2 years of high school, so they were reflecting on their recent PE experiences in the interviews occurring in their first semester of college. The participants were between 18 and 25 years old; males and females participated in the study. Pseudonyms were

used for the participants to ensure confidentiality. See Table 1 for demographics of the participants.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>PE class in college</b>	<b># of PE courses in high school and most recent school year taken</b>
Callie	Female	Caucasian	Beg Volleyball	1-senior
Chris	Female	Caucasian	Beg Volleyball	1-junior
Sylvia	Female	Caucasian	Beg Volleyball	1-senior
Juliet	Female	Caucasian	Beg Volleyball	2-senior
Emily	Female	Caucasian	Beg Volleyball	1-junior
Zane	Male	Caucasian	Beg Tennis	2-senior
Sally	Female	Hispanic	Beg Tennis	1-junior
Sandy	Female	Caucasian	Intermediate Tennis	1-senior
Jamie	Male	Caucasian	Beg Racquetball	1-senior
Amber	Female	Hispanic	Beg Racquetball	1-senior
John	Male	Caucasian	Basketball	1-senior
Stacy	Female	African American	Badminton	1-sophomore
Diamond	Female	Asian	FFL Jogging	1-senior
Hannah	Female	Caucasian	FFL Jogging	1-senior
Dale	Female	Caucasian	FFL Swimming	2-junior
Johann	Male	Caucasian	Weight Training	1-senior

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the interviews for emerging themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, the researcher audio-recorded, transcribed (Saldana, 2009), and stored the interviews on a personal computer and flash drive to ensure that they were protected until completion of the research. The researcher used Saldana’s (2009) work on comparing similarities and differences in participants’ experiences to analyze the data from this study. The researcher first coded the data, then organized the data into categories, and finally arranged the data into themes; however,

a second researcher then analyzed the themes to verify accuracy (Preissle, 2008). The themes emerging from this study were determined through LeCompte's (2000) work on students' experiences in urban high school PE. The researchers wanted to give voice to each of those students and understand their previous experiences. The researchers then drew conclusions from the data provided.

## Findings

This research study was designed to give voice to former urban high school students reflecting on their PE program. The major themes that emerged focused on (1) reflections on mandated school curriculum in PE and (2) teacher methods of content delivery. Under these themes, several subthemes emerged from the transcribed interview data.

### Students' Reflections on Mandated School Curriculum in PE

The curriculum consists of the entire experience that occurs within the school walls, as well as students' experiences, and includes various subjects offered through the school curriculum (Ennis, 1995). This section directly answers Research Question 2a: What do students recollect about the high school PE curriculum? What did they find valuable? What would they prefer eliminated? The findings center on the subthemes of (1) variety of nontraditional sports, (2) superficial coverage of sports content, (3) curricular expansion of PE courses, and (4) student-centered curriculum.

**Variety of nontraditional sports.** The traditional sports of basketball, volleyball, and running often dominate PE classes (Corbett & Wilson, 2002); however, students often prefer to engage in nontraditional sports. Students in this study wanted variety in the courses they were taught and sought diversity in their PE subjects, games, sports, and activities. Sylvia explained, "I would like those games and even like some more nontraditional games like more real ones like, for example, badminton." Sylvia also mentioned that she was interested in taking an outdoor adventure class in high school. Sandy stated that she "wanted something that most of us hadn't gotten to do before or something that most people haven't really heard of—that kind of sport." Dale wanted "different kinds of sports," and she specifically mentioned swimming and Frisbee as desired classes, stating that her school "didn't have [many] options; my school offered

maybe like one or two [PE classes].” Clearly, based on the participants’ words, they desired variety in the courses they were taught and sought varied experiences.

