

Original Article

Differences in Social Skills of Cypriot Students in the Physical Education Class

EFSTATHIOS CHRISTODOULIDES¹, VASSILIKI DERRI², OLIA TSIVITANIDOU³, EFTHIMIS KIOUMOURTZOGLOU¹

¹Department of Sport Science, University of Nicosia, CYPRUS

²Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, Democritus University of Thrace, HELLAS

³Department of Education, University of Cyprus, CYPRUS

Published online: September 21, 2012

(Accepted for publication September 10, 2012)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2012.03055; <http://dx.doi.org/10.7752/jpes.2012.03055>

Abstract

Social skills are of vital importance in successful living. Acquisition and performance of social skills in education may rely on several factors. The main aim of this study was to identify the possible influence of age and gender on Greek Cypriot students' social skills ('acquaintance', 'responsibility', 'reward', 'help', 'goals') and total social skills score, in physical education. A secondary aim was to examine whether ethnicity differentiates students' perceptions of their social skills. Four hundred and fifty one students ($N = 451$) from eight randomly selected schools in Nicosia participated. Four hundred and thirty one of them ($n=431$) were Greek Cypriot students, from upper elementary ($n = 202$, $M_{age} = 11.24$, $SD_{age} = 0.41$) and high school ($n = 229$, $M_{age} = 13.1$, $SD_{age} = 0.45$) while the remaining twenty ($n=20$) were their foreign classmates. Students completed the Student's Behaviours' Self-Evaluation Scale (Vernadakis, Kellis, Albanidis, Derri, & Kourteses, 2010). With regard to the first purpose of the study, Manova 2 (age group) X 2 (gender) revealed significant differences between high school Greek Cypriot boys and girls in 'acquaintance', 'reward', 'goals', and in total social skills score as well, in favor of girls. Also, older boys exhibited significantly lower perceptions of 'reward' and 'goals', and lower total social skills score than younger boys, while older girls outperformed the younger in 'acquaintance'. On average, female students displayed higher scores on 'help' and 'responsibility' than their male peers. The comparison between foreign and Greek Cypriot students (a similar group, randomly selected of the corresponding sample), showed that the former outperformed the latter only in 'acquaintance'. The results suggest that students' perceptions vary according to age, gender, and ethnicity. Understanding the effect of these factors is considered imperative to designing and implementing the physical education lesson to address social skills enhancement and facilitate student development.

Key Words: social behaviour, physical education, age, gender, ethnicity

Introduction

Social development during childhood is considered one of the greatest challenges in today's education. Although the school environment can tremendously influence student social development, the efforts for the achievement of this goal appear to be unsuccessful or incomplete. As a result, many countries raise concern about the ongoing student problem behaviours (De Jong, 2005), and report high bullying in elementary school (Wong, Lok, Lo, & Ma, 2008). Recent studies in Cyprus provide similar evidence about student problem behaviours (e.g., Stavrinides, Paradeisiotou, Tziogouros, & Lazarou, 2010) as well as their relation with the increasing ethnic diversity (e.g., Zembylas, Michaelidou, & Afantintou-Lambrianou, 2010).

Researchers realized that social skills development can affect, in short and long terms, the life of students (Gülay & Akman, 2009), and since 1970s, focusing attention towards prevention, suggested that they should be addressed systematically at early ages (Zsolnai & Józca, 2003). Social skills may be viewed as observable and learned sets of self and interpersonal behaviours (e.g., goal setting, cooperation) that lead to desired social outcomes (Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). This conceptualization was verified by research studies which demonstrated that inadequate acquisition and performance of social skills is often associated with negative outcomes (mental, externalizing, and internalizing problems) such as negative peer interactions (Hay et al., 2004), rejection, depression, and loneliness (Cole & Carpentieri, 1990; Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). Negative peer relations and child loneliness, in turn, are related to negative behaviour at home and school, respectively

(e.g., Stormshak & Webster-Stratton, 1999). Also, negative social behaviours are related to a continuous poor student adjustment (Morgan & Merier, 2008) and achievement in school (Hung & Lockard, 2007). In contrast, acquisition of social skills has been often associated with positive peer relationships, and assimilation and adaptation of social behaviour (Parker & Asher, 1987). In general, positive social behaviours and interactions have been found to affect children's social, emotional and academic adjustment, as well as their educational success (Hay et al., 2004). The above relations could be explained by the point of view that inadequate social skills are the cause and effect of behavioral and emotional problems. Within a vicious circle, poor social skills, for instance, cause an increase in problem behaviours, which also causes the continuation of poor social skills (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998).

The acquisition and performance of social skills seems to be directly associated with social cognitive development or social cognition, a process which allows the development of social competence. Being summative and others-based, social competence is comprised of social skills and indicates the degree of one's adequacy in applying them. This process may be considered a specific application of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998).

