

## **Peer provocation in physical education: experiences of Botswana adolescents**

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Critical incidents of peer provocation in physical education were investigated among 675 junior secondary school students in Botswana. Data were generated through a brief, open-ended questionnaire requesting the students to narrate their experiences of bad, hurtful and offensive peer behaviours during physical education classes. Six overlapping categories of peer provocation that emerged from the data were: humiliation, injustice, physical assaults, sexual harassment; dangerous play and female physicality frighteners. These categories are discussed with reference to the themes central to boys' and girls' experiences. To the extent that peer provocation is differentially aimed at boys and girls, it is crucial to recurrently (en)gender its analysis. This study encourages educators in general and physical education teachers in particular to take heightened interest in, and reflect more critically about proactive ways to address the multiple domains and consequences of peer provocation in physical education settings.

**Keywords:** peer; provocation; physical education; Botswana; adolescents

### **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, researchers have paid increasing attention to peer relations in the context of school (or classroom) emotional climate, and the consequences of these interpersonal relations on student engagement, academic attainment and overall well-being (Williamson and Cullingford 1998; Woodward and Fergusson 2000; Wentzel, Barry, and Caldwell 2004). On one hand, positive and supportive peer interactions have been found to boost students' self-esteem, emotional adjustment, social skills, school adjustment and composite achievement scores. On the other hand, abusive, exclusive and disrespectful peer relations have been linked to youth depression, alienation, aggressive behaviour, low academic performance and risk of dropping out of school (Olweus 1993; Parker et al. 1995; Berndt, Hawkins, and Jiao 1999; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Kaltiana-Heino et al. 2000; Fleming, Cook, and Stone 2002; San Antonio and Salzfass 2007). Within the context of sport, researchers have opened up investigations into incidents and experiences of harassment and victimisation among athletes (Kirby, Greaves, and Hanvkivsky 2000; Brackenridge 2001; Fejgin and Hanegby 2001; Brackenridge and Fasting 2002; Rosenthal 2008). This line of research is critical, not only to empower victimised athletes to find their own voices, but also to inform and enhance policy efforts to make sport a safe and wholesome setting for participants. The very features that make relational abuse problematic in

sport settings – for example, unequal power relations (in terms of gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality), differential athletic ability, spatial exploitation, physical contact in game situations and performance – make physical education (PE) an especially important site for exploring various peer behaviours and how pupils perceive and interpret these behaviours. Although studies have been conducted on harassment and abuse in sport, there has been very little work carried out on peer behaviours that pupils dislike during physical education (Kwon 2007). It is very important to take into account provocative experiences in physical education, as they not only reflect and affect developmental outcomes but also influence students' attitudes towards physical education and/or related occupations (Figley 1985). This study presents Botswana adolescents' accounts of peer provocation experienced during physical education. Peer provocation is defined in this study as *peer action or speech experienced by the target as bad, hurtful and offensive*. Studies conducted in many countries (Whitney and Smith 1993; Houndoumadi and Pateraki 2001; Boulton, Trueman, and Flemington 2002) illustrate the need to view peer provocation as complex, multiple, layered and cultural. Accordingly, this study enlarges, in some small way, our understanding of how provocative peer behaviours occur, recur and vary in different educational and national settings, and informs the development of prevention programmes for peer provocation with the context of physical education and beyond.

## **Method**

In order to ensure diversity of sample and geographical locations (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003), this preliminary study was conducted in 20 co-educational junior secondary schools in Northern, Central and South Central regions of Botswana during May and June 2007. The respondents were chosen from a population of 1668 third-year students taking elective physical education in the selected schools. The 740 students who indicated interest in the study were purposively selected to participate, of which 675 (372 girls and 303 boys) handed in their completed questionnaire – a response rate of 91%. Respondents were aged between 15 and 16 years at the time of the study.