**Superficial coverage of sports content.** Traditionally in PE, multiple traditional sports are covered in one semester (Corbett & Wilson, 2002). Not only did students want a variety of nontraditional sports offered, but they also wanted an in-depth focus on one traditional sport versus a survey of many traditional sports offered in PE classes. Amber and Jamie wished that their high school PE classes focused on specific sports instead of an overview of many sports. Stacy wished soccer and track and field were offered, stating that they “played basketball all the time, we would switch to other sports, but that would basically be it.” Zane wanted a softball class and a wider variety of PE activities. Sandy was tired of the same sports over and over and wanted variety. She said,

I think people get discouraged when it’s the same sports over and over that are encouraged; you feel that if you don’t play that sport, then yours isn’t important or you shouldn’t have to play it, and I think that all sports should be recognized in a PE class; you should be able to learn about them and practice them so you know if, hey, maybe I wanted to play this, I could take lessons or I could do something else.

**Curricular expansion of PE courses.** Students often asked for more PE than the required time or semester and wished their school offered more choices, longer times, and allowed them to take PE in more semesters. John wished for two health classes instead of the one mandatory class. Diamond wished that more PE classes were required. She stated,

If the PE was longer [meaning more exposure to physical activities], I feel like more students would want exercise, even outside of class . . . If the class was a year long, I feel like the results would be a lot more and students would be a lot more motivated . . . because after, like, the semester, I didn’t really do, like, the mile run and all that stuff. I did, like, fun stuff outside of school, but nothing in school. Maybe if they made it a year or something like that. I know I’m saying it. If I was, like, a student and someone said that to me, I’d be like,

“Shut up. I just want it a semester.” I guess a year would be better. Extending it. The best thing I can think of.

Sally wished her high school had more options for PE. She said, “I guess they could have had more options but like in college how they have, like, tennis class and other classes.” Dale said, “I disliked how short it was. I kind of wish it could’ve been a little bit longer,” and “I feel like high school should have PE every year, every day.” Chris said,

I feel like it should be required in more than one semester, because one semester in four years, that’s negligible. That’s nothing compared to all the other classes you are taking. I don’t know. I feel like it should be required to at least have two because the more it is involved in your life, the more it becomes part of your life, everyday type of thing. I wouldn’t say every day of the week, just three days of the week because the more you do it, the less fun it is. If you have it in smaller dosages, it’s better. But if it’s an hour long every day, you don’t look forward to it. But longer period of time, keep it within intervals. That’s what I would suggest.

**Student-centered curriculum.** There are typically two types of curricula: teacher driven and student centered (Ennis, 1995). In a teacher-driven curriculum in PE, the teacher determines what to teach, when to teach it, how to teach it, and what sports and activities to teach. In most PE programs, the focus is on what the teacher wants to teach or what the teacher was told to teach (Ennis, 1995), but students often want a voice in what they learn and do in PE. A student-centered curriculum focuses on what the students want, need, and desire. Participants repeatedly stated that they wished for PE courses they desired and sports and activities that had meaning for them. Chris also wished her school had more PE options and expanded on this idea:

For me, I feel like they could have had more options for us to be able to choose what’s best. I don’t know, maybe for, this sounds terrible, but it may be [good] for us to have more say in what we do, like what sport do you all want to

learn. I know that's hard with a class to have a majority and everything. Not everyone is going to be happy, but that even gives more incentive. If I want to learn to play tennis, and we are learning tennis, I'm actually going to put effort into learning how to do it correctly and everything. But if it is like we are doing this, it's like, I don't like basketball, and I don't want to play. You only put half your effort in, but I think if we had more options or more choices within the class at least or more say, then I think it would be more enjoyable.

Sandy also stated that it would have been better to have sports that she wanted to learn about rather than the ones she felt forced to do. She wanted a variety of sports offered instead of the one or two sports offered. Sandy explained,

Well some of us, we don't like running the track every day, or we don't want to play racquetball. We want to play something that we thought would be fun, so if they offered, like, more volleyball or they offered tennis or they offered soccer lessons or something else that you got to do, then it would be more enjoyable . . . If you got a choice, you could do the track, you could do Frisbee or throw the football or do something else besides just what you were—that one thing that you were told to do.