Factors such as age and gender are among the important considerations in social skills development. Based on the aspects of social cognitive development that relate to social competence (Eisenberg & Harris, 1984), upper elementary school children acquire quality problem-solving skills (Pelligrini, 1980) as well as cooperative and supportive communications (Keane & Cogner, 1981). Also, their friendship patterns are characterized by an increased concern about self-presentation and peer acceptance (Goldstein & Gallagher, 1992). Adolescents develop further their social skills, since their cognitive and social capabilities mature. That reflects to the increasing complexity and number of their positive social communications (Eisenberg & Harris, 1984) and solutions to social problems (Pelligrini, 1980). They also rely on self-, rather than peer-oriented friendship patterns which enable them to discover their personal identity (Gottman, 1986). Therefore, high school students, as more socially mature, are expected to exhibit more positive and fewer negative social behaviours than elementary school students. However, recent studies provided evidence that as age increases positive social behaviors decrease while antisocial behaviours increase, both in social (Hassandra, Goudas, & Theodorakis, 2007) and in physical education settings (e.g., Hassandra et al., 2007; Papageorgiou, Hassandra, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2008). Elementary school children have also more positive attitudes than high school children towards foreign students (UNICEF, 2001).

In terms of gender, significant differences in social skills and problem behaviours appear during the elementary and high school years. Merrell (1993) found that teacher ratings of elementary girls' social skills and antisocial behavior were significantly more positive than those of boys. Related evidence suggests that schoolboys have often more problem behaviours than girls (e.g., Keane & Calkins, 2004; Margetts, 2005); they are engaged in and are also being more physically bullied. Similarly, in physical education boys have more negative behaviors than their female peers (Papageorgiou et al., 2008). On the contrary, the latter exhibit more positive social behaviors in social settings (Giavrimis & Papanis, 2007; Jurado, Cumba-Avilés, Collazo, & Matos, 2006) and in physical education (Hassandra et al., 2007; Hassandra, Goudas, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2003; Papageorgiou, et al., 2008) as well as greater tolerance towards foreign students (UNICEF, 2001). However, some studies indicated no significant gender differences in verbal bullying and exclusion (Wong et al., 2008) or in positive behaviours (Ma, 2005).

Ethnicity has been also included in the study of social skills. Merrell (1993) found extremely small correlations between child's ethnicity and social skills or problem behaviours ratings, and attributed this finding mainly to the nationwide social skill behaviours. Related studies indicated that foreign students show worse interpersonal relationships and self-control than the indigenous (Giavrimis & Papanis, 2007), and they tend to have relationships with children of similar experiences (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs - UNESCO, 1984). Also, in the study by Zembylas et al. (2010), the self-reported behaviour of Greek Cypriot students toward foreigners was negative whereas girls provided more positive answers than boys. In line, former research evidence showed that Greek Cypriot children had negative perceptions toward foreigners with elements of racism, xenophobia (Papamichael, 2009), and stereotypes (Philippou, 2009). The reactions to groups of different ethnicity have been analyzed based on models of assimilation, integration, and separatism (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003). In assimilation, foreigners adopt the characteristics of the indigenous group. In integration, the public differences between groups are eliminated, but not necessarily the cultural. In separatism, differences between groups are preserved; foreigners keep their own culture.

Contemporary physical education, through its dynamic social nature and its different codes, provides a variety of opportunities for student interaction that requires performance of social skills such as self-control, goal setting, accepting, helping and cooperating with others etc. (e.g., Hellison, 2011). Although by nature this subject matter is expected to counterbalance students' differences and enhance their social skills, the aforementioned limited research demonstrated quite the opposite. Unambiguously, positive feelings are not

produced by merely participating in physical education. Rather, sometimes competitive sports without organized social instruction can even affect negatively children's social development (e.g., Tjeerdsma, 1999). However, child loneliness is negatively related to participation in physical activity and to health-related fitness (e.g., Page, Frey, Talbert, & Falk, 1992).

Therefore, one of the greatest challenges that physical education teachers encounter in their class is to identify students' social differences, understand their needs, and provide them with appropriate learning experiences in order to acquire and perform social skills. This approach will preserve students from expending valuable instructional time on problem behaviours, and will assist them in internalizing and transferring their social skills to real life. However, to enable teachers and students to achieve such goals, the physical education curriculum should be accordingly endorsed. Besides, the societal changes in Cyprus namely the increasing diversity which reaches approximately 8.8 percent of the school population, and consequently the interaction between Greek Cypriot and foreign students, raised interest in curriculum reform. Indeed, educational policy makers made changes to the curriculum and instruction methods of physical education, in order to promote student overall development. Social skills such as receiving and providing help, comments, feedback, critics and rewards to teammates and opponents, personal and team goal setting, and cooperative work, are among the social objectives of the new Physical Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). These objectives have to be achieved by all students, regardless of their differences in ethnicity, gender, level, etc. In this frame, students' evaluation would provide valuable feedback to teachers, parents, and students, with regard to social skills development and learning of the latter group. The social evaluation outcomes could also serve as an initial measurement of the new curriculum in Cyprus, and assist its developers in adapting the content, instruction and assessment strategies to students' strengths and weaknesses.

