

GIRL'S NON-PARTICIPATION IN SWIMMING LESSONS AT SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL. ANALYSIS OF THE PUPILS' POINT OF VIEW

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Motivation is an important lever for all human behaviours. Pupils' motivation is one of the most important concerns of PE teachers as underlined in a large consultation of the French in-service teachers [1]. In fact, educators often regret that learners and/or participants do not show interest and involvement. The place of motivation is largely underlined in the educational literature. Researchers as well as practitioners propose books and papers designed to better understand the problem and to provide some practical trails [2]. Non-participation represented one fifth of the criteria identified as indicating a lack of motivation in PE students [3]. Similarly, a lack of motivation was also considered as one of the main causes of absenteeism in PE classes [4].

As pointed out by several French and Belgian authors [5][6][7], non-participation to PE lessons is a large phenomenon in some West European countries, in secondary school education. Its origin is complex as many factors can contribute to the decision of the student to not participate. Several categories of motives can be identified: medical, physical (obesity), socio-cultural, religious or fear of injury [8]. The situation is more worrying than in countries where the educational culture emphasizes more the respect of a code of practice. Such policies are developed to ensure schools offer a consistent approach to what is expected of pupils with regard to dress and participation in PE. They provide a set of guidelines which are clear enough to apply yet offer flexibility. Parents and their children exactly know the rules. If similar guidelines are sometimes enacted in our schools, they are rarely applied and PE teachers are often helpless in front of students who chose to deliberately avoid their compulsory course evoking built excuses. Girls have more recourse to excuses (medical or parental) than boys [6][7]. That trend could be related to their lower attitude towards PE [9] and to cultural characteristics concerning their physical activity [10].

Development of positive motivation and warm atmosphere has been suggested as a priority to decrease students' non-participation. These factors were considered as preferable to using coercive actions [4]. A better communication towards the parents and doctors who sometimes support the students to find excuses was also recommended [7].

The case of swimming in girls' classes represents the major concern for non-participation [11][12]. In fact, the number of excuses grows dramatically when swimming is planned and such situations where a majority of students are not active become more and more frequent [6]. A common excuse comes from menstruations [13] even if modern sanitary measures exist and are used for leisure swimming activities. Teachers are powerless in face of the behaviour of these students. Rather than cancelling swimming courses as in several schools, constructive solutions should be found and experienced. Research could help practitioners to better understand the phenomenon and establish collaboration in order to struggle against a dangerous drift which could alter the status of PE.

The aims of the present study were to verify if the situation was as grave as that reported by the teachers and to improve our knowledge about the reasons explaining why girls do not participate.

The study took place in the region of Liège, in the French speaking part of Belgium. In the Belgian educational context, PE lessons are single-gendered. Ten female secondary school level PE teachers involved in a swimming unit authorized us to interview their non-participant students during one lesson. Interviews were conducted by the same researcher. They comprised closed and open ended questions focusing on several aspects related to motivational characteristics of the pupils (attitude towards school, extra-curricular sport activities, attitude towards PE, perceived behaviour in PE and swimming, attitude towards swimming lessons, non participation to the swimming lessons. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. A content analysis was operated. High levels of intra- and inter-analyst reliability were controlled (respectively 93.3 and 84.4%). Finally, 57 students who did not attend to a swimming lesson were integrated in our sample. .

Table 1 presents some characteristics of the classes and precise the number of students that we have interviewed. These data showed that teachers do not lie when they consider that non participation is a serious problem. In the classes that we have met almost 60% of the pupils were not participating. The situation was really serious in some classes as underlined in two classes where the teacher worked with only two students out of 20 or 22.