Zane said that he thought it would be beneficial for teachers to offer a PE course that meets the students' needs. Amber stated that she wanted to be able to choose a sport and play it, "not be forced to do what the teacher told me to do."

### **Teacher Methods of Content Delivery**

Participants answered questions about their likes and dislikes about their PE program as related to instruction. This section directly answers research question 2b: What were students' experiences of the instructional strategies? Which ones stand out as being useful or effective? Which ones were negatively experienced? The subthemes included (1) organizing for instruction and lesson implementation and (2) the teaching strategies and styles used by the teacher in regard to instruction.

### **Organizing for instruction and lesson implementation.**

Rules, routines, and lesson structure are important in any course; they establish standards and provide order to what can be a chaotic classroom environment. In PE, rules, routines, and structure are especially important because safety is a paramount issue due to the nature of movement activities taught (Graham, 1995). Routines are determined by teachers, and most PE programs are organized the same way, with the students going to locker rooms to change into PE clothes or uniforms, then attendance, then warm-ups or stretching, and then the focus of the day (Graham, 1995). Dale stated:

Okay, so I would leave my other class and go there and we had about 5, 10 minutes to change clothes. Then you go in the weight room, and we would stretch and do just like warm-ups, just so you don't injure yourself. Then we would do exercises.

Another student, Juliet, said: "Well, we did, like, one lap, like, two laps was a warm-up and then whatever sport you were doing." Sandy's class would change in the locker room, go to the track, stretch, and run, and the teacher would write down their times when they were finished. In regard to the structure of the lesson, participants' experiences fell into the categories of (1) structured and organized lessons and (2) a free-for-all without any structure.

Some teachers provided a well-planned-out and organized lesson with structure and order. Juliet's class, for example, was structured. She explained, "We would run, have a few drills, maybe, like, high knees or, like, butt kicks and then . . . get on teams and scrimmage or just do, like, basic drills for that sport." In Johann's class, the teacher was "very official" and "wrote everything down, timed you, and then he graded you. You actually had to do some stuff. It wasn't just show up and dress out and you get an A." Johann expounded, "The teacher had structured, organized lessons for not only the lecture part but also for the activities; he would write it on the board." At Chris's school, the students would change and then everything was organized from start to finish:

Then you would do about 10 minutes of warm-up, so it leaves, like, 25 minutes to actually play, but then they usually do five-minute intro if we are learning about a specific aspect

of a sport or introducing the sport in general. Then we do some drills about it, like, that specific thing, skill that we are learning and then normally I would try to play a game using the skills that we learned . . . No, it wasn't like, "All right, you guys can do this," it was like, "All right, today we are going to play dodge ball." We would all play dodge ball or, like, this is a fun day, but we are all going to do the same thing. It wasn't a free-for-all. We were all specifically told what to do.

Unfortunately, some teachers did not provide planned-out or organized lessons and typically let the students do what they wanted. In many instances, class became a free period, and according to Sylvia, the teachers "rolled out the balls." In Emily's class, the teacher provided the equipment and let them do what they wanted. Emily said, "So it wasn't, like, organized like, 'here's what we're going to do today.' It was like, 'here's a bucket of balls.'" In Sylvia's experience, "Some days they would just get a whole bag or bucket or cart full of balls, and if we were in the gym, we could grab whatever basketball or soccer ball or bouncy ball and just kind of play around." With no structure, often little teaching occurred. Sandy said her class was "disorganized," and she stated,

If you would just do your work in class, it would take, like, 10 minutes and you'd be done and you'd just sit there. Or if you were an athlete and you finished your lap, your mile in nine minutes, then you could just do whatever you wanted and you'd just sit there. You'd talk; there wasn't really anything else to do.

Jamie explained, "It was less organized; he was a very relaxed teacher, and he didn't do much, he wasn't very organized, if I'm honest. It wasn't a very structured class." Zane stated, "And if I could describe that in one word, it would be very laid-back, not very much structure. It was just kind of do what you want." Zane said his teachers would disappear to their office after taking roll: "[They] were just kind of like absentees," and he stated,

So that's one thing I wish there was more of is teacher involvement in the class and like more—almost more structure, the teacher kind of makes, the teacher kind of

plans something and then you do it that day and then kind of, maybe if you have time, free-for-all stuff . . . I wanted more structure.

