

# Verbal interaction amongst students during physical education

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## ABSTRACT

This following paper presents an ethnographical study in which verbal interactions during Physical Education between students of Secondary School are analysed. Research tools include observation of lessons with elaboration of narrative registers supplemented by audio recordings and the semi-structured interview. 343 students distributed into 11 class groups participated in the study for a total of 17 sessions. The results indicate that, during the observed lessons and in the light of the interactions analysed, instances of violence or friction between peers were isolated cases. On the other hand, there is a widespread presence of unpleasant situations of dissent, although they did not necessarily produce tension. There was a lot of mockery and periods of cohesion were scant. Insults and expletives were traded in nearly every conversation analysed. **Keywords:** Interaction between peers; Ethnographic observation; Physical education; Secondary education.

### Cite this article as:

Montesdeoca, R., Marchena, R.M., & Mateos, C. (2019). Verbal interaction amongst students during physical education. *Journal of Human Sport and Exercise*, 14(3), 560-570. doi:<https://doi.org/10.14198/jhse.2019.143.07>

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Submitted for publication July 2018

Accepted for publication October 2018

Published September 2019 (*in press* November 2018)

JOURNAL OF HUMAN SPORT & EXERCISE ISSN 1988-5202

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doi:10.14198/jhse.2019.143.07

## INTRODUCTION

Interactions amongst peers, and interactions established between student body and faculty, widely set the mood or atmosphere of the classroom. A classroom, far from defining it as a physical space constituted by four walls, is conceptualized as a communicative space in which social interaction and affective factors acquire a pivotal role (Castellá, Comelles, Cros y Vila, 2007).

This following study focuses on the analysis of the verbal interaction generated between students of Secondary Education during Physical Education. Despite its relevance and predictive power in terms of improving quality teaching, this analysis perspective is not always met with wide dissemination in Physical Education. This subject matter showcases more interest in teachers' and/or trainers' pedagogical efficiency, which is later translated into the analysis of verbal and non-verbal interactions between these and the students or athletes (Goicochea, 2014). However, we must also keep in mind that we are facing a field whose objectives are often focused on motor action rather than in verbal action.

Verbal interaction between students can be easily observed during Physical Education as opposed to regular classrooms. This is because it is conditioned due to the characteristics of space, material and motor tasks (Sánchez, 2009). When students perform physical exercises, a more intense and spontaneous conversation - which is not produced in other lessons - can be noted between participants, because in those other lessons silence is a basic rule. The recreational nature of many of the activities carried out in Physical Education provides a more relaxed environment, which in turn promotes free and spontaneous conversation between peers.

The observation students make on how teachers interact with them is an important source of information, and teenagers later use it to make judgement on the acceptance or rejection of their classmates (Hughes, Cavell y Willson, 2001). For that reason, keeping in mind the impact that the attitudes and personality of the teacher have on the social behaviour of students emphasizes the idea that, on the one hand, the teacher is nuclear when establishing appropriate coexistence (Villena, 2016) and, on the other hand, that diagnosing the interactions between peers provides crucial feedback for the faculty to improve teaching quality.

For learning to be effective, interaction amongst peers must be well managed. It is not only an issue of quantity, but also of quality. "It is not enough to facilitate the interactions so that they are achieved, in an invariable, favorable effects on motor learning, affective development or the process of socialization. In educational contexts it is necessary to intervene promoting forms of organization that propitiate relationships between enriching students for all of them" (Ruíz, 2008, p.1).

This interaction between classmates can be significant not only for education, but also for the personal development of each of them. A study on teenagers' physical self-concept during Physical Education (Hortigüela y Pérez, 2015) highlights that it is not just about fostering the benefits that physical activity has at a biological or physical level in the students, but to create strategies in the classroom to make them feel comfortable and value themselves positively as a participant (Barney y Christenson, 2013). To this we must add that, from dynamic conceptions of personality, the creation of a positive self-concept is a largely psychosocial phenomenon in a teenager. This means that it is configured depending on the assessments that others make of us, with a much greater importance being placed on those that come from classmates and friends (i.e. their peers) due to the age of these students.