Table 1 – Descriptive data

Grade	Pupils (n)	Non participants (n)	Interviews (n)
11	24	15	5
12	24	13	5
11	21	14	3
11+12	18	10	1
11	18	10	4
9	20	12	9
10	12	10	6
9	26	19	5
7+8	25	22	6
7+8	24	11	7
7	25	7	6
Total	237	143 (60.3%)	57 (39.9%)

Figure 1 showed that the attitude of the non participants towards school was rather positive. This level of attitude can be compared to the findings of other studies in the same educational context [14].

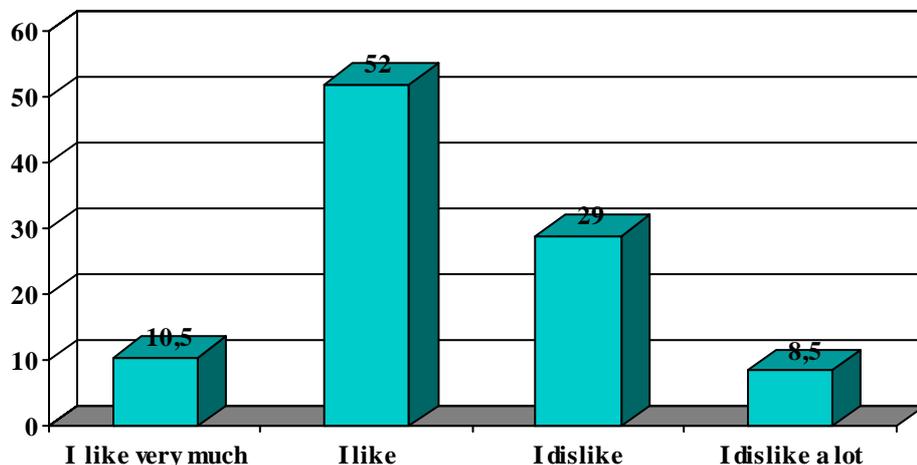


Figure 1 – Affective component of the attitude towards school (% of pupils)

Specific courses like language, sciences and PE (7 students/57), friends, some teachers, interest for the future... were listed among the aspects that non participant students proposed as positive interests at school. Rejected aspects gathered some courses, some teachers because of their lack of originality, the authority, the workload, swimming (6 students/57), ... A half of the non-participant students (29/57) were regularly involved in sports, even in swimming activities (n = 5). Among those who did not practice (21/57), eight mentioned swimming as one of the activities that they practised before dropping out. Seven out of the 57 students never practised sport.

Logically, the interest of the non participant student towards PE was lower than in the literature [14][9]. More than four non participant students out of 10 dislike PE (Figure 2). That is a negative determinant for their participation.

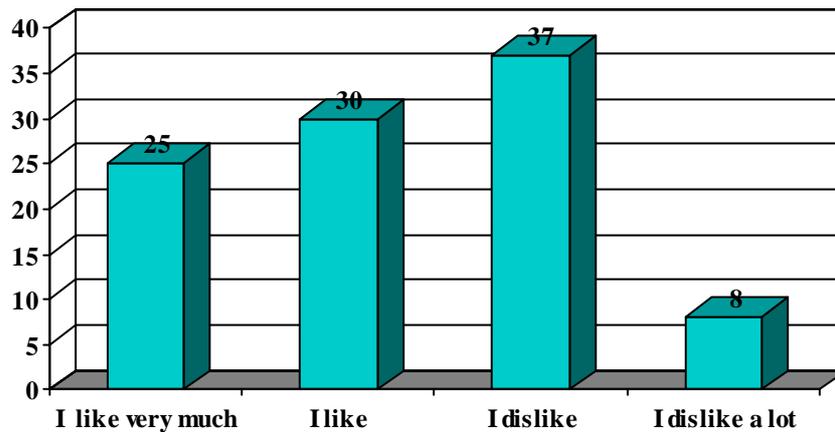


Figure 2 – Affective component of the attitude towards physical education (% of pupils)

Concerning the perceived behaviours, involvement, activity, forgetting of the sport clothing and attendance were some of the aspects that have been considered. The overall view is rather positive (Table 2) but it could mask a real problem about swimming with one fifth of the students clearly out of PE.