Johann had unstructured free days on Fridays, but the other days of the week were structured. He stated,

I guess one thing I didn't like is on the free days, they just let everyone go. Usually, one group dominated the court. They would let you play, but you wouldn't be fully involved, you would just, like, be on the side. I guess I wish they had a little bit more structure on Fridays, even though it was technically a free day, do whatever you want.

Callie too had a free period after stretching. She said,

We didn't really do that many organized things. They let us loose in the gym, basically every day. I don't know. We would stretch, and then we could just play games. We could play with the volleyball or another game, you know, just anything that we wanted to do, really . . . I'd say very rarely did we have anything that we were supposed to do. I'd say maybe once every two weeks did we ever have a structured lesson plan at all.

**Teaching strategies and styles.** Every teacher teaches a certain way, often called a style or strategy. Being able to teach the same content in different ways to accommodate different learners is an important tenet of teaching and education (Cothran & Ennis, 2001). This section includes aspects dealing with how teachers taught, teachers not caring or no teaching occurring, use of competition, lack of useful feedback, the presence of the teacher-coach dichotomy, the focus on athletes, and the presence of sexism.

***Variety of activities for content delivery and teaching to diversity in skill.*** Students wanted not only a variety of course offerings, as noted in the previous section about students' reactions to the required curriculum, but also a variety of activities and drills, to avoid, as Sylvia stated, "the monotony of class." Juliet wished her teacher had varied the drills based on skill level instead of making everyone do the same drills. She said,

Umm, maybe, like, split the class up into different levels of skill, but I feel like if he would have done that, it would have been, like, offensive, maybe you can split yourself up and do it, and my school, they would have [been] good at that because everyone is understanding. So if he had let us and then given us different skills accordingly, that would have been good for sure, but making us all do it together just put pressure on the bad people and made the good people annoyed.

Dale wished for her teachers to be more creative. She explained, “Maybe teach it in several different ways because not every person learns the same [way]. They could appropriately explain it and then show you how to do it or show you videos maybe.” Sandy wished for more choices; she wanted the teacher to give the students options of what to do and let them choose their activity. Diamond enjoyed having yoga as a choice in her PE class and thought it was a nice break from the traditional fitness activities such as running and weight lifting. Callie said that her teacher could have varied the lessons to make it more interesting, “but he let people do nothing the whole semester, so he obviously wasn’t doing a great job in that regard.” Johann got tired of receiving the same old information, stating that the teachers had to review the stuff he had already learned, so they could say they went over it, and “I think for the first two weeks I was like so bored because it was all basic stuff we already knew.” Sylvia stated, “Sometimes in our PE class, we’d kind of do, like, similar things all the time, so it would get a little repetitive.” Stacy said her class played basketball all the time, and she wanted different activities. Sylvia, Chris, Amber, Diamond, and Emily wanted variety in skill levels for classes. Sylvia said that the teachers could encourage students with lower skills to play, by dividing the class by skill level and showing the lower skilled players how to play the game. Chris wanted different classes, such as beginner and intermediate volleyball, for different player levels. She said, “Maybe offer different levels of PE for the people who are more athletic.” Emily said:

There could have been, like, two different semesters for a beginner’s class and, like, a more athletic, like, people who were already athletes, like, doing sports. I think that might have been better because then you are with people more in

your same level and it's not, like, as bad as where, like, the show-offs, people who would finish super fast. They would be with people more on their level, too.

