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ANALYSIS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ABSENCES FROM PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES IN SPLIT

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Summary *– The sample consisted of 1136 high school students in Split, who were given scaled answers in order to research attitudes and opinions of a very current issue: "To what extent are students absent from physical education classes". The results obtained in this research account for the following conclusions:*

In the sample mentioned around 76% of students participate in regular PE programs, 13% participate partially, while 11% of students is entirely exempt of PE classes. Considering gender and the degree of education, high school students equally participate in PE classes, and equally of partially or entirely are exempt of PE classes. However, considering vocational education, students differ significantly among each other.

Male students, as opposed to female students, are more regular in attending PE classes. At the same time they tend to often or frequently avoid the same, especially second year students (frequently) and third year students (often). It is evident that general high school students (grammar school) are the most regular attendance, while Technical school students have the most absences.

While female students remain at home, their peers often spend that time downtown.

The results of the χ^2 test affirm the above mentioned differences between the groups analyzed, and the following can be concluded: students differ among each other regarding regular attendance in PE classes, and there is a significant difference in spending their time while being absent from PE classes.

Key words*: participation, exemption from PE classes, analysis of differences.*

PROBLEM

Within the framework of the complex research on fundamental values and evaluation of physical education teaching (PE) we attempted to provide answers to a very current issue,: " To what extent are high school students absent from PE classes, that is, what are the possible consequences of this "occurrence" which, according to some beliefs is acquiring disturbing proportions?" [1,7,8,99]

In that context it is important to mention the ONLINE SURVEY "Do your children have unexcused absences from classes?" www.vecernji-list.hr

Concisely presenting the results of the mentioned survey, Kustura [13)] established that six hundred thousand students in primary and secondary school acquired 30 million absences in the last school year. The majority of those absences were excused, and about two million and 200 thousand were unexcused. As could have been expected, the majority of unexcused absences were by students in secondary schools. A little more than two hundred thousand secondary school students acquired 14 and a half million of absences, of which more than a million and a half were unexcused.[13)]

Although this data looks appalling at first, when those hours are divided with the number of students, it appears that each one of them was absent from classes on average eight working days. Except for illness, one of the most frequent reasons for excused absences are tests or awareness that the teacher will be conducting examinations that day for which a child was not prepared. This was acknowledged by both students and parents.

In the last decade, an increase in avoiding PE classes was observed in Split, especially in some high schools. This problem was discusses at professional meetings, staff meetings, as well as some written and TV reports in mass media. According to the report of one high school principal in Split, out of 679 students in the 2003/4 school year, 73 students were entirely exempt from PE classes and a somewhat smaller number was partially exempt. A special staff meeting was called to discuss only one issue on the agenda: The analysis of absences and exemption of students from PE classes. The discussion made clear the opinion that the cause of such mass phenomenon is not only traditional attitude (the school does not meet adequate material and technical conditions for conducting classes, two shifts, distance for traveling students, etc) which explained the "phenomenon". On the contrary, the central problem was the relationship: student – teacher – teaching content – evaluation.

At another high school in Split, which operates under the same working conditions as the above mentioned Grammar school, 62 students were exempt from PE classes in the same year. It is interesting to mention the unusual emersion of "mass" exemption of students from PE classes in one vocational four year school with about 1200 students, where during the same school year 153 students were exempt. In order to obtain an overall view of the problem, one must take into consideration those students who were partially exempt from PE classes, which is approximately the same percentage as those who are entirely exempt.

Kristofić, Bosak and Pinter[11] present data from the Varaždin area for the 1993/94 school year where it is evident that 527 students asked to be exempt from PE classes of which 283, 4% were high school students. The authors emphasize that according to tradition the majority are female grammar school students, 76 of 10% of the entire number of female students. A significantly smaller number of male students (4.5%), followed by students in the Business school, and 3.7% in the Technical school, etc.

Taking into consideration the present problem in the numerical sense and today's time distance, the problem is not only multiplying, but is obviously taking a completely opposite direction from what can be generally acceptable and scientifically based values of physical education, as an attribute of health, motor education, development of motor skills and conative formation and cognitive development.