Data for this study were generated (Ritchie 2003) through a brief, open-ended questionnaire requesting the students to narrate critical incidents (Strauss 1969; Woods 1990) involving peer provocation during physical education. Critical incident solicitation has been fruitfully used to investigate student perception of caring teaching in physical education (Larson 2007) and adolescents' attitudes towards physical education as a subject (Figley 1985; Luke and Sinclair 1991). Four items on the research instrument requested demographic data related to age, school, grade level and gender. The fifth item requested accounts of things that boys and/or girls have said or done to the respondent during physical education lesson which he or she experienced as bad, hurtful and offensive. The sixth item asked the students to describe how they responded to these provocative behaviours. References to pre-established categories of provocative peer behaviours were omitted from the instrument, first, to enable the subjects to reconstruct their experiences of peer provocation during physical education and second, to let gender differences between their experiences and voices emerge.

Prior to data collection, official permission was obtained from the school principals. Subjects were duly informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. They were given a week to complete the critical incident solicitation form,

during which they were required to seek approval of their parents/guardians before participating in the study. Completion of the form was taken as an indication of parental and respondent consent. The retrieved data was re-read several times and systematically coded to tease out themes, categories, frequencies and commonalities across male and female responses (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

## **Results**

The students recounted a total of 2754 incidents which were analysed and interpretively categorised. Table 1 illustrates the 34 themes and six categories of peer provocation that emerged from data analysis, the distribution of incidents recounted by boys and girls, and the direction of provocation in terms of girl–girl, girl–boy, boy–boy and boy–girl interactions. Peer provocation related to the category of humiliation was mentioned most frequently, followed by physical assault, dangerous play, sexual harassment, injustice and female physicality frighteners in that order. It should be noted that some of the themes occurred in multiple peer interactions.

### ***Humiliation***

A persistent theme throughout the students' narratives is the humiliation that underlies much of the interpersonal relations experienced in physical education lessons. Both boys and girls reportedly engage in speech and actions calculated to put each other down.

The other day I failed to serve the volleyball over the net and my teammates called me “clumsy”, “stupid”, “useless”. When I outdid them in flexibility exercises, they called me “twisted” and “disabled”. (Girl)

I have been mocked by both boys and girls for giving wrong answers, missing the ball or rending my PE short during high jump. They think it is fun to make others miserable. It is no use reporting to the PE teacher. I have learnt to taunt them as well. (Boy)

### ***Physical assault***

About 90% of the girls and 96% of the boys indicated that they have been hit, kicked or had their necks, shoulders and limbs grabbed at some point or the other. However, these assaults are somewhat gendered. Most of the girls recounted that assaults have been committed against them by both sexes, but boys rarely report being hit by girls.

We were arguing about whose turn it was to throw the javelin and the boy just kicked me and twisted my arm, saying I was rude and that girls don't belong in a physical education class. I was scared of being wounded with the javelin so I let go. When I told the teacher, she simply said to wait for the next turn and to stop trying to wrest things from boys. I was angry with her for not reprimanding the boy. If that boy twists arms again I will claw him. That will teach him to respect girls. (Girl)

By mistake I had tripped a classmate during a warm-up activity. I actually apologised, but he got up and punched me in the chest. Of course, I had to punch him back. We were both punished with twenty push-ups. (Boy)

Table 1. Themes of peer provocation in physical education classes.

