FUTURE PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE OBESE CHILD
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Recent research identifies the prevalence of overweight and obesity as a growing problem across developed countries bringing with them associated increases in essentially physiological ill health conditions. Obesity, in particular, has also been identified as being associated with psychological, sociological and indeed developmental disturbances. Inadequate school physical education (PE) has been targeted as the culprit for the rising incidence of overweight and obesity in children despite limited evidence. Research has attempted to address not only the impact of the teacher on the PE experience, but also on the attitudes of the children towards PE and physical activity in the broader context to predict future physical activity, in both normal and overweight children. Few articles, however, have attempted to investigate the perceptions of the teacher toward their pupils.

Whilst research has identified negative fat bias in obesity health professionals (Schwartz et al., 2003) and graduates from the exercise sciences who may represent the future health promotion workforce (Chambliss et al., 2004), no research has examined if future PE teachers in England already perceive obese children differently.

One hundred and sixty seven students (101 males, 64 females; age 20.9±2.9; height 1.75±0.11m; mass 72.4±12.7; BMI 23.7±3.4) who were studying sport (n=54) or ‘named’ PE (n=110) courses at a university in England completed a questionnaire consisting of demographic information and an adapted version of Whitehead’s Children and Youth Physical Self Perception Profile (Whitehead, 1995). The questionnaire was adapted so that participants responded to the items with their perception of ‘fat’ kids compared to their perception of ‘normal weight’ kids. Internal reliability of the subscales was acceptable (Cronbach’s Alpha SPORT=.78; CONDITION=.85; BODY=.74; STRENGTH=.86; PSW=.83; GSE=.80). Means for each subscale were SPORT=1.88±.45; CONDITION=1.52±.49; BODY=1.63±.43; STRENGTH=2.48±.52; PSW=1.79±.47; GSE=2.10±.50 with a one-sample t-test identifying that all subscales, except STRENGTH (P=.669), were significantly lower than the subscale mean value of 2.5 (P<0.001). Independent t-tests identified no subscale differences between the ‘named’ PE and sports courses.

The results identify that students on both PE and sports courses had perceptions of obese children that were significantly lower than the scale mean for all subscales except STRENGTH when compared to their perceptions of normal weight children. Further research is required to establish if these data are unique to future PE and sports professional and to identify if such perceptions translate into negative behaviours in PE and sport settings that might impact upon the likelihood of overweight and obese children participating in physical activity in the future.