Absence from PE classes has been the border topic of kinesiological profession and school and sport medicine. Numerous research and professional articles broaden the awareness of this "issue". Criteria for exempting students from PE classes are theoretically more coinciding, but experience teaches us, and pedagogical practice confirms, that there is an obvious rise in the number of students asking for entire or partial exemption from PE classes. What is the proportion of the transformation of the healthcare system from "Healthcare service for school children and young adults" to "School polyclinic" a system of basic healthcare with a basic unit "family doctor?" The answer to that question demonstrates a new need for an integral discussion which exceeds the framework of this article.

Because of that, the problem of avoiding PE classes, deserves one integral research and analysis with the aim to reveal those relevant factors responsible for such "mass" occurrence and demotivation of students for participation in PE classes. Starting with the assumption that students, as subjects, directly and precisely experience PE lessons and that they can freely and independently estimate why and to which extent they avoid PE classes, it was necessary and useful to establish attitudes and thoughts of students on the issue, which was the task of this research.

AIMS

The main aim of this research is to establish to what extent high school students participate in physical education classes, that is, to what extent they are absent from physical education classes. In addition to that it tried to establish how students spend the time of absence. With an aim set like that, it is possible to place the basic system of productive information into two hypothetic levels:

- functions of the dispersion results of participants in particular variables, depending on gender, degree of education and vocation show a uniform validity and
- a significant difference between the analyzed groups is expected with regard to gender, degree of education and vocation.

The expected results in this research have a dual meaning: firstly, it is expected that the results obtained in this research will satisfactorily explain to what extent do high school students in Split participate in PE classes, that is to what extent are they avoided either partially or entirely. And secondly the practical value of this research can be seen in its systematic, analytical considerations of the disturbing factors, based on the statements of students themselves, which can concretely contribute to the motivation of students to participate in PE classes, and in that way somewhat reduce such a big number of absences.

METHODOLOGY

Basic information on participation in PE classes, that is, the phenomenon of being exempt from PE were obtain based on free statements given by 1136 high school students in Split.

For that purpose, a sample of 1136 female and male high school students from Split was defined (I. grammar school, II. grammar school (291 students), Business school (285), Technical school (209), School of technology and transportation (211) and Craft school (140 students), between 15 and 19 years of age. The sample consisted of students in their 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year of high school. All students attended teaching programs from all required classes, except the physical education program.

One of the ways to observe the problem of participating and attending PE classes is feedback on the attitudes and thoughts of students, based on which conclusions on the reasons that students are exempt from PE classes can be made.

Of the incoming variables designated to estimate basic values and the evaluation of PE classes four were kept for the purpose of this research:

1. **«Are you exempt of physical education classes?» (ONTZK)**
   - I'm not excused
   - I'm partially exempt
   - I'm entirely exempt
2. **«I attend PE classes» (STZKP)**
   - properly and regularly
   - absent occasionally (illness etc.)
   - I'm absent often
3. **«If you are absent from PE classes, where do you spend that time?» (PVTZK)**
   - at home
   - near the school
   - downtown (coffee shops, etc.).

4. List five school subjects that you like to listen to or attend! (5NPRS)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

The first, second and third variables contained three scales of answers, while the fourth one contained five answers.

The statistical analysis of data was conducted using the program SPSS for windows. Findings on the evaluation of participants were presented in tables with the values of basic statistical indicators: frequency of answers and appropriate percentage for each answer (for each group with respect to gender, degree of education and vocational education). Differences between groups were established using the χ^2 test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In searching for a reliable answer about high school students' absences from PE classes we posed a target question with possible alternative answers: **«Are you exempt from PE classes?** As can be seen in Table 1, of the entire sample of participants (1136) 864 students (or 76%) attend PE classes. 143 students (12.6%) attend partially, while 129 (approximately 11%) are completely excused from PE classes. Considering the participants' gender, it is evident that of the 500 female students who participated in the research, 376 (or 75%) were not exempt from PE classes, 12% were partially exempt, while about 13% were entirely exempt from PE classes. Although the difference in frequency of female and male students in partially or entirely exempt from PE classes is evident, the results of the χ^2 test point out that those differences are not statistically significant.