Categories/themes	Direction				Responses		
	Boy-Boy	Boy-Girl	Girl-Girl	Girl-Boy	Boys	Girls	Total
A. Humiliation					303	372	675
1. Name calling	✓	✓	✓	✓	72	94	166
2. Interrupting	✓	✓	✓	✓	39	36	75
3. Taunting	✓	✓	✓	✓	42	40	82
4. Jeering	✓	✓	✓	✓	21	27	48
5. Spitting	✓	✓			6	17	23
6. Ostracising	✓	✓	✓		19	31	50
7. Deriding	✓	✓	✓	✓	43	44	87
8. Distracting	✓	✓			24	19	43
9. Disparaging	✓	✓	✓	✓	37	64	101
B. Physical assault					290	334	624
1. Hitting	✓	✓	✓		173	107	320
2. Kicking	✓	✓	✓		77	122	199
3. Grabbing	✓	✓			40	65	105
C. Dangerous play					206	279	485
1. Shoving	✓	✓	✓		54	58	112
2. Tripping	✓	✓	✓		72	43	115
3. Brandishing	✓	✓			32	86	118
4. Throwing sand	✓	✓			0	14	14
5. Withdrawing support	✓	✓			29	45	74
6. Pulling the mat out	✓	✓			19	33	52
D. Sexual harassment					23	372	395
1. Dress lifting/pulling	✓	✓			0	76	76
2. Vulgar comments	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	64	72
3. Forcible kissing		✓			0	38	38
4. Sexual touching	✓	✓	✓		9	115	124
5. Lewd gestures		✓			0	43	43
6. Obscene suggestions		✓			0	42	42
E. Injustice					61	328	389
1. Discriminating	✓	✓	✓		11	69	80
2. Gossiping	✓	✓	✓	✓	22	95	117
3. Slandering	✓	✓	✓	✓	13	55	68
4. Monopolising	✓	✓			0	42	42
5. Constraining	✓	✓	✓	✓	15	67	82
F. Female physicality frighteners					0	186	186
1. Muscularity		✓	✓		0	51	51
2. Infertility		✓	✓		0	82	82
3. Spouselessness			✓		0	33	33
4. Ugliness		✓	✓		0	20	20

### ***Dangerous play***

Competition, cooperation and compliance with a set of rules are important aspects of learning activities in physical education. A violation of playground rules and routines is necessarily an affront, a disservice to one's team and a significant safety and liability issue for the physical education teacher and the school. Many of the students recounted fouls and pranks played on them by classmates that made them feel uneasy and irritated. Several girls stated that boys were fond of playing to endanger or embarrass, like letting others down during gymnastics, using hard tackles and trickery, tripping people up and acting threateningly towards classmates.

With boys, one cannot take it for granted that they will play fair and not make things worse for you when you are grouped with them or when you ask them for help. A boy let go of me during a cartwheel practice and I fell and hurt my hip. The guy denied letting me slip. At the same time, he was laughing at me and enjoying my discomfort. (Girl)

You go for the ball and another boy acts like he wants to kick you or strike you with an implement just to upset or scare you. (Boy)

### ***Sexual harassment***

About 8% of the boys and all the girls in this study mentioned that they have been sexually harassed during physical education lessons. Although girls were the most vulnerable to sexual harassment, they could be harassers of boys as well.

Boys say we wear tights and shorts to PE lessons because we wanted to be noticed, admired and touched. They keep smacking our butts, touching and brushing against our breasts. And when we wear skirts, they pull or lift them to see our panties and to see who is wearing a sanitary pad. (Girl)

Some girls in my class are very naughty. Whenever we are changing into our PE attire, they go around prodding others' buttocks, ribs, tummies and breasts, describing some bodies as cool and some as unmarketable, as if our bodies are for sale. (Girl)

Boys tell me that because I am skinny, I will need more than one man to satisfy me sexually; that fat women tire easily but thin ones can't have enough. I have overheard men in the village say this nonsense about thin and fat women. It makes me feel abnormal compared to fat girls. (Girl)

Because I am the fattest boy in class, both boys and girls touch my breasts and butts and call me 'big butt', 'big breast' and 'fat sissy'. I have to keep avoiding their touch. They laugh at every move I make. They make me dread physical education classes. (Boy)

The other day, girls were jeering at us boys wearing tights and making judgment about the size of our dicks, saying some are small and some are extra/extra large. We had to compare their body shapes too. (Boy)

### ***Injustice***

Girls had more experiences of unfairness to recount than boys. In nearly all of the responses under this category of peer provocation, the emphasis was on how classmates acted in an unreasonable, selfish, oppressive, discriminatory and false manner.