For the evaluation of children's social skills, informants' ratings (e.g., parents, teachers) or/and self-reports have been utilized. Although the former techniques are reliable and valid, they are time-consuming to administer and fail to measure pure social skills. Self-report instruments have been considered biased (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1996), and dependent on children's ability to accurately report on their own social skills (Merrell, 2001). Research, however, indicated that children can self-report their social skills, as long as they have the cognitive and emotional ability, and the educational level (Riley, 2004). Also, self-evaluation is considered a useful pedagogical process that enhances children's responsibility and self-awareness, allowing them to evaluate the results of their efforts and proceed in modifications, if necessary (Andreadakis & Xanthakou, 2005). Furthermore, according to Matsagouras (2000), this process contributes to a full, harmonious and balanced student development. Besides, personal experiences are life itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Based on the above, the limited evidence in physical education, and the lack of similar studies, to our knowledge, in Cyprus, the main aim of this study was to identify the possible influence of age and gender on Greek Cypriot students' social skills and total social skills score, in physical education. A secondary aim was to examine whether ethnicity differentiates students' perceptions of their social skills. Behaviours related to the social skills a) acceptance and interaction with students of different ethnicity (acquaintance), b) showing responsible behaviour (responsibility), c) rewarding fair play and effort (reward), d) providing and receiving help (help), and e) personal and team goal setting (goals), were evaluated. The following questions were studied:

- Do Greek Cypriot students of different age and gender have different perceptions of their social skills?
- Do Greek Cypriot students of different age have different perceptions of their social skills?
- Do Greek Cypriot students of different gender have different perceptions of their social skills?
- Do Cypriot students of different ethnicity have different perceptions of their social skills?

Material & Methods

Participants

Students (n=451) were drawn from eight randomly selected elementary and high schools in Nicosia, Cyprus. Four hundred and thirty one of them (n=431) were Greek Cypriot students between 10-12 and 12-14 years of age who attended fifth and sixth grade (n=202, 115 boys and 87 girls, $M_{age} = 11.24$, $SD_{age} = 0.41$), and seventh and eighth grade (n=229, 115 boys and 114 girls, $M_{age} = 13.1$, $SD_{age} = 0.45$) physical education classes. The remaining twenty students (n=20), 10 from elementary and 10 from high school ($M_{age} = 12.3$, $SD_{age} = 0.4$) were their foreign classmates. The latter group was compared to an equal size, age and gender Greek Cypriot students' group, which was randomly selected from the total corresponding sample in this study. None of the students was engaged in any organized extracurricular social skills program. The directors of the schools and the parents of the children were informed about the purpose and the nature of the study and consented to students' participation in it. They were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of students' responses. This procedure was followed for the protection of students' privacy and schools' identity.

Measures

The Student's Behaviours' Self-Evaluation Scale (SBSS) (Vernadakis, Kellis, Albanidis, Derri, & Kourtesses, 2010) was used to evaluate students' social skills in physical education. The selection of the Scale was considered appropriate because a) its items are highly related to the social objectives of the new Physical Education Curriculum in Cyprus (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010), b) there is a number of students of different ethnicity in the physical education class who are required, as their Greek Cypriot classmates, to accept others' differences and work together, and c) it can be applied in a multicultural physical education setting. In addition, related empirical research was limited.

The Scale consists of a total of 18 items for five social skills. 'Acquaintance' consists of 3 items (e.g., I like playing games with children from other countries). 'Responsibility' consists of 3 items (e.g., I insult my classmates without any particular reason). 'Reward' consists of 4 items (e.g., I congratulate opponent players, regardless of the result of the game). 'Help' consists of 4 items (e.g., I accept help from others when I cannot perform an exercise). 'Goals' consists of 4 items (e.g., I set goals for the success of my team). Cronbach's α of this Scale ranged between .66 and .88 (Vernadakis et al., 2010). Similarly, for the participants in the present study, Cronbach's α ranged between .65 and .83. Students answered the questions on a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 'never' to 5 'always' to indicate their level of agreement with each of the 18 items. Higher scores indicate better perceptions. The higher mean score for each separate skill would be 5 points. The total social skill score was also calculated.

Procedure

One of the researchers administered the questionnaire to the students, and informed them that there were no correct or wrong answers and time limitation for its completion. The researcher also assured students for the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and encouraged them to be as objective and honest as possible.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS (version 15.0). To identify possible differences in the perceptions of Greek Cypriot students, in terms of their age and gender, multivariate analysis of variance with two factors [Manova 2 (age) X 2 (gender)], and Bonferroni pairwise comparisons were applied. Similarly, a separate multivariate analysis of variance was performed for a total number of forty students, 20 foreigners and 20 Greek Cypriots, to identify any possible effect of ethnicity on their social skills in physical education.

Results

Means and standard deviations of the perceptions of Greek Cypriot student groups for their social skills in physical education and statistically significant findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of Greek Cypriot students' perceptions for their social skills and significant findings.

