What Makes PE Teachers Credible To Children?



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Introduction

PE programs in schools are designed to ultimately lead children to be physically active for a lifetime (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2010). Pate et al. (2006) suggested that PE teachers may play an instrumental role in guiding and inspiring children and young adults to live an active and healthy lifestyle. One important component which can increase PE teacher effectiveness in this area is PE teacher credibility.

Source Credibility Theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953) contends that a PE teacher's power of persuasion, and thus, acquisition of knowledge or attitude change, can be increased when he or she is credible in the eyes of the students. If teacher effectiveness is determined by how much students learn the content, then it can be reasonably deduced that credibility may help increase teacher effectiveness and vice-versa. Pogue and AhYun (2006) not only argued that students' perception of learning is increased when they perceive their instructors to be highly credible, but also teachers have more influence on their students in the creation of understanding. Given that Source Credibility is in the eye of the beholder, in this case students, it seems especially important to know what they believe makes a PE teacher credible.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions and construction of PE teacher credibility.

The findings from this study identified how students constructed their perceptions of credibility and the different personal qualities, behaviors, and teaching skills that may increase the credibility of PE teachers and consequently, PE teacher effectiveness.

Method

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used (Patton, 2002) to select students from a school with an effective PE teacher who served as a gate-keeper during the study.

The criteria for selection of two boys and two girls from both the 3rd and 5th grade (N=8) were: (a) skill level in PE and (b) ability to communicate. The PE teacher was asked to list students according to gender and performance level (high and low) in PE. Mixed groups with low and high-performance level students from both genders were selected to maintain a heterogeneous group.

Theoretical Framework

With the objective of investigating students' perspectives of PE teacher credibility, Hovland et al.'s (1953) Source Credibility Theory framed the study. Constructionism and Symbolic Interactionism (SI) (Blumer, 1969) provided a framework for data analysis revealing students' perspectives as it related to the credibility construct as a student-centered process.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of 14 weeks totaling 45 hrs with students and PE teacher. Data collection techniques included (a) a participant orientation (Freeman & Mathison, 2009), (b) an open-ended questionnaire (Fisher, 1992), (c) student drawings (MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004), (d) a picture elicitation exercise (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005), (e) observations and field notes (Patton, 2002), (f) group interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005), and (g) individual interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2003).

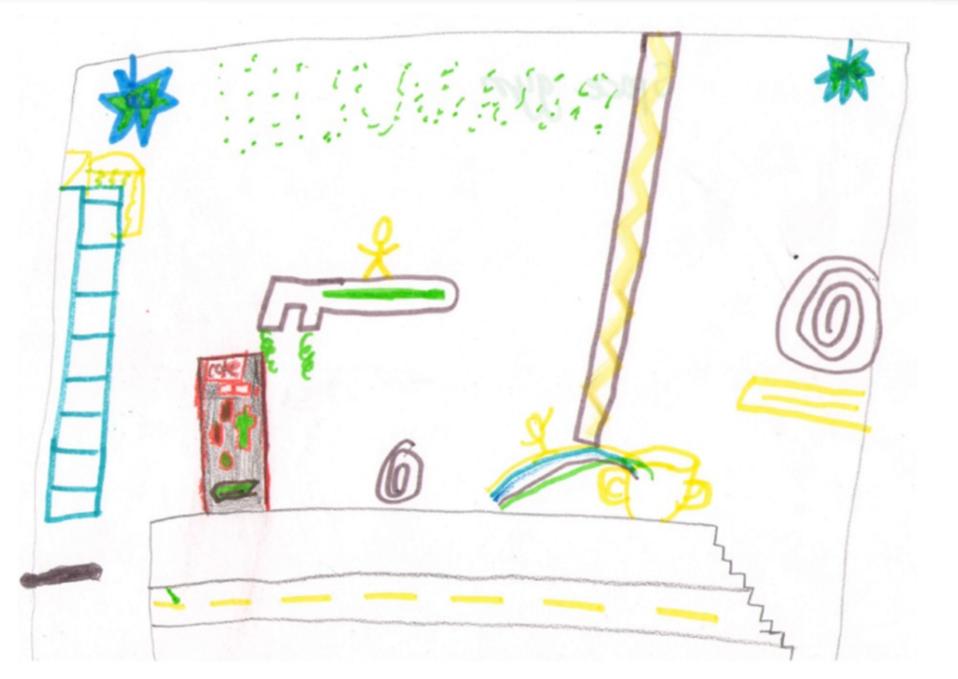
Data Analysis

Data analyses were steered by Miles and Huberman's (1994) four-step Flow Model approach – data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification – and carried out in relation to Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953) as a way to provide a realistic view of students' perceptions and construction of PE teacher credibility. This process included the search for emerging themes that represented qualities, behaviors, and teaching skills making a PE teacher credible in the eyes of children and the social structure in which students built their perceptions of credibility.

Trustworthiness

For this study, trustworthiness was demonstrated through peer debriefer (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), reflexivity journal/audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and data triangulation (Patton, 2002).





Results

Three major themes emerged from the data regarding students' descriptions of personal qualities, behaviors, teaching skills, and construction of PE teacher credibility. In their view, a credible PE teacher: (a) "Looks Like One," (b) "Practices What She Preaches," and (c) "Is an 'Awesome' Pedagogue."

Looks Like One

Appearance affords the PE teacher an early opportunity to establish his or her credibility. A PE teacher who "looks like a credible one" is more appealing and interesting to students because, in their eyes, that teacher appears to be more knowledgeable and athletic. The students indicated they wanted a PE teacher who could teach new skills and content which are important to students' lives. The PE teacher who "looks like one" conveys the idea he or she knows everything there is to know about PE and is able to perform every skill and every sport students can imagine. According to the students the appearance of credible PE teachers was composed of two factors: (a) display of physical (or bodily) qualities, and (b) attire.