***Lack of enthusiasm and caring in teachers' content delivery methods.*** Teachers who show excitement about their teaching and content often send a positive message to their students (Graham, 1995). Some participants believed that their teachers did not care about teaching; they believed their teachers simply wanted a paycheck and did not care about their students. Sandy noted that the teachers in her PE class did not care, seemed as if they had to do a job, and were not enthusiastic. Amber said that her teacher "kind of didn't care." Emily thought that the teacher did not care about individual students and was insensitive; she wanted the teacher to pay "more attention to the differences in students." Jamie also had a teacher who did not seem to care. He said,

He didn't really care . . . Honestly, it was a joke. I mean everybody knew that health class was a joke; everybody in our class, on the final, got a 95. I don't even think he graded the tests if I'm honest, I think he just wrote 95 on it, and that was it. Umm, and the weight-lifting class, it was more structured, but it was still—a lot of it was just getting out of actually doing work, it was kind of a free period . . . It did bother me that at least, especially in the health class, that it was so lax and that nobody really cared enough to put time and effort into a class because, as a student, that's one thing that really bothers me . . . if the teacher doesn't care, it's frustrating because after a point you don't care either, and then it's just kind of downhill from there, so that was probably my least favorite thing.

Occasionally students stated that their teachers were not teaching and that often certain teachers would simply let the students do what they wanted. Not only was there no structure in the class or a lesson plan, but also the teacher did not teach them anything. Sandy said that in her PE class "[the teachers] just figured you knew how to do it because in middle school they taught you all that stuff, so they just figured you know how to do it." Sylvia experienced very little teaching; the teacher often provided the bucket of balls and "kind of just stood there not really helping out much" and "sometimes, I think,

the teachers wouldn't even be in the gym; they'd be doing something else." In Amber's class, the teacher didn't teach anything. She stated, "He was like a paid babysitter or something and . . . I don't know. We didn't learn anything . . . He just kind of sat there . . . He didn't really teach you it. He was just like, 'Okay, here's some organized games, You do that.'" Jamie too experienced limited teaching. He said,

And the running, he didn't really teach us, he just kind of said, run a mile and I will time you. And the weight lifting, if I'm honest, we weren't given any instruction on how to lift weights correctly; he just kind of said go and do. He gave us sheets of what we were supposed to do, but honestly, 90% of the time, we made it up and just kind of sat around and talked . . . But yeah, I mean it was just—it wasn't very engaging, it was just—I mean it was a joke; it was an hour and a half of freedom, an hour of freedom. But yeah, it wasn't the best.

***Student learning and teacher feedback.*** Teacher feedback is important in PE and is an important way for a teacher to let a student know how to improve (Schmidlein et al., 2014). Sally stated that her teacher was really good at giving feedback: "I liked how he gave us a lot of feedback when we were doing, like, weight lifting, you know, exercising in general." Chris's teacher was great at giving feedback, as well. Chris stated, "We had 20 people, so yes definitely if you did it wrong. But, she wouldn't do it in a condescending way. It was just very like, 'Hey, next time, whenever you do that, it's easier if you do it this way.'" John's teacher also provided feedback; he would "say like, Okay, you're making this like a little bit too easy, try to add some weight"; he would give you those little feedback things, or he'd say, "Your form is perfect but one extra thing you can do."

Juliet had two PE teachers, and when asked if her teachers provided feedback, she said she had different experiences. For one teacher, she said, "Not really, no. If you were doing something drastically wrong like a push-up wrong where it's obvious, but if you're playing a sport and you're not good at it, they were basically just like, 'Okay, you're bad,' but they didn't do really anything." Her other teacher "was fine; she was really good at telling you how to fix things . . . she was good at being like, 'Oh, you can improve it by doing this,' and she gave me a lot of help outside of class for stretching and pre-

venting being sore.” Jamie’s teacher would provide feedback in the weight room and correct students if they were doing a lift wrong. Hannah’s teacher provided feedback for weight training, but offered no feedback for sports. Feedback is important in PE courses, and often students have a hard time learning without it. Emily stated that her teacher would demonstrate a skill, but “she never corrected us if we were doing anything wrong or provide feedback or criticism. It was more like you just play with your peers, and that’s how you learned it, I guess.”