Social skills	Elementary school				High school			
	Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Acquaintance	3.54	.76	3.58 ^{***}	.72	3.40 [*]	.96	3.82 ^{*,***}	.85
^{a,b} Responsibility	4.64	.45	4.72	.47	4.28	.70	4.54	.54
Reward	3.88 ^{**}	.75	3.87	.73	3.43 ^{*,**}	.99	3.86 [*]	.77
^a Help	3.47	.81	3.68	.74	3.36	.95	3.81	.71
Goals	4.16 ^{**}	.72	4.08	.77	3.94 ^{*,**}	.97	4.29 [*]	.70
Total social skills score	3.94 ^{**}	.46	3.98	.43	3.68 ^{*,**}	.62	4.06 [*]	.51

^{*} significant differences between high school boys and girls ($p < .001$).

^{**} significant differences between high school and elementary school boys ($p < .001$ to $p < .05$).

^{***} significant differences between high school and elementary school girls ($p < .05$).

^a significant differences between boys and girls on average ($p < .001$).

^b significant differences between older and younger students ($p < .001$).

The results indicated a statistically significant age X gender interaction in ‘acquaintance’, $F(1,430)=5.31, p<.05, \eta^2=.012$, ‘reward’, $F(1,430)=7.79, p<.01, \eta^2=.018$, ‘goals’, $F(1,430)=8, p<.01, \eta^2=.018$, and in total social skills score, $F(1,430)=11.30, p<.01, \eta^2=.026$. Following Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons revealed statistically significant differences between high school boys and girls in ‘acquaintance’ ($p<.001, \eta^2=.032$), ‘reward’ ($p<.001, \eta^2=.036$), ‘goals’ ($p<.001, \eta^2=.025$) and total social skills score ($p<.001, \eta^2=.068$), in favor of girls.

Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons also indicated statistically significant differences between elementary and high school boys in ‘reward’ ($p < .001, \eta^2 = .039$), ‘goals’ ($p < .05, \eta^2 = .011$), and total social skills score ($p < .01, \eta^2 = .032$), in favor of the former group. On the other hand, older girls’ perceptions of ‘acquaintance’ were significantly higher than those of younger girls ($p < .05, \eta^2 = .009$).

The main effect of gender was found to be statistically significant in variables ‘responsibility’, $F(1,430)=10, p<.01, \eta^2=.023$, and ‘help’, $F(1,430)=16.68, p<.001, \eta^2=.038$. Girls on average displayed higher perceptions than boys, both in responsibility ($p<.001, \eta^2=.052$) and help ($p<.001, \eta^2=.038$). The main effect of age was also statistically significant for the social skill ‘responsibility’, $F(1,430)=23.49, p<.001, \eta^2=.052$, in favor of the elementary school students.

Means and standard deviations of the perceptions of Greek Cypriot and foreign students for their social skills in physical education and statistically significant findings are presented in Table 2. Multivariate analysis of variance showed a statistically significant effect of ethnicity only on ‘acquaintance’, $F(1,37)=4.83, p<.01, \eta^2=.13$. Following Bonferroni Pairwise comparisons indicated a significant difference between the two student groups, in favor of foreign students ($p<.05, \eta^2=.13$). The above significant effects are considered small when $\eta^2=.01$, moderate when $\eta^2=.06$ and high when $\eta^2=.14$ (Cohen, 1988).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of the perceptions of Greek Cypriot and foreign students for their social skills and significant findings.

Social skills	Greek Cypriot students		Foreign students	
	M	SD	M	SD
Acquaintance	3.41*	.71	4*	.84
Responsibility	4.31	.64	4.27	.62
Reward	3.58	.84	3.51	.99
Help	3.44	.87	3.23	1
Goals	4.01	.84	3.91	.78
Total social skills score	3.75	.48	3.78	.68

* $p<.05$

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to determine whether significant differences exist in certain social skills (‘acquaintance’, ‘responsibility’, ‘reward’, ‘help’, ‘goals’) and in total social skills score among Greek Cypriot students of different age and gender, in the physical education lesson. A secondary aim was to identify if there were any differences between Greek Cypriot students and their foreign classmates, in the above skills.

With regard to the first purpose of the study, elementary school children regardless of gender exhibited positive social behaviors that reflect to their relationships with their foreign classmates (‘acquaintance’) and indicate that they prefer their assimilation or integration in the physical education lesson. Their behaviours also seem to fulfill the expectations of their peers (Keane & Cogner, 1981), since they are characterized by cooperative (‘goals’) and supportive communications (‘rewards’). Therefore, children increase their possibility to gain peer acceptance (Goldstein & Gallagher, 1992) which they consider important in their friendships. Accordingly, their total social skill score was similar. Existing evidence in social settings (e.g., Merrell, 1993) and in physical education (e.g., Hassandra et al., 2007; Papageorgiou et al., 2008) is inconsistent with these results. In alignment, however, are studies that revealed no significant differences between genders in positive (Ma, 2005) or negative behaviours (Wong et al., 2008) in social settings.