Table 2 – Perceived behaviours (n)

<i>Involvement</i>		<i>Time on task</i>		<i>No sport clothes</i>		<i>Attendance</i>	
Yes	46	Good	17	Never	40	Very good	13
No	11	Intermediate	11	Sometime	6	High	23
		Low	4	Frequently	10	Intermediate	8
		Variable	16	No opinion	1	Low	12
		No opinion	2			Null	1

Figure 3 presents the list of the sport activities that students appreciate in PE lessons. The Top 3 is occupied by “game” activities. Traditional girls’ activities such as aerobic and dance were not so well appreciated while swimming was not so bad considered by some students. On the contrary, it was definitely the most rejected activity with endurance training (Figure 3). Non participant students seemed to dislike physical efforts.

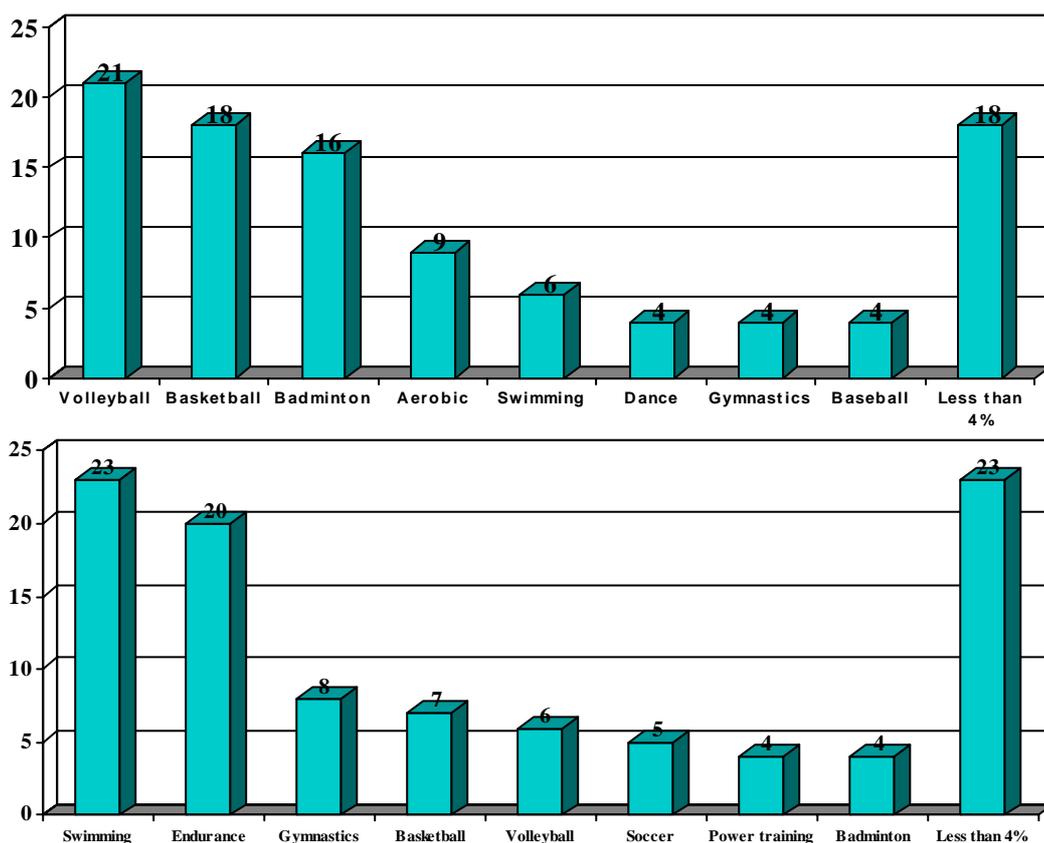


Figure 3 – Activities that interviewed students appreciate (above) or not (below) (n)

Fifty percents of the non participant students disliked swimming lessons. This finding shows that the attitude towards the activity could be related to the attendance of the pupils. The categories of reasons proposed by pupils to explain why they do not like swimming at school are listed in Table 3. Some quotations illustrate clearly the feelings of the students. As it is frequently the case, the identified causes dealt with teaching decisions and/or organisation in one hand, with educational and/or cultural characteristics in the other hand.