***Inequity in curriculum implementation.*** Inequality was present in some PE programs. Some teachers were inequitable toward their students in regard to athleticism and gender. Some PE teachers favored athletic students over nonathletic students and would give them more leniencies, let them do what they wanted more frequently, and were friendlier with them. Sandy experienced her teacher show favoritism toward athletes in her PE class. She explained,

They would focus more on mainly guys especially because of the sport, our school was very football-, basketball-, baseball-oriented, so if you didn’t play those sports you were kind of, not forgotten about, but you weren’t as important as they were to get them through that class. They would, I guess, show favoritism toward the guys; they would give them extra time to turn in stuff, and they would help them out more on tests or on quizzes or worksheets. When we went to the track, they would kind of let them do their own thing; they didn’t really have to do the laps. They could throw the football around, and everyone else had to do it, or they could just sit there and not do anything. So it was kind of like if you weren’t them, then you weren’t important in the class.

Jamie’s teacher was friendly and nice with the baseball players and athletes, but impersonal with other students. Sandy wished her teachers did not show favoritism toward athletes: “They would focus more on people that played their sport . . . and everyone else would just kind of have to do whatever in the class.”

Amber experienced sexism from her teacher. She pointed out that the teacher said, “Oh, girls can’t play football. Why are you on the football team?” Her teacher thought males were better than

females in sports. He would make comments such as “Oh, this guy is going to be so much better than this girl” and “Why is she good at sports if she’s so little?” He also had different rules for males and females: “Like for working out, girls would have certain exercises as opposed to guys who probably had more difficult exercises,” and he would divide up teams based on gender, even though women were better at certain sports than some men. John also experienced sexism from his teacher. He stated,

She was very sexist. Well, obviously men have more of a physical advantage over women, but it came to a point where she said every single guy in the class was not performing the way they should. She expected us to go way above and beyond, and the girls could just sort of relax and do whatever they want. There was one day where—literally—she made all the guys go upstairs and run miles around the track while all the other girls could go downstairs and start playing basketball, and so I don’t know, maybe just a sexist sort of thing . . . other than that you could definitely tell that she favored the girls when it came to talking to them, letting them ease off the intensity of the workouts.

***Coach–teacher role conflict and effect on teaching and student learning.*** In some schools, the PE teachers were also coaches for sports, and the role of coach was more important than the role of teacher, as one student, Sandy, stated:

Umm, I feel like they didn’t really want to do it, but because they were coaches, they had to teach something, and I think that was why they were in there and they were more focused on what they had to do after school for their sport or what their sport needed rather than what the class offered like needed.

Jamie narrated,

It was always taught by coaches from the school, and there wasn’t anybody who really knew exactly what they were doing, if that makes sense; it was just kind of periphery of their coaching job, so it wasn’t like we had somebody who

specifically graduated in PE. It was just kind of like they were a coach, so the high school hired them to do this PE class.

At Zane's school, the PE teachers were coaches and would use the PE class time to go to their office and work on practice and game plans for their sports. He said,

They would kind of, like—they all had their offices and stuff—they would either be meeting with players or stuff that kind of revolved around their sport, making sure that their players were in class and stuff like that. So it was kind of, I'm not saying it was a negative, I mean it was negative that they weren't there, but they weren't, like, sleeping in their office. They were doing stuff that needed to be done, but it's almost like you need two teachers per class: one that does the sport and one that doesn't.

Hannah went to a school where athletics was very important. The school hired coaches to coach and had them teach PE as a side job, but coaching was their priority. The coaches would often disappear from class and leave the students to their own devices. She stated,

I didn't like it when the coaches were preoccupied with their sports, but I understood it because our head coach is hired to be a head coach to the football team and not to be preoccupied with me. It was frustrating sometimes because you wanted their attention, and they were busy with . . . On Fridays, [the coach] was gone. They had a game that night. I understood it, but it was still kind of frustrating . . . Then [the coach] just really had his own office, and sometimes would just . . . He would always be there at the beginning and would give us a write-up on the white board, the workout, and then go and sit in his office and do whatever he did.