On the contrary, high school boys’ relationships (‘acquaintance’) followed different patterns, implying that they prefer foreign students’ separation rather than assimilation or integration in the physical education lesson. The greater tolerance of girls towards foreign students in this study is in line with previous reports (UNICEF, 2001). Similarly, although in the study by Zembylas et al. (2010) Greek Cypriot students’ attitudes toward foreigners were negative in general, girls’ attitudes were more positive. Also, high school boys seem to

have less developed cooperative ('goals') and supportive communications ('rewards') than their female peers in the physical education lesson. These results are quite prospective since boys tend to exhibit or are perceived as exhibiting more behavior problems than girls, still similar moral reasoning (Bredemeier, 1994), which tend to be inversely related to social skills. A sports oriented physical education lesson that places great emphasis on competitiveness, and the decrease of the significance of peer acceptance during adolescence could explain boys' fewer positive behaviours and their lower total social skills score. Gender differences in anti-social and positive behaviours in high school also emerged in earlier studies (e.g., Bredemeier, 1994; Papageorgiou et al., 2008). A more thorough explanation of the effect of gender on social skills development is provided later in this section.

The finding that relationships with foreign students ('acquaintance') and cooperative communications ('goals') improve as girls age (high school girls exhibited significantly higher perceptions than the elementary), indicates that girls "follow" their social skill development, and exhibit advanced social skills. In contrast, high school boys' fewer supportive ('reward') and cooperative communications ('goals') as well as their lower social skills score, in comparison to younger boys, might be attributed to a possible increase in their problem behaviors which are related to poor social skills (Broidy, Nagin, Tremblay, Bates, Brame, & Dodge, 2003). Motivation may also play a role. As Digelidis and Papaioannou (1999) suggested, children participate with pleasure in the physical education class, but as they age they become less motivated. Also, Papageorgiou et al. (2008) concluded that students and boys with low levels of internal motivation adopt more anti-social behaviours in this lesson. Besides, empirical evidence has demonstrated that competitive sports without social construct can affect negatively children's social development (e.g., Tjeerdsma, 1999). In this case, problems related to social skills become a relatively stable and continuous phenomenon (Ollendick Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992). Perhaps, it was a combination of the above factors that contributed to the appearance of significant differences between the two age groups of boys. Papageorgiou et al. (2008) also revealed significant differences between elementary and high school boys, in favor of the former group while, quite oppositely, similar differences were not apparent for girls. All the above findings show the significant effect of age and gender on 'acquaintance', 'reward', 'goals', and in total social skill score and provide a positive answer to the first question of the study.

Moreover, girls on average displayed higher perceptions for 'help' and 'responsibility' than boys, verifying the effect of gender on these skills. Specifically, girls exhibited more supportive behaviours such as help provision and positive communication with their classmates regardless of their origin. Opposite behaviours are included in verbal bullying which has negative effect on student self-esteem, concentration and learning (Sharp & Smith, 1994). The superiority of girls in help provision and support was also indicated in the study by Whiting and Edwards (1973) for six different cultures (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1996). However, in the study by Wong et al. (2008) there were no significant gender differences, in terms of verbal bullying and exclusion. The causes of influences on gender differences appear to be complex and multidimensional. In this regard, there is some evidence for biological influences (e.g., Donovan, 1985), but even more evidence for social learning or psychosocial influences (e.g., Stavrinides et al., 2010).

The factors that produce such differences possibly reflect societal expectations and stereotypes (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998) that relate to gender-based family socialization processes and school climate. In Cyprus, as in other countries and cultures, girls from the very earliest age are raised with more social control and other-oriented behavior. They are expected to be more cooperative, kind, responsive, and empathic than boys. Usually, they adapt better to teachers' expectations; follow rules, listen carefully, cooperate with others etc. (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998; Nourani, 1998). On the contrary, boys are raised with more independence. As it has already been mentioned, boys are more likely to behave competitively in social situations and demonstrate or perceived as demonstrating more problem behaviours. Similarly, teachers in physical education provide girls more rewards for positive social behaviour and less criticism for antisocial behaviour than boys (Licht & Dweck, 1983), encouraging individuality and competitiveness in boys but sociability and cooperation in girls. However, the above socialization processes, and teachers' expectations in relation to gender, affect negatively the attitudes toward 'others' and the 'different' (Winkler, 2007), and preserve the complexity of gender differences. In general, gender differences that appeared in this study, both in high school and on average are in accordance with the conclusions of earlier studies for everyday life (Giavrimis & Papanis, 2007; Jurado et al., 2006) and physical education (e.g., Hassandra et al., 2007). It can be concluded that, regardless of the reason, boys and girls are likely to have somewhat different patterns of developing and performing social skills.

The result that elementary school children had higher perceptions of 'responsibility' than high school students provides some answer to the third question of the study, concerning the effect of age on this social skill. It is not in line, however, with the general implication that social skills develop as age increases. It seems that each social skill follows different patterns of development in relation to age. However, if today's high school students were enrolled in quality physical education programs during their studies in the elementary school might have displayed advanced social skills. Therefore, it is considered necessary to pay attention to the structure of the physical education program from the early ages, in order to improve and maintain students'

positive behaviours. Also, the enhancement of student internal motivation might assist in this effort. The increase of anti-social behaviors in everyday life and in physical education as age increases was also proved in previous studies (e.g., Hassandra et al., 2007). Inconsistent, however, are the results of Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, and Laible (1999) which suggest that positive social and moral behaviours increase as age increases.