In an ethnographical study performed on Secondary Education classes (Marchena, 2005), they found that there were forms of cohesion, acceptance and desire for mutual assistance between peers. However, they also found that in those same classes there was tension, disputes, rivalries and desire for competition. Despite that, they did not note widespread negative and extended signs of friction or frequent competitiveness. Adverse events detected were isolated cases of such behaviour.

## RESOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Considering the main purpose of this investigation, focused on analysing verbal interactions between students during Physical Education, our proposed objectives were as follows: a) Characterize, from the dialogues and conversations, what kind of relationship students have b) Find out what triggers the way their relationships are established c) Analyse the most frequently used terminology by students to communicate amongst themselves.

To reach these objectives, we designed an ethnographical investigation of qualitative nature (Angrosino, 2012) considering the classroom under the ecological paradigm (Doyle, 1986; Tikunoff, 1979). This means to “perceive the Physical Education class as a complex structure of interdependent and intensely braided variables, difficult to isolate, that act globally on the educational reality” (Marchena, Palomino, Ramos y Montesdeoca, 2017, p.8).

### *Participants*

Using international sampling, a Secondary School from the island of Gran Canaria, located in a mid-level neighbourhood, was selected, even though most students came from other slums. It was an associated centre (i.e. of private religious initiative), but with state subsidy. After previous negotiations for access with the headmaster, the authorization to be allowed in all lessons of Physical Education for all levels taught at the school was obtained during the last term of the 2015-2016 school year. More specifically, to eight classes of Mandatory Secondary Education (ESO) and three classes for the first year of high school (1° de Bachillerato). There was a sole teacher for that subject at the school.

Verbal interactions generated by a total of 343 students distributed in the groups, ratios and sessions indicated in Table 1 were analysed.

Table 1. Description of the sample

LEVELS	GROUPS	RATIO	NUMBER OF SESSIONS
1° ESO	A	31	2
	B	31	1
2° ESO	A	31	2
	B	31	2
3° ESO	A	31	2
	B	31	1
4° ESO	A	31	2
	B	31	2
1° BACHILLER	A	32	1
	B	32	1
	C	31	1
TOTAL	11 groups	343 students	17 sessions

### **Measures and procedures**

To obtain the information generated by the student body we used *ethnographic observation* as an investigation tool, elaborating a narrative register of everything that was happening. This measure was supplemented by audio recordings. Regarding the teacher who taught this subject to the 343 students, he was given a *semi-structured interview*.

### **Analysis of information**

Once the narrative registers of the observations made in the classrooms were transcribed, a total of 47 units of information are extracted, containing the dialogues and conversations between the students. From these segments of content, we establish a category system (Taylor and Bogdan, 1992), which generate the categories described and conceptualized in *table 2*. All of them reflect a characterization of the types of relationships that peers had in these lessons. We observed that only one implied a positive relationship (of closeness) between peers.

Table 2. Categories characterizing the type of relationship established

CATEGORIES	CONCEPTUALIZATION
Rejection	Does not want to work with their classmate, does not accept collaboration
Mocking	Gestures, laughing or words which externalize publicly a negative criticism
Friction	Disagreements which produce tension, disputes and/or violence
Pestering	Students annoy each other, and disagreements arise, although without producing tension; behaviours may be characteristic of their age
Closeness	Students praise each other, offer support, offer help to carry out their tasks

To find out the trigger of the types of relationships observed, the information is once more grouped into the categories in Table 3. Lastly, the analysis of the terminology used in those dialogues and conversations is classified into a third group of categories which are shown in Table 4.

Once the content was classified, the units of information were quantified in frequency and percentages because, having been transformed into numbers, qualitative data is more manageable than when presented in words and text (Rodríguez, García y García, 1999).