Table 1. Are you exempt from Physical Education classes (F – frequency, % percentage) - (considering gender, degree of education, and vocation)

STUDENTS EXEMPT FROM PE CLASSES			
GENDER	**Not exempt**	**Partially exempt**	**Entirely exempt**
Female students (500)	F = 376 (75.8%)	F = 61 (12.2%)	F = 63 (12.6%)
Male students (636)	F = 488 (76.7%)	F = 82 (12.9%)	F = 66 (10.4%)
Total (1136)	F = 864 (76.1%)	F = 143 (12.6%)	F = 129 (11.4%)
Chi-square = 1.40 df = 2 p = .49			

GRADE	Not exempt	Partially exempt	Entirely exempt
1st grade (316)	F = 246 (77.8%)	F = 44 (13.9%)	F = 26 (8.2%)
2nd grade (315)	F = 315 (78.7%)	F = 38 (12.1%)	F = 29 (9.2%)
3rd grade (315)	F = 229 (72.7%)	F = 38 (12.1%)	F = 48 (15.2%)
4th grade (190)	F = 141 (74.2%)	F = 23 (12.1%)	F = 26 (13.7%)
Total (1136)	F = 864 (76.1%)	F = 143 (12.6%)	F = 129 (11.4%)
Chi-square = 10.69 df = 6 p = .10			

VOCATION	Not exempt	Partially exempt	Entirely exempt
Grammar school (291)	F = 235 (80.8%)	F = 20 (6.9%)	F = 36 (12.4%)
Business (285)	F = 196 (68.8%)	F = 48 (16.8%)	F = 41 (14.4%)
Technical (209)	F = 138 (66.0%)	F = 44 (21.1%)	F = 27 (12.9%)
Transport (211)	F = 178 (84.4%)	F = 18 (8.5%)	F = 15 (7.1%)
Craft (140)	F = 117 (83.4%)	F = 13 (9.3%)	F = 10 (7.1%)
Total (1136)	F = 864 (76.0%)	F = 143 (12.6%)	F = 129 (11.4%)
Chi-square = 44.62 df = 8 p = .00			

Based on this it can be concluded that high school students do not differ significantly among themselves in whether they are partially or entirely exempt from PE classes with regard to gender.

Information on attendance and exemption from PE classes with respect to the degree of education are shown in Table 1. In analyzing Table 1, it is evident that about 76% of students is not exempt from PE classes, 13 % is partially exempt and 11% of the students is entirely exempt from PE classes. Based on the above mentioned, it can be expected that high school students in Split participate equally in PE classes with respect to gender and degree of education.

However, this cannot be said for students in various vocational schools. It has been observed that Business school students (69%) and Technical school students (66%) attend PE classes in a significantly lower percent with respect to students in Transportation/Technical schools (84%), Craft school (83%) and Grammar school (80%).

In accordance to that it was expected that partially exempt students are found in the Technical school (21%), Business school (17%) and the highest number of entirely exempt students in the Business school (about 14.4%), Technical school (13%), Grammar school (12.4%), etc. The results of the χ^2 test proved the hypotheses that there are significant differences among participants considering their vocation.

Further on in the analysis we were interested in how frequent and regular were students in their PE classes. Table 2 shows that only about 24% of high school students participated properly and regularly in PE classes. The same percentage of students were frequently absent, while the majority of them (about 45%) were occasionally absent. Although male students participate more in PE classes (about 63%) than female students (37%), they are more prone to be absent occasionally (54%) or frequently (59%) from PE classes.

Table 2. I attend physical education classes (F – frequency, % percentage) - (according to gender, degree of education and vocation)

GENDER	Exempt	Reguralry	Occasional absence	Frequent absence
Female students (500)	F = 56 (60.2%)	F =1001 (37.4%)	F = 237 (40.6%)	F = 106 (40.6%)
Male students (636)	F = 37 (39.8%)	F = 169 (62.6%)	F = 275 (53.7%)	F = 155 (59.4%)
Total (1136)	F = 93 (8.2%)	F = 270 (23.8%)	F = 512 (45.0%)	F = 261 (23.0%)
Sci-square = 16.99 df = 3 p = .00				