In relation to the second purpose of the study, Greek-Cypriot students and their foreign classmates displayed different patterns of peer relationships ('acquaintance'), verifying the effect of ethnicity on this social skill. This high effect, in favor of foreign students, may relate to defense mechanisms that indigenous students develop against the 'different', and 'fearsome' (Zembylas, 2010). The stereotypes against foreigners become more intense in the social context of physical education, since indigenous students on one hand are required to deal with the existence of foreign students and on the other to cooperate with them. This finding is not aligned with previous reports, that foreign students have worse relations than the indigenous (Giavrimis & Papanis, 2007), and tend to have relationships with children of similar experiences (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs – UNESCO, 1984). The absence of any other differences between the two groups in this study seems also unrelated with the evidence that foreign students are more timid in their relationships, and excessively obedient (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2008). However, the way that children function and behave in their social groups depends among other factors on the level of acceptance by their peers (Davis et al., 2006), and in this case by the Greek Cypriots. For instance, rejection by peers has been associated with juvenile delinquency and school abandonment (Cummins, 2003), depression, and isolated loneliness (e.g., Cole & Carpentieri, 1990). Encouraging is the evidence that elementary school students improve gradually their attitudes toward foreign students because of the positive effect of the school environment on their social development (Mitis, 1998). Even though little evidence is available for the physical education lesson, and in this study is based on the foreign students who were enrolled in the same schools/classes with the Greek Cypriot students, it is assumed that ethnicity could potentially affect the development of children's social skills in physical education. Obviously, much more evidence is needed, before conclusions are warranted.

Conclusions

The findings of this study imply that students' perceptions of their social skills in physical education vary according to age and gender. Girls on average display more advanced social skills than boys, and high school girls 'follow' their social skill development, displaying more positive behaviours than younger girls, and their male peers. Also, the differences in social skill development patterns imply that older boys, unlike girls, prefer the separation of their foreign classmates in physical education. Furthermore, the ethnic background influences positively foreign students' perceptions for their peer relationships in this lesson. Taking into consideration that social skills affect students' successful living in a variety of settings; relationships with parents, classmates, teachers, friends, teammates etc., and that their point of view is valuable for diagnosis or treatment of problems in their social relations in physical education, these findings are considered interesting and important for their social skills development.

In general, based on the results of this study, the physical education teacher should assist elementary school students and high school girls in preserving their positive social behaviours and improving them further. In parallel, the teacher should motivate and help high school boys to display more positive behaviours. However, since the findings are based on group rather than individual research, they should not be generalized to all individuals of a group. Thus, an organized carefully and taught properly physical education program, embodied by an intercultural model of education, in which strengths and weakness of each student are recognized and respected both by teachers and students, is necessary. To achieve similar benefits for all students, independently of their differences, the program should include cooperative, problem solving, and decision-making activities. Through them, all students will be provided with outstanding opportunities to learn social skills in the natural social environment of physical education, and apply them in and out of the school environment (Fitzgerald, 1994). School, through the other subject matters and its policy, family, peers and community should also assist children and adolescents in improving and maintaining healthy relationships as well as in strengthening their protective factors such as school achievement, appropriate peer interaction, and self-esteem (Bulach, 2002).

Finally, this study could be regarded as an initial step toward the development of the new physical education curriculum in Cyprus. The findings could assist the curriculum developers in adapting the content, instruction and assessment methods to elementary and high school students' needs. This, in conjunction with the clearly stated objectives of the social goal in the physical education curriculum (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010), will enable children and adolescents not to be lost in the pursuit of fitness and motor skills. Further research is required to warrant the conclusions of this study, especially for the foreign students. The technique of direct behavior observation by the physical education teacher could assist further this effort.

Student observation could also be realized across the school years in order to track the process of social skill development and learning in physical education, and assist more in the creation of successful programs.