Once its transcription is done, the interview is also categorized with a similar thematic axis as the narrative registers to later apply a triangulation of agents and tools, in order to increase the validity of the quantitative data unearthed (Del Villar, 1994).

Table 3. Categories which establish the trigger of the type of interaction established

CATEGORIES	CONCEPTUALIZATION
Capacities/abilities	The time devoted to study, the modality of the programme which they attend at school, level of execution of motor tasks
Sexual orientation	Presence of homosexuality
Behaviour	What is done or said in general (touching, joking, stopping a song that is liked...) and which is not related to the capacities or sexual orientation
Physique	Characteristics which define any external body part

Table 4. Categories which classify the terminology used

CATEGORIES	CONCEPTUALIZATION
Insults	Words that offend due to meaning
Insults related to disability	Insults which use terms that in former times were applied to people with disabilities (mongoloid, moron, retard...)
Expletives	Rude or improper words

## RESULTS

The interviewed teacher declared that his class environment is good, *although sometimes the lack of will to participate shown by the students don't help to improve the class dynamic*. He also added that there were not many conflicts, but *depending on the class year, they don't follow the rules and they have to be reminded constantly (put your mobile phones away, leave your bags in the changing room...) or they don't know the difference between a joke and being annoying, which generally causes disputes*.

Of the total (n=47) of Units of Information (henceforth UI) which relate to situations of interaction between the student body (figure 1), the major category is *pestering* (40.4%). When we triangulate that information with what the teacher declared and keeping in mind the meaning of the category *pestering*, there is a match in the data: *there is no aggression, (...), the ones in ESO (Mandatory Secondary Education) can be classified as "horseplay"*. The category of *closeness* (12.7%), which is a positive interaction, has a lower frequency than *pestering* and *mocking*. *Friction* (8.5%), has the lowest appearance rate.

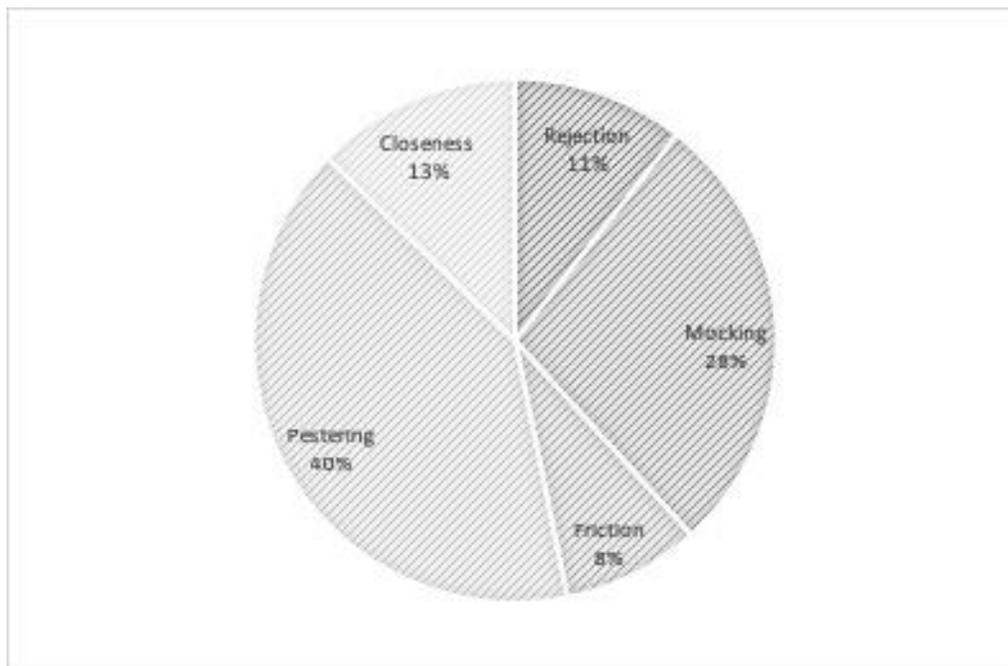


Figure 1. UI percentages associated to the categories which describe the interactions.