GRADE	Exempt	Regular and appropriate	Occasionally absent	Frequently absent
1st grade (316)	F = 15 (16.1%)	F = 113 (41.8%)	F = 127 (24.8%)	F = 61 (23.4%)
2nd grade (315)	F = 21 (22.6%)	F = 73 (27.0%)	F = 160 (31.2%)	F = 61 (23.4%)
3rd grade (315)	F = 36 (38.7%)	F = 53 (19.6%)	F = 135 (26.4%)	F = 91 (34.9%)
4th grade (190)	F = 21 (22.6%)	F = 31 (11.5%)	F = 90 (17.6%)	F = 48 (18.4%)
Total (1136)	F = 93 (8.2%)	F = 270 (23.8%)	F = 512 (45.1%)	F = 261 (23.0%)
Shi-square = 54.79 df = 9 p = .00				

VOCATION	Exempt	Regular and appropriate	Occasionally absent	Frequently absent
Grammar school	F = 30 (32.3%)	F = 106 (39.3%)	F = 127 (24.8%)	F = 28 (10.7%)
Business	F = 37 (39.8%)	F = 54 (20.0%)	F = 134 (26.2%)	F = 60 (23.0%)
Technical	F = 12 (12.9%)	F = 27 (10.0%)	F = 69 (13.5%)	F = 101 (38.7%)
Transport.	F = 8 (8.6%)	F = 52 (19.3%)	F = 114 (22.3%)	F = 37 (14.2%)
Craft	F = 6 (6.4%)	F = 31 (11.5%)	F = 68 (13.3%)	F = 35 (13.4%)
Total	F = 93 (8.2%)	F = 270 (23.8%)	F = 512 (45.1%)	F = 261 (23.0%)
Chi-square = 147.41 df = 12 p = .00				

With the degree of education (Table 2) the percentage of students who properly and regularly attend PE classes increases significantly. It can be said that second grade students are prone to occasional absences (31%), while third grade students are leading in frequent absences. It is interesting to mention that contrary to common belief that students in final grades are often absent from PE classes (due to studying, grades, tiredness, etc) this was not confirmed in this research. As a matter of fact, the mentioned students do that only in 18% of the cases.

To the question: **«If you are absent from PE classes – where do you spend that time?**» about 60% of the participants answered at home, 20% said downtown, and 7% in the school vicinity. While female students most often spend that time at home (about 64%), and less downtown (17%), male students spend less time at home (56%), and more downtown (23%). Obviously, this broadens the area for further research such as: «What does the street, coffee shops, entertainment centers and other places downtown offer, what kind of content and activities? Who is controlling young people and what are possible sociological consequences of such time use (risky conduct in schools)*)

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*) **Kustura[13]):** More than half of the students are afraid of school. Večernji list, 21. 01. 2004, p. 3. (Risky behavior in school: I consumed alcohol in school; I was offered drug sin school and around the school).

Table 3. If you are absent from PE classes – where do you spend that time? (considering gender, degree of education and vocation)

GENDER	Exempt	At home	School vicinity	Downtown
Female students (500)	F = 85 (17.0%)	F = 319 (63.8%)	F = 10 (2.0%)	F = 86 (17.2%)
Male students (636)	F = 67 (10.5%)	F = 359 (56.4%)	F = 65 (10.2%)	F = 145 (22.8%)
Total (1136)	F =152 (13.4%)	F = 678 (59.7%)	F = 75 (6.6%)	F = 231 (20.3%)
Sci-square = 16.99 df = 3 p = .00				

GRADE	Exempt	At home	School vicinity	Downtown
1st grade (316)	F = 46 (14.6%)	F = 174 (55.1%)	F = 33 (10.4%)	F = 63 (19.9%)
2nd grade (315)	F = 31 (9.8%)	F = 202 (64.1%)	F = 19 (6.3%)	F = 63 (20.0%)
3rd grade (315)	F = 50 (15.9%)	F = 191 (60.6%)	F = 9 (2.9%)	F = 65 (20.6%)
4th grade (190)	F = 25 (13.2%)	F = 111 (58.4%)	F = 14 (7.4%)	F = 40 (21.0%)
Total (1136)	F =152 (13.4%)	F = 678 (60.0%)	F = 75 (6.6%)	F = 231 (20.0%)
Shi-square = 54.79 df = 9 p = .00				