References

- Andreidakis, N., & Xanthakou, G. (2005). *Student's Self-evaluation as Selfdetermination process in the school. Educational-School Psychology*. Athens: Atrapos Publications (in Greek).
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bredemeier, B. J. (1994). Children's moral reasoning and their assertive, aggressive, and submissive tendencies in sport and daily life. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 16, 1-14.
- Broidy, L. M., Nagin, D. S., Tremblay, R. E., Bates, J. E., Brame, B., Dodge, K. A., ...Vitaro, F. (2003). Developmental trajectories of childhood disruptive behaviors and adolescent delinquency: A six-site, cross-national study. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(2), 222-245.
- Bulach, C. R. (2002). Implementing a character education curriculum and assessing its impact on student behavior. *Character Education*, 76(2), 79-83.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cole, D. A., & Carpentieri, S. (1990). Social status and the comorbidity of child depression and conduct disorder. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 58, 748-757.
- Colvin, C. R., Block, J., & Funder, D.C. (1996). Overly positive self-evaluations and personality: negative implications for mental health. *Journal of Personality and Psychology*, 68, 1152-1162.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row: New York.
- Cummins, R. A. (1993). *Comprehensive quality of life scale—intellectual disability*. Melbourne: Psychology Research Centre.
- Davis, E., Waters, E., Mackinnon, A., Reddihough, D., Graham, H.K., Mehmet-Radji, O., & Boyd, R. (2006). Paediatric quality of life instruments: A review of the impact of the conceptual framework on outcomes. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 48(4), 311-318.
- De Jong, T. (2005). A framework of principles and best practice for managing student behavior in the Australian education context. *School Psychology International* 26(3), 353-370.
- Digelidis, N., & Papaioannou, A. (1999). Age-goup differences in intrinsic motivation, goal orientations and perceptions of athletic competence, physical appearance and motivational climate in Greek physical education. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 9, 375-380.
- Donovan, B. T. (1985). *Hormones and human behaviour*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisenberg, N., & Harris, J. D. (1984). Social competence: a developmental perspective. *School Psychology Review*, 13, 267-277.
- Fabes, R. A., Carlo, G., Kupanoff, K., & Laible, D. (1999). Early adolescence and prosocial/moral behavior I: The role of individual processes. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 19, 5-16.
- Fabes, R. A., & Eisenberg, N. (1996). *Age and gender differences in prosocial behavior: A meta analytic examination*. Unpublished manuscript, Arizona State University.
- Fitzgerald, G. E. (1994). Using the computer with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Technology and Disability*, 3(2), 87-99.
- Giavrimis, P., & Papanis, E. (2007). Assessment of social competence and antisocial behavior of school age children, [in Greek]. Retrieved from <http://epapanis.blogspot.com/2007/09/ph.html>
- Goldstein, H., & Gallagher, T. M. (1992). Strategies for promoting the social-communication competence of young children with specific language impairment. In S. R. Odom, S. L. McConnell, & A. M. McEvoy (Eds), *Social competence of young children with disabilities* (pp. 189-213). Baltimore: Brookers.
- Gottman, J. M. (1986). The observation of social process. In J. M. Gottman, & J. C. Parker (Eds), *Conversations of friends: speculation on affective development* (pp. 51-102). New York: Cambridge Univesity Press.
- Gülay, H., & Akman, B. (2009). *Okul öncesi dönemde sosyal beceriler*. (1.Baskı). Ankara: Pegem Akademi Yay. Egt. Dan. Hizm.Tic. Ltd. Sti.
- Hassandra, M., Goudas, M., & Theodorakis, Y. (2007). Variation and relations of fair play behavior, fair play atmosphere and daily morality of physical education students. Proceedings, *12th European Congress of Sport Psychology*. Halkidiki, Greece.
- Hassandra, M., Goudas, M., & Hatziogeorgiadis, A. (2003). Attitudes towards fair play in physical education: The role of intrinsic motivation and gender. In R. Stelter (Ed.), *Book of Abstracts XIth European Congress of Sport Psychology* (p. 72), Copenhagen, 22-27 July 2003.
- Hay, D. F., Payne, A., & Chadwick, A. (2004). Peer relations in childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45, 84-108.