## Conclusion

This study revealed several student reflections on PE in urban settings. This study shows that students want diversity in course selection, program expansion, and relevance of courses to their lives. The students in this study wanted urban school PE curriculum to incor-

porate student needs and desires and wanted courses to focus on individual sports instead of a survey of multiple sports. Participants wanted activities relevant to their lives; they did not want the teacher to decide what they would do. Students wanted a say in the curriculum. Students felt they should have dance, outdoor activities, and more nontraditional games and activities.

The teachers had control over the organization of instruction, content delivery, and assessment of student learning, with some teachers structuring their classes, setting rules, and developing class routines and others not having structure and displaying limited effective teaching. Student reflections tended to center on teachers' actions; many teachers in this study were thought of as being apathetic and not caring, and many course activities were seen as monotonous. According to the students, some teachers gave positive and corrective feedback, yet others provided little to no feedback. In this study, many teachers showed favoritism toward athletes or athletic students and males, and other teachers (11 of the 16) were too preoccupied with being a head coach and consequently their teaching duties suffered. Often, students felt shortchanged and wished their teachers were engaged in class activities and cared about them or course instruction.

## **Discussion**

Students are the consumers of education, and their perspectives and perceptions could yield valuable insights and information about their attitudes toward physical activity involvement in PE (Prusak, Davis, Pennington, & Wilkinson, 2014). Students' perspectives on their learning and involvement in PE programs could indicate ways to improve education, and this necessitates the focus on student voice research. However, student voice research is rare in education, and students are rarely consulted when decisions are made about curricula or when program evaluation and implementation are under consideration (Dyson, 1995); thus, researchers have recommended that scholars consider student voice research as a valuable source of information (Dyson, 2006; Erikson & Schultz, 1992; Graham, 1995; Prusak et al., 2014).

Two findings in this study did not corroborate previous research studies (Cothran & Ennis, 2001). The majority of students in this study wanted a more in-depth knowledge of specific sports instead

of a survey of many sports and activities. Instead of asking for less PE, students were asking for more. Students expressed that they did not like the 2-week overview of one sport followed by another sport. The participants said that they would have preferred to have a longer and more in-depth overview of one sport and learn it right, and then play it for an extended time before moving on to the next activity. The second finding concerned students' desire for more time in PE. In Prusak et al.'s (2014) study, students in elementary PE suggested adding a greater variety of new activities such as skating, golf, and lacrosse and suggested lengthening PE and holding it more frequently. In this study, students expressed that they wanted not only more than the one required PE course, but also PE to be offered more times per week and at least annually.

### **Suggested Changes for Reform in Urban PE**

Changes to urban PE curriculum need to be made in regard to teacher training and preparation so that teachers are better prepared to teach (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Teachers need to develop organizational and managerial skills, focus on student learning, provide positive and corrective feedback, and care about their students (Flory, 2015). They need to focus on their teaching over their coaching, because they were hired to teach, and put more emphasis on student-centered learning by asking students what they want, desire, and need. Teachers need to treat everyone equally and be fair in assessing students (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011).

High school PE has tremendous potential to increase physical activity participation among young adults (Dyson et al., 2009). Changes need to be made to urban PE programs if they are to improve students' quality of life (Schmidlein et al., 2014). Because of the decline in activity levels from high school to college and obesity concerns (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance [AAHPERD], 2012; Johnson, 1997; Karpati et al., 2004), PE needs the interest and support of researchers, educators, the community, and administrators. There needs to be a desire for more PE in schools. Schools should not continue to cut PE when the budget becomes an issue, and states need to increase the PE requirement to meet student needs (AAHPERD, 2012; Mears, 2008; Perna et al., 2012; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012). Overcrowding is also a paramount concern in urban schools, and

administrators should not allow the overcrowding of students in PE, because this limits quality physical activity and student–teacher interaction (Cothran & Ennis, 1999; McKenzie, 2001). The local community and state and federal governments need to provide schools in underprivileged, low socioeconomic areas with extra funding to help them combat the issues of overcrowding, lack of resources, and lack of space, which in turn could improve the learning environment for the students.