If we look at what triggers the interactions which lead to conflict, the teacher declared that, when compared to other subjects, more conflicts between peers arise during Physical Education *due to the physical interaction, the "scuffing" and misunderstanding competitiveness*. *They don't know how to play together, they think they are competing*.

From a quantitative point of view, focusing on the categories which do not involve closeness, we observe (Figure 2) that what a classmate does or says (i.e. *behaviour* category), has the highest score (67.5%). The teacher noted that *they don't know the difference between a joke and being annoying, which generally causes disputes*. In order of relevance, the next would be *capacities and/or abilities* (20%). *Physique* has generated scarce amounts of conflictive verbal situations (2%) but *sexual orientation*, although not very present (7.5%), is discernible in the negative interactions between the students observed.

*A girl appears from behind and touches her classmate. He tells her "You're sweating! That's disgusting!". Another classmate gestures for her to get away and also tells her "Move, Cinthia!". (1° ESO, REJECTION, BEHAVIOUR)*

*A group of girls is talking about a classmate in front of them:*

- Woooooow! Look at his foot. How ugly. It's really big, isn't it?
- Yeah, a size 11 at the very least.
- He has to go buy his spikes to Vecindario at least... hahahaha
- To Moya... hahahahahaha! At a craft shop
- Juan Carlos, your shoes are handcrafted, right? –they tell him-

*Without waiting for an answer, they all laugh out loud (1° ESO, MOCKING, PHYSIQUE)*

*A girl and a boy (foreseeably homosexual) are talking together:*

- What are you going to dress up as next year??
- I don't know. Did you know that the theme is flowers?
- Then you're going to dress up as a flower fairy, right? –the girl tells him, laughing out loud-
- Hag! (3° ESO MOCKING, SEXUAL ORIENTATION)

*A boy was running. His coordination is not very good. A classmate, pointing at him, says out loud as he laughs:*

- Oooooooh! Amazing speed... (4°ESO, MOCKING, CAPACITIES/ABILITIES)

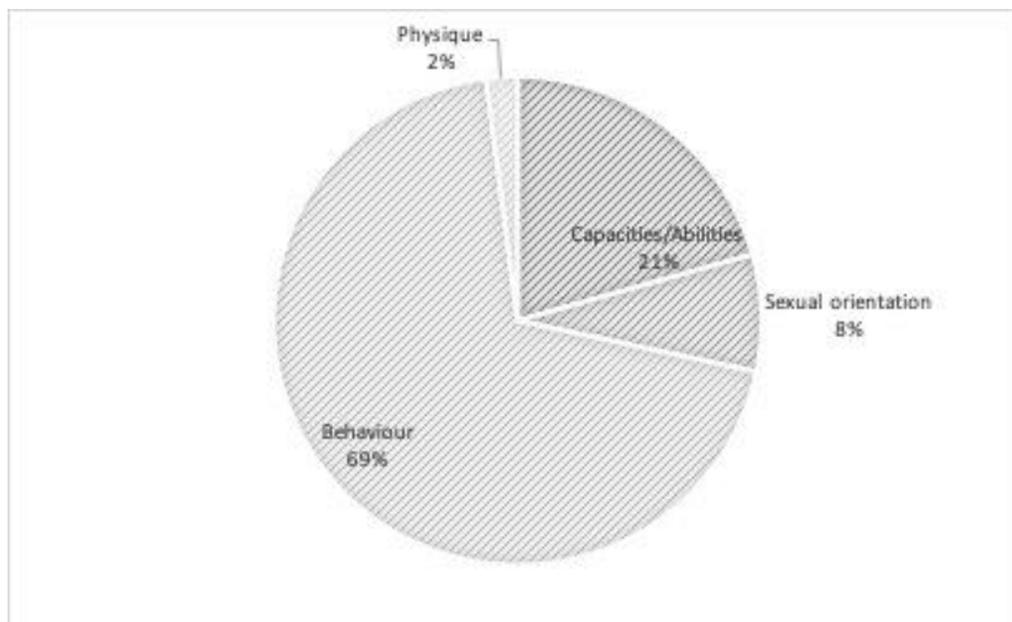


Figure 2. Causes and UI percentages which generate verbal interactions without closeness.