- Hellison, D. (2011). *Teaching personal and social responsibility through physical activity*. USA: Human Kinetics.
- Hung, W., & Lockard, J. (2007). Using an advance organizer guided behavior matrix to support teachers' problem solving in classroom behavior management. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 22(1), 21-36.
- Jurado, M., Cumba-Avilés, E., Collazo, L. C., & Matos, M. (2006). Reliability and validity of a Spanish version of the social skills rating System. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 24(3), 195-209.
- Keane, S. P., & Calkins, S. D. (2004). Predicting kindergarten peer social status from toddler and preschool problem behavior. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 32, 409-423.
- Keane, S. P., & Cogner, J. C. (1981). The implications of communication development for social skills training. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 6, 369-381.
- Licht, B. G., & Dweck, C. S. (1983). Sex differences in achievement orientation: Consequences for academic choice and attainments. In M. Marland (Ed.), *Sex differentiation and schooling* (pp. 628-632). London: Heineman Educational Books.
- Ma, H. K. (2005). The relation of altruism orientation to pro-social and anti-social behavior of Chinese children. *Psychologia*, 50, 150-163.
- Margetts, K. (2005). *Children's adjustment to the first year of schooling: indicators of hyperactivity, internalizing and externalizing behaviors*. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood*, 1, 36-44. Retrieved from http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/pdf/journal_margetts.pdf
- Matsagouras, E. (2000). *The Classroom*. Athens: Ellinika Grammata Publications (in Greek).
- Merrell, K.W. (2001). Assessment of children's social skills: Recent developments, best practices, and new directions. *Exceptionality*, 9, 1-2, 3-18.
- Merrell, K. W. (1993). *School social behavior scales*. Austin, TX: Pro Ed.
- Merrell, K. W., & Gimpel, G. A. (1998). *Social skills of children and adolescents. Conceptualization, assessment, treatment*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ministry of Education and Culture (2010). *Program Studies of Physical Education*. Retrieved from http://www.paideia.org.cy/upload/analytika_programmata_2010/19.fisikiagogi.pdf
- Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (2008). *Management of multiculturalism in the school environment. Distance asynchronous training of teachers for teaching lessons*. National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Special service of programs implementation. Athens.
- Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs – UNESCO (1984). *School reintegration of immigrants: Problems and perspectives*. Athens (in Greek).
- Mitilis, A. (1998). The minorities in the school classroom, an interactive relation. Athens: Odysseas (in Greek).
- Morgan, P. L., & Meier, C. R. (2008). Dialogic reading's potential to improve children's emergent literacy skills and behavior. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(4), 11-16.
- Nourani, K. (1998). *Social skills and adaptive behavior of Iranian preschoolers: Teachers' and parents' ratings*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Department of human development and applied psychology, Ontario institute for studies in education of the University of Toronto.
- Ollendick, T. H., Weist, M. D., Borden, M. C., & Greene, R.W. (1992). Sociometric status and academic, behavioral, and psychological adjustment: A five-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 60, 80-87.
- Page, M. R., Frey, J., Talbert, R., & Falk, C. (1992). Children's feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction: relationship to measures of physical fitness and activity. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 11, 211-219.
- Papageorgiou, M., Hassandra, M., & Hatzigeorgiadis, A. (2008). Fair Play in Physical Education: Effects of Sex, Age and Intrinsic Motivation. *Inquiries in Sport & Physical Education*, 6(2), 162-168.
- Papamichael, E. (2009). Greek-Cypriot teachers' understandings of intercultural education in an increasingly diverse society. *The Cyprus Review*, 20(2), 51-78.
- Parker, J. G., & Asher, S. R. (1987). Peer relations and later personal adjustment: Are low-accepted children at risk? *Psychological Bulletin*, 102, 357-389.
- Parkhurst, J. T., & Asher, S. R. (1992). Peer rejection in middle school: Subgroup differences in behavior, loneliness, and interpersonal concerns. *Developmental Psychology*, 28, 231-241.
- Pelligrini, D. (1980). Social cognition, competence, and adaptation in children under stress. In N. Gamezy (Ed.), *Studies of stress and coping in children*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Philippou, S. (2009). Greek-Cypriot pupils' representations of national others: a study of the impact of 'Europe' in a primary school curricula intervention. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, 14(2), 117-160.

- Riley, A. (2004). Evidence that school-age children can self-report on their health. *Ambulatory Pediatrics*, 4(4), 374-376.
- Sharp, S., & Smith, P. (1994). *Tackling bullying in your school: A practical handbook for teachers*. London: Routledge.
- Stavrinides, P., Paradeisiotou, A., Tziogouros, C., & Lazarou, C. (2010). Prevalence of bullying among Cyprus elementary and high school students. *International Journal of Violence and School*, 11, 114-128.
- Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2003). Cultural recognition or social redistribution: predicaments of minority education. In Y. Iram (Ed.), *Education of Minorities and Peace Education in Pluralistic Societies*. Israel: Bar Ilan University.
- Stormshak, E. A., & Webster-Stratton, C. (1999). The qualitative interactions of children with conduct problems and their peers: Differential correlates with self-report measures, home behavior, and school behavior problems. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 20(2), 295-317.
- Tjeerdsma, B. L. (1999). Physical Education as a Social and Emotional Development Laboratory. *Teaching Elementary Physical Education*, 10(4), 12-16.
- UNICEF (2001). *Discrimination-Racism-Xenophobia in the Hellenic educational system*. KAPA Research. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.gr/reports/racism.php>
- Vernadakis, N., Kellis, I., Albanidis, E., Derri V., & Kourtesses, T. (2010). The development of a student's behaviors' self evaluation scale (SBSS) in multicultural physical education class settings. *Educational Research and Review*, 5(11), 637-645. Retrieved from <http://www.academicjournals.org/ERR2>
- Whiting, B., & Edwards, C. P. (1973). A cross-cultural analysis of sex differences in the behavior of children aged three through 11. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 91, 171-188.
- Winkler, B. (2007). A Multicultural Society - A Challenge for us all. Proceedings, *Brandon Lecture, Salzburg-Seminar*, Austria.
- Wong, D. S. W., Lok, D. P., Lo T. W., & Ma, S. K. (2008). School bullying among Hong Kong Chinese primary schoolchildren. *Youth & Society*, 40(1), 35-54.
- Zembylas, M. (2010). Greek-Cypriot teachers' constructions of Turkish-speaking children's identities: critical race theory and education in a conflict-ridden society. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(8), 1372-1391.
- Zembylas, M., Michaelidou, E., & Afantintou-Lambrianou, Th. (2010). Greek Cypriot adolescent attitudes toward immigrants and 'enemy-others' in the context of an ethnic conflict. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, 15(1), 5-39.
- Zsolnai, A., & Józca, K. (2003). Possibilities of criterion referenced social skills development. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 1(2), 181-196.