Teachers, educators, researchers, and administrators can learn a great deal about teaching and learning by listening to students talk about their experiences. Student voice research in PE is crucial to understanding how to improve PE and to understanding students’ motivations for participating in physical activity (Brookins, Petersen, & Brooks, 1997; Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Dyson, 2006; Graham, 1995; Pissanos & Allison, 1993). Researchers have conducted literature reviews on recent urban PE programs (Lackman & Chepyator-Thomson, 2014) and should continue to study ways to improve PE for urban students to improve their experiences, and they need to continue to ask students about their experiences to find out their likes and dislikes to improve their educational experiences. Through studying students’ lives, scholars will better understand students’ wants and desires, which would enable them to generate ideas and institute actions that could improve learning in PE. If teachers are engaged and have an appealing curriculum, students are likely to be engaged and to find PE enjoyable and useful (Prusak et al., 2014). This leads to positive attitudes toward PE and physical activity among students, which in turn could foster more physical activity involvement outside of class and lead to a positive and healthy lifestyle (Graham, 1995).

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the study was that students were asked to reflect back on their high school PE experiences, while in college, meaning that some of the students’ views could have changed over time, becoming either more negative or more positive. In addition, the experience of being in a PE course in college could have influenced their views; they may enjoy their college PE class more or less than their high school PE class, or they may have better, more engaged, and more enthusiastic teachers in college than in high school. The

researcher sought participants who had recently completed high school PE (in their senior year), but not all participants had completed high school PE in their senior year.

Additionally, the researcher had to take the participants' word as the truth. Participants may have exaggerated for effect or simply not communicated because they felt uncomfortable in the interview setting. The researcher tried to ask similar questions at different times during the interview to verify the participants' statements and tried to make the students feel comfortable in the interview by making it conversational and informal, hoping the students would open up and describe their PE experiences.

Finally, the researcher and one other researcher reviewed all themes and participant statements for accuracy; however, different people can view different statements as different themes. Although the researchers spent many hours reviewing and re-reviewing and agreeing on the themes, other researchers may interpret some themes differently.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

More research studies are need in urban schools (Lackman & Chepyator-Thomson, 2014). Based on this research, several suggestions can be made, including conducting more student voice research in urban high schools and colleges in PE. Researchers need to conduct student voice research to determine what students want and need from their educational experiences. This study focused on college freshmen at a southeastern university, but it is also important for researchers to obtain perspectives of urban students from different areas of the United States and from different years in school. Furthermore, researchers need to study a wider variety of urban students, such as those not attending college and those attending community colleges.

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## Appendix

### In-Depth Individual Interview Questions

- Tell me about your K–12 PE experiences.
- What do you enjoy most about PE? Tell me what makes PE fun for you. What aspects of PE are enjoyable to you?
- What did you dislike about PE?
- Tell me about your experiences outside of school in regard to sport and activity during your K–12 years.
- What could your PE teacher have done to make PE a more enjoyable experience? Probes: Activities, teaching styles, student interaction
- What can be done differently in regard to teaching in high school to get students to enroll in more PE classes in high school?
- Tell me about your experiences with sport (intramurals, club, pick-up games in neighborhood, interscholastic, etc.) in high school.
- What PE class are you currently enrolled in?
- Tell me about the process of deciding which college PE class to take. Why did you choose it? What were your reasons for taking it?
- How did your thoughts and experiences in K–12 PE impact your decision to enroll in the basic PE course(s) you selected?
- Tell me about your experiences outside of school in regard to sport and activity during college.
- Tell me about your physical activity level in college.
- What can be done differently in the course offerings/curriculum in college to get you to enroll in more PE classes in college?
- What can be done differently in regard to teaching in college to get you to enroll in more PE classes in college?
- That concludes our interview. Is there anything else you would like to mention or talk about? If not, I would like to thank you for participating in this interview. The information you provided me will be extremely useful to my research. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns pertaining to this interview. Thank you again for your participation.