Table 3 – Reasons explaining why the students do not like swimming at school

Categories	%	
Lack of interest	16.3	"What's the interest of swimming?" "Why must we swim? It isn't useful."
Lack of comfort	14.3	
Physical aspects	10.2	"Wet hairs", "Changing clothes", "Problem with make-up"
Boring lessons	10.2	"As all my friends, I do not appreciate to show my body"
Lack of competence	8.2	"Lack of originality", "Activities mainly based on distance swimming"
School swimming	8.2	
Presence of males	6.1	"Cultural differences are more difficult to manage and need a school policy"
Lack of enjoyment	6.1	
Student/teacher conflict	4.1	
Season	4.1	
Miscellaneous	12.2	

The tasks that pupils appreciated in the swimming lessons were to play, to swim in their preferred style and to participate to original activities. As they explained these choices, enjoyment will to feel completed and to establish relationships with others are determining factors. The tasks that they did not appreciate during the swimming lessons were to swim in one style and to swim long distances. They described that opinion to the risk of feeling incompetent or to the routine character of the task proposed by the teacher. This finding pointed out that students would associate swimming to a leisure activity, such that they chose to do when they have time to spend with their friends. The “skill-oriented” lessons that teacher propose (often because they do not have space enough for their students in the swimming pool) do not encounter the interests of the youth. We pointed out that the attitude of secondary school level female students improved through the introduction of game like situations in swimming lessons [15].

The reasons provided by the students to explain their non participation are listed in Table 4. Health problems and menstruation were the most important categories but most of the pupils did not have credible motives of non participation as it is supported by these quotations:

Table 4 - Reasons proposed by the students to explain why they do not participate

Categories	n
Health	21
Menstruations	18
Lack of interest	9
No sport clothes	2
Religion	1
Miscellaneous	6

Interviewer: *“Do you use this problem as an excuse or is it really impossible to go to swim when you have your menstruations?”*

S # 4: *“Yes, I could!” (04.02.10)*

Interviewer: *“Is it the real raison explaining why you don’t participate to the lesson?”*

S # 17: *“In fact, I try to find real excuses but I say anything to avoid the lesson” (04.02.13)*

Interviewer: *“Did you easily get your medical excuse?”*

S # 15: *“Yes. A friend of my mother is a doctor and she provided me the document” (04.03.23)*

The non-participants have proposed several factors that could encourage them to become active during swimming lessons. Suggestions were characterized by a large diversity:

- Organising games and challenges;
- Participation of more students (that is a paradoxical aspect!);
- More time after the lesson in the cloak-room;
- Free time periods;
- Decreasing of the skill learning part of the lessons;
- More fun;
- Programming water-polo or aqua fitness;
- Cleaning the pool and the changing rooms;
- Longer lessons;
- Planning the lessons at the end of the school day;
- A more positive relationship with the teacher.

Conclusion

Our study showed that, in the teaching context of the French speaking part of Belgium, a lot of girls do not participate to swimming lessons. The reasons they provided to their teacher

were not often true. Some of them used motives which laid teachers without opportunities to react due to the (un)conscious complicity of adults who do not perceive the implications of these decisions (parents & health professionals). Nevertheless, it appeared that the lack of interest of the students towards swimming can be considered as the main factor that could explain the situation. An improvement of the organizational conditions and of the content of the lessons should help the PE teachers to keep the students in the water. We think that action research and exchanges of good practices should be a promising process for improvement of the situation.

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