If we link the causes with the categories (table 5), we must highlight that *capacities and/or abilities* of classmates is the main reason for *mocking* (50%) while *rejection* (12.5%) and *friction* (12.5%) appear the least. *Sexual orientation* of peers appeared only in the category of *mocking*. *Behaviour* triggers mostly the instances of *pestering* (55.5%), although also of *friction* (18.5%). The smallest factor is *rejection* (11.1%). *Physique* triggered *rejection* (50%) and *mocking* (50%).

Table 5. Percentages of Causes and UI Terminology associated to each category

	REJECTION	MOCKING	FRICION	PESTERING	CLOSENESS
<b>TERMINOLOGY</b>					
Insults	10.5%	26.3%	21%	36.8%	5.2%
Ins. about disability	0%	0%	0%	75%	25%
Expletives	0%	0%	11.1%	55.5%	33.3%
<b>CAUSE</b>					
Capacities, abilities	12.5%	50%	12.5%	25%	-
Sexual orientation	0%	100%	0%	0%	-
Behaviour	11.1%	14.8%	18.5%	55.5%	-
Physique	50%	50%	0%	0%	-

Regarding the terminology introduced in the dialogues and conversations, we find in the total UI (figure 3) a high percentage (68%) of *insults* (59.3%), *expletives* (28.1%) and even *insults related do disability* (12.5%). These terms did not necessarily appear during conflictive interactions such as *pestering* and even *closeness*. As for expletives, we can see (table 5) that the greater frequency lies with *pestering* (55.5%), followed by *closeness* (33.3%). Teachers confirm that opinion, asserting that *conflicts, as such, are far and few between. What is surprising is that students talk amongst themselves using expletives. Conflicts are usually verbal (...)*.

*A boy bothers a classmate and she complains:*

- Owww! Are you retarded or what?... (2°ESO, PESTERING, INSULT RELATED TO DISABILITY)

*Boys and girls pass a ball around while playing. One of the boys takes the ball away from a girl who had it at that moment. He can be heard saying:*

- Fuck you, bitches! You sluts!

*The girls get tired of it and go sit down at the stands (2°ESO, PESTERING, INSULT)*

*A group is playing racquetball. They are cheering each other:*

- Go, motherfucker!

- Go, team! Hip-hip-hurrah...! (1°ESO, CLOSENESS, EXPLETIVE)

*Some girls play football with boys. The girls can be heard saying:*

- Angelo! Pass it already, you fucking pain in the ass...

- Dani, the ball, noooow!

- Goddamn fucking bores! (2°ESO, PESTERING, EXPLETIVES)