Other girls were saying that I put up good performance during PE lessons because I had a crush on the PE teacher and I wanted him to date me. I couldn't tell the teacher because it was embarrassing to repeat their false accusation. I was very sad and discouraged. (Girl)

I hate how they always pick me last to make the team and blame me for what I didn't do so as to call the teacher's punishment on me. (Boy)

Boys have this attitude that physical education is a male subject. They pass the ball to each other and heckle girls. They give points to their friends whenever they are refereeing a game. Proper class supervision is needed. (Girl)

### ***Female physicality frighteners***

Girls who try to excel in physical activity reported that they are offhandedly admonished by their classmates for going against nature and culture. These girls reported that myths and taboos are pervasive in peer talk, and are especially distressing and alienating.

I like to be the goalkeeper for my team. But my classmates warned that I will damage my womb if I keep catching shots against my tummy. Now I let in all shots aimed at my body. (Girl)

I hate this peer talk that it is pathetic for a girl to physically exert herself like boys. They say girls will become muscular and ugly if they are too physical in the playground. (Girl)

When I am able to outdo other girls in physical activity they become envious and say things like, "what are you trying to prove?", "you think you know everything", "which Botswana man do you think will marry a tomboy like you?", and "tomboys make troublesome wives". (Girl)

### **Typical responses to peer provocation**

The ways in which both boys and girls have responded to provocation are a mixture of acquiescence, negotiation, resistance, vengeance and telling on the offenders. Exemplar quotations in this regard include:

- I shrugged off their naughtiness.
- I tried to talk them out of cheating.
- I shouted at them.
- I fought back.
- I spat at him too.
- I told the teacher.
- I wept bitterly.
- I joined another group.
- I kept doing my best.
- I called them names.
- I became more vigilant.
- I insisted on my turn.
- I changed the way I dress for P.E.
- I kept a safer distance.
- I was afraid to report.

- I ignored their comments.
- I smacked their butts as well.
- I yelled to alert the teacher.
- I kept my cool.
- I tried to educate them.
- I opted out of rough play.
- I joined in their pranks.
- I abandoned the game.
- I insisted on the rules.

## Discussion

This study utilises critical incidents (students' written narratives) to explore Botswana adolescents' experiences of peer provocation in physical education. The 34 themes of peer provocation emerging from the generated data were grouped into six overlapping categories: humiliation, physical assault, dangerous play, sexual harassment, injustice, and female physicality frighteners. The students' narratives depict a sense of outrage at being humiliated, and a desire to have their feelings and dignity respected. Individual accounts of humiliation contained themes of name-calling, interruption of speech or activity, taunts, jeers, isolation, derision, distraction, disparagement and being spat at. These themes emerge as a means through which the students became objects of shame. Physical assault experienced by the students took the forms of hitting, kicking, and grabbing. These behaviours are often enacted to encroach, disrupt, defend, oppress or retaliate. They are also used in attempts to sexually harass others. The types and targets of assaults however varied according to sex: boys were more likely to be offenders, and are rarely grabbed by girls to impress, oppress or redress a grievance.

Behaviours strongly felt by students to be detrimental to meaningful play and skill practice were shoving, tripping, brandishing of equipment, throwing sand about, withdrawing support during stunts and pulling the landing mat out in gymnastics. Unlike the boys' accounts, those of the girls revealed that boys generally engage in frightening and dangerous pranks during physical activities.

One pervasive and especially distressing form of peer provocation recounted by preponderance of girls is sexual harassment. Girls were far more likely to have been sexually touched, forcibly kissed and subjected to lewd gestures, obscene suggestion, vulgar comments, and bodily exposure than boys. Watching how boys had exploited space, time, brawn, rules and equipment during physical activities, the girls were painfully conscious of the ways their body had been added to the list of boys' playthings. Undoubtedly, results indicated that a few girls and boys had experienced unwanted sexual touching and vulgar comments from peers of the same sex. Girls were, however, more likely to have been targets of sexual harassment by boys, especially in the context of girls' increasing visibility in physical education classes in Botswana secondary schools and the boys' need to restore patriarchal order and masculinities in the playground.