Students indicated that in order to "Look Like One" a credible PE teacher should look (a) in shape, (b) muscular, (c) tall, (d) strong, (e) flexible, (f) healthy, (g) fit, and (h) athletic. Additionally, students suggested that a PE teacher should dress appropriately to enhance his or her personal qualities. To do so, PE teachers should wear athletic clothing that suggest movement such as tennis shoes, sweat pants, and a t-shirt.

"She is not really skinny, but she is in shape, she looks in shape" (Santa, open-ended questionnaire)

"She could do like, back flips, and stuff, and she [PE teacher] could actually teach you how to do stuff" (January, individual interview) "You can get fat and unhealthy,...you don't feel good and you can't exercise" (Anne, individual interview)

"They [PE teachers] know what clothes to wear, like tennis shoes instead of flip-flops" (Pepe, individual interview)

Practices What She Preaches

This theme represents the idea that credible PE teachers demonstrate a set of behaviors that serve two related purposes. First and most immediately, the exhibition of these behaviors reinforces what the PE teacher teaches in the gym. Second and more importantly, these behaviors set examples that may inspire students to emulate healthy behaviors. As a result, the display of these behaviors could lead students to become physically educated individuals. The children believed that if the PE teacher was teaching concepts that included the proper way to perform motor skills, how to eat healthily, and the benefits of exercise, the PE teacher should be able to demonstrate to students that these concepts worked in the real world. They expected the PE teacher to perform everything she wanted students to perform and put into practice everything she was teaching. To the students, it made sense that if their teacher was teaching something for their benefit, the PE teacher should do the same for her benefit. In essence, the children suggested that PE teachers should be physically educated individuals, who believe and apply the concepts they teach and live a healthy lifestyle. For this reason, the behaviors of the PE teacher must align with his or her "preaching" and demonstrate to students that what students are learning is valuable. In the opinion of the students, a PE teacher would be deemed more credible when he or she (a) exercises, (b) plays sports, and (c) performs peripheral behaviors.

"[Credible PE teachers] follow the rules of what they are teaching. Like, when they are teaching about how to take care of your body, you don't go see them do the exact opposite" (Stacey, individual interview)

"I think that they should be healthy. So they would be setting a good example for us" (January, individual interview)

Is an 'Awesome' Pedagogue

This theme revealed actions that a credible PE teacher does in the gymnasium. The numerous teaching skills suggested by the students reflected a set of commonalities that represent what they thought to be good teaching practice. These skills revealed that an "awesome" pedagogue, and therefore credible PE teacher, (a) promotes students' security, (b) ignites students' positive attitudes, and (c) stimulates students' engagement with the content.

Students indicated that when a PE teacher promotes students' security by (a) being present, (b) treating students equally, (c) displaying tranquility, and (d) protecting students physically, students feel safe, nurtured, protected and are more likely to be engaged and learn. Through these teaching skills, the PE teacher has the opportunity to express to students that he or she is "caring" and "trustworthy." These abilities present a PE teacher who has a personal interest in students.

Credible PE teachers ignite students' positive attitudes by (a) exhibiting enjoyment, (b) treating students well, and (c) providing encouragement. It appears that in doing so, teachers help students feel good about coming to PE because students believe in their abilities and would have an enjoyable learning experience.

When a PE teacher stimulates students' engagement with the content, the teacher may heighten students' chances of being successful and as a result, learning the content. In brief, these teaching skills are the essence of effective teaching. According to students, credible PE teachers (a) organize, (b) vary, (c) enhance, (d) articulate, (e) demonstrate, (f) provide examples, (g) participate, and (h) provide feedback to students during activities in the gym class.

"[A credible PE teacher] doesn't get really mad at us when we do something wrong" (Anne, open-ended questionnaire)

"When they are happy [it] means they like what they are doing, and when they like what they are doing, they are gonna do it with their best, and they know about it more" (Stacey, individual interview)

Discussion

The current study extend the literature in education and PE exploring what specific personal qualities, behaviors, and teaching skills PE teachers should perform and exhibit in order to be deemed more credible by students.

The concept that credible PE teachers should "Look Like One" supports the literature indicating that the appearance of the PE teacher affects students' learning and perceptions about the PE teacher's effectiveness (Dean, Adams, & Comeaus, 2005; Gold, Petrella, Angel, Ennis, & Wolley, 2012; Melville & Maddalozzo, 1988). Additionally, the findings substantiate the position that role modeling can assist children and adolescents in the adoption of healthy behaviors (NASPE, 2009) while being a powerful tool in teaching (Cardinal & Cardinal, 2001). The educational literature is supported by this study's findings suggesting specific teaching skills and qualities that are related to teacher credibility (e.g., Chory, 2007; Teven, 2007).

The detailed description of personal qualities, behaviors, and teaching skills was the first step in informing in-service teachers, preservice teachers, and PETE educators about the importance, enhancement, and impact of PE teacher credibility. Credibility may be adopted by national standards, TE and PETE programs as an integral part of their content as neglecting this construct could negatively influence the preparation of pre-service and level of in-service teacher effectiveness. In a world where the obesity problem has reached epidemic proportions, the ability to physically educate students to be healthy and active citizens for a lifetime is imperative. This responsibility, more than ever before, rests on the shoulders of PE educators. To face this challenge, physical educators must be prepared to effectively teach our children. Credibility is one tool that can aid PE educators to accomplish this goal.

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