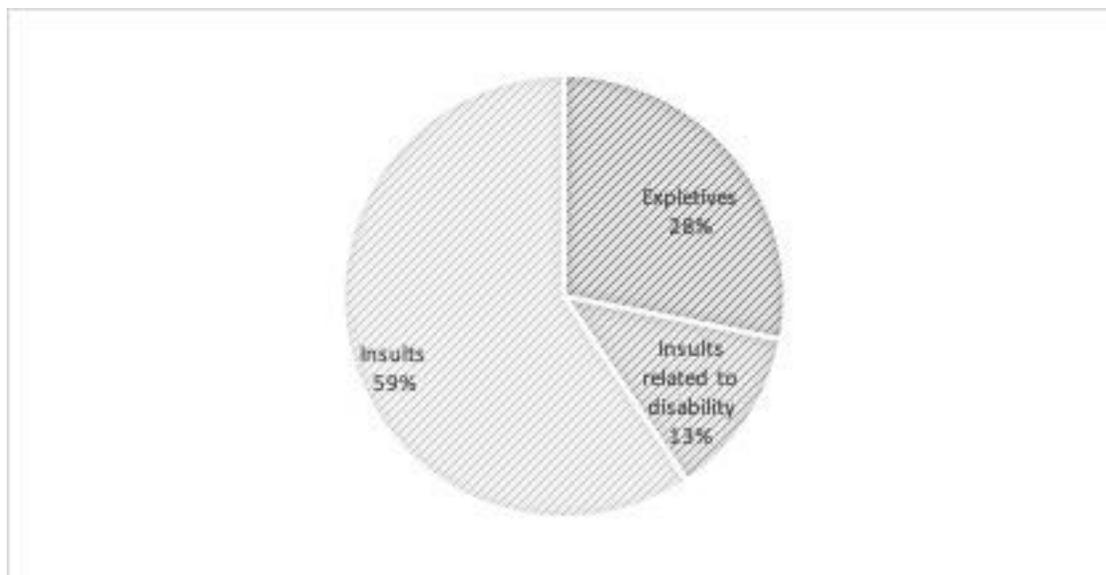


Figure 3. Terminology and UI percentages introduced in the interaction

## DISCUSSION

From these results, we can assert that mainly situations of disagreement and unpleasantness, “horseplay” as the teacher would call it, arise when the students from Secondary School that we have studied interact verbally. Few of those situations have led to violence or aggressiveness; there have been some, but scarce. If we keep in mind that in qualitative studies the higher the level of triangulation, the higher the reliability, we find ourselves faced with solid findings. This is because our two investigation tools used, observation and the interview, delivered the same results. We can also verify the study done by Marchena (2005), which was done in Secondary School classrooms with similar methodology but looking at the relationship between students in other subjects.

Albeit not a violent interaction between peers, mockery dominates many interactions and, even more worrying, there are not many instances of closeness, of offering help. We have discerned, through the oral interaction, a student body which lacks cohesion, and which is not very close. Faced with this scenario, it is imperative to make plans stressing especially on creation of cooperative tasks for Physical Education (Orlick, García y Martínez, 1990; Alonso y Ruíz, 2017). Only like this would we be meeting the basic competences of this educational stage as well as the practical application of the principles of Inclusive Education, the educational tendency upon which our current educational system is built.

It is interesting to note that, amongst the registered mocking, the homosexuality which is apparent in some classmates is included as a trigger among the students of Secondary School. Concurrently, resorting to downgrading classmates by using obsolete terms which society has unfairly applied to people with disability (retard, mongoloid, moron...), has been a surprising finding from a moral and ethical point of view. In view of these considerations, it would be advisable to incorporate contents related to the concept and culture of diversity in our current society during the initial training of professionals of physical activity and sport (Booth, Simón, Sandoval, Echeita, Muñoz, 2015; Barton, 2011). Only a teaching staff sensitive to exclusionary tendencies can take action in their lessons with the rigour and resolve which these situations require.

The capacities and abilities that each student possesses have been a recurring cause, although not only for mocking. It is apparent that when they annoyed or rejected each other, or during the few cases of major conflict, there was a tendency to highlight how badly their classmate was doing the motor tasks, the grades they got or the adapted pedagogical programmes which they took at school. This reality has to be interpreted keeping in mind that teachers generate expectations about their students which they are transmitting to the rest of the classmates unconsciously, thus contributing to a higher or lower degree of acceptance (Hughes, Cavell y Willson, 2001, Villena, 2016, Jiménez, Moreno, Murgui y Musitu, 2008): “the degree of coincidence between the perception of the students and that of the teacher is usually high, so that generally, teachers and students usually evaluate negatively the same students. This fact highlights the existing parallelism between the quality of the student’s relationship with peers and with the teacher” (Jiménez et al, 2008, p. 233).