Students' objection to injustice (thematized here as peer behaviours meant to discriminate, slander, constrain, monopolise and criticise) are emblematic of the view that they have moral rights to being respected, enabled, supported, included and judged fairly. In comparison with boys, girls were more likely to have experienced gendered acts of injustice. In other words, girls' experiences of unfair peer behaviours during physical education classes did not parallel those of boys.

A form of peer provocation exclusively recounted by girls pertains to the myth that a girl's involvement in vigorous physical activity or display of sheer physicality is harmful to her female identity. Since the introduction of elective physical education into Botswana secondary school curriculum in 1999, more girls have become visibly active in school gymnasiums and playgrounds. In this social context, female physicality is stigmatised as unfeminine and detrimental, rather than an aspect of girls' emerging self-identities. Although some of the girls consider these myths absurd, and felt adequate to confound them, others declared that they have developed ambivalence toward physical performance. On one hand, the latter wanted to excel in physical education as an optional and examinable subject. On the other hand, they were ostensibly worried about what they imagined could happen to their fertility, desirability and femininity. Thus, the myths and stigma that peers attached to physicality have been experienced by these girls as markers of cultural values that are crucial to the construction of their emerging female sexuality. Paradoxically, girls were more likely than boys to circulate myths capable of repressing female physicality in physical education lessons.

It is worth noting that the six categories of peer provocation overlap in the sense that each provides a context for the perpetration of the others. Physical assaults are humiliating and unjust. They are also co-terminus with sexual harassment, dangerous play and legitimisation of myths about girls' unsuitability for physical performance. Put another way, provocative peer relations often embody and convey assault, humiliation, injustice, stigmatisation and sexualisation of aggression.

## **Conclusion**

This study presents accounts of peer behaviours during physical education that Botswana adolescents consider particularly bad, hurtful and offensive. Results further instantiate the wide range of contextual variables involved in peer aggression and victimisation (Olweus 1993; Bjorkqvist 1994; Atlas and Peplar 1998; Underwood 2003). Results also confirm that gender and sexism play a significant role in coordinating provocative peer behaviors (Larkin 1994; Hart 1998; Jarvis 2001; Boulton, Trueman, and Flemington 2002; Pellegrini 2002; Farrel et al. 2007). In addition, the study shows differences and similarities in boys' and girls' experiences of peer provocation and the way both sexes have responded to these experiences. It is important however to caution against viewing students in this study as a homogeneous adolescent group located as implicit victims of a particular physical education system. Responses of these students to peer provocation frequently involve resistance, resilience and agency. Moreover, describing girls as more vulnerable to provocation by boys should not obscure the experiences of those who were targets of girls' provocation as well. This study encourages schoolteachers in general and physical educators, in particular, to take heightened interest in, and reflect more critically about proactive ways to address the multiple domains of peer provocation in the classroom and playground. Importantly, physical education classes need to be adequately supervised to prevent insidious consequences due to nasty peer behaviours. Because this initial study sought to explore the nature of peer provocation in Botswana physical education classes, further questions regarding the learning environment in those classes remain. In particular, we do not yet know precisely how and what physical education teachers in the selected schools do to prevent and/or confront the challenges of peer provocation among their students. Moreover, it will be necessary to examine those factors



mediating boys' and girls' responses to peer provocation in different physical education settings. The extent to which the findings presented here are generalisable beyond the Botswana case also will have to be answered by future studies.

### Notes on contributor

Jimoh Shehu is senior lecturer and head of the Department of Physical Education at the University of Botswana. His research interests include pedagogy of physical activity and sport development discourse analysis.

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