Given the results of this present study, Physical Education teachers should constantly control and reflect on the comments that they voice to their students, even the briefest and most subtle ones. Likewise, they should neutralise and tweak positively the possible derogatory comments that students make about their classmates. These derogatory comments have more probability to emerge during Physical Education given that motor tasks are always public and open to the rest of the class (Palomino, Marchena y Ramos, 2017). Maths problems are solved and, unless specifically requested by the teacher, the notebook is closed so no classmate can see it. A somersault, however, is performed in front of the whole class.

Regarding the terminology and words which they intersperse in their dialogues and conversations, the sheer number of insults that students trade with each other has stood out, especially in situations of pestering (i.e. segments of relationship which did not entail violence or mocking). They emerged even during situations of closeness. Similarly, and with equal tendency, we find a great number of expletives being used. We are once again facing results of great credibility given the coinciding information when triangulating the opinions of teachers and the observations made in class. This generalised trait during interactions leads us to believe that insults and expletives are mainly being used without egregious intent. It could be said that the participants of this study have normalized a practically vulgar vocabulary when interacting spontaneously amongst themselves.

Moreno (2009), facing a study which has also found a high percentage of rude vocabulary being used by students of Secondary School, interprets this trait in two possible ways: firstly, considering that students do it consciously “as a strategy to express themselves differently, with a distinctive identity characteristic of youth groups” (p. 21); or secondly, which does not necessarily have to be separate from the first one, perceives this trait considering that there is a group of students who are ignorant of basic courtesy rules because they have not learned them.

Fuentes y Alcaide (2008) argue that marginal lexicon based on insults and expletives used frequently by speakers of low social standing has been passed down to youths, who use it as an affiliation method, devoid of their inherent violence, to generate group consciousness. Media would be contributing to it by generalizing stereotypes. This results in “youths who are not part of socially marginalised environments using these terms as a way to react to what is established, but always in particular situations of their daily life activities: school, university, group of friends...” (p. 20).

## CONCLUSIONS

The verbal interactions established by the students during Physical Education in this study are characterized by the overwhelming presence of uncomfortable situations (i.e. of disagreement), but which do not necessarily produce tension or violence. However, we can confirm the considerable frequency of situations of mockery, some of which surprise by using homosexuality of classmates as a cause. Interactions of great friction and rejection amongst peers are scarce. Despite this data (not indicative of conflictive relationships), the social profile of the groups observed is not geared towards cooperation and collaboration. This reality is confirmed by the scant registered verbal interactions which imply closeness.

The trigger of the antagonistic interactions observed is mainly a particular behaviour from classmates, something that is said or done, which objectively speaking is not necessarily conflictive. The introduction of a large number of insults and expletives during dialogues and conversations stands out even in situations of closeness.

The educational implications which can be extracted from these conclusions indicate that it is imperative to improve the interactions amongst peers starting with Physical Education. We are facing a situation of coexistence which rarely calls upon support and praise. There are currently many programmes being initiated by educational administrations in order to encourage social interaction amongst peers and for bullying prevention. This is all of great importance. We should also keep in mind that sports have always been considered an excellent resource in order to convey values (Ruíz y Cabrera, 2004), a reality which can be applied easily from a Physical Education lesson.

However, out of all the measures adopted, it is being established that the role of the teacher includes participating in the implementation and monitoring of those programmes, but seldom are they given training from a didactic point of view attuned to the ecological paradigm of the classroom in which this investigation is based. This means that training must stress on making the teacher aware that the tasks and activities carried out in class are directly related to coexistence, given that those are the best behaviour regulators for students. Thus, it is convenient for the teaching staff to learn to create activities for Physical Education that encourage cohesion and cooperation amongst peers and to imbue those activities with close and assertive interaction when engaging with the students. Concurrently, they must adjust their attitudes regarding respect towards the diversity which is a part of any human group. This will all result in an improvement of the class environment during Physical Education and a positive attitude of students towards physical activities and sport.

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