STRUKA	Exempt	At home	School vicinity	Downtown
Grammar school (291)	F = 55 (18.9%)	F = 191 (65.6%)	F = 17 (5.8%)	F = 28 (9.6%)
Business 28	F = 53 (18.6%)	F = 180 (63.2%)	F = 5 (1.7%)	F = 47 (16.5%)
Technical (209)	F = 22(10.5%)	F = 152 (72.7%)	F = 6 (2.8%)	F = 29 (13.9%)
Transport. (211	F = 13 (6.2%)	F = 106 (50.2%)	F = 17 (8.1%)	F = 75 (37.5%)
Craft (140	F = 9 (6.4%)	F = 49 (35.0%)	F = 30 (21.4%)	F = 52 (37.1%)
Total (1136)	F=152 (13.4%)	F = 678 (59.7%)	F = 75 (6.6%)	F = 231(20.3%)
Chi-square = p = .00				

Considering the degree of education it is evident that students in their second and third years, if absent from PE classes, most often spend that time at home, while students in their first year spend that time in the vicinity of the school. What is common to students in all four years is that about 20% spend time downtown. Of course, the number of such students and the amount unsupervised time spent in the school vicinity or downtown is not negligible, as a matter of fact from a sociological point of view it can be "risky".

Considering the vocation (Table 3), it is observed that students in Technical school and Grammar school spend the majority of time absent from PE classes at home (73%, that is, 66%), while students at Transport and Technical school and Craft school (about 37%) use that time for entertainment downtown.[17)]

The results of the χ^2 test confirmed the above mentioned statements on the differences between the vocations analyzed and it can be concluded that students who are absent from PE classes use that time in various ways and in various places (at home, downtown, and the least amount in the school vicinity). Considering gender, degree of education and vocation, they differ significantly in that respect.

The final question in the survey was: **«List five school subjects that you like to listen to and attend»!** Unfortunately, the traditional belief of parents, the profession and even the public which generates a generally speaking positive attitude and thought about exercise, and physical education, and that young people of this age perceive exercises with high interest was not confirmed in this research. It was established that students in all defined groups did not rank physical education classes among the first five teaching subjects they like listen to or attend. The awareness of such a response is very significant and analyses especially to what extent do current teaching plans and programs, types and work methods comply with the needs and interest of students of this age.

In the analysis of absences from PE classes by high school students in Split, and based on the data obtained, a logical question is posed: «Do high school students in Split (frequently) miss PE classes, and what are the possible consequences of that? The fact that about 11.4% of students are completely exempt from PE

classes and that about 13% are partially exempt, totaling about 24% of students exempt brings forth the question of the value of physical education as an educational area, that is, PE classes. This is emphasized more since it is known that partially exempt students are that category of students who, due to health reasons, cannot participate in the regular curriculum, and are often advised to join programs for students with health problems who out of objective or subjective reasons, at least when referring to Split, are not organized nor realized.

According to a report by the Advisor for physical education in former Yugoslavia, the number of students exempt from PE classes in Zagreb was between 3 – 10% 3-10% Gagro (1984).

The results of the work by the Commission for excusing students from physical education classes in primary schools and secondary schools in the Slavonski Brod area in the period between 1974 – 1979 give the following results: in primary schools, the average percentage of students exempt from PE was 2.4%, and in high schools 3.6%. More girls were exempt in both cases, especially in high schools (61% - 66%), where in addition to objective excuses we often find subjective factors such as shyness and fear of inability to perform especially in cases of obesity, fear of failure and injury, as well as bad grades, etc. (Rokoš-Trešnjić).[16)]

Interesting research was conducted in the Grammar school in Pula (Vrbanac).[18)] The results obtained showed that of the total 805 male students, 62 students (7.7%) were exempt. Of 268 students 16, or 6%, were partially exempt, while there were no students entirely exempt from PE. Of the total 537 female students, 41 or 8% were partially exempt and 5 students or 1% were completely exempt. In total, 46 female students, or 9.57% were exempt. In the conclusion, the author emphasizes that during the school year the number of students exempt from PE classes was on the increase, when the teaching program demands in students' opinion somewhat "more difficult", such as sport gymnastics and athletics. [6)] There is no doubt that a particular number of students throughout their education have to be exempt of PE classes due to medical reasons either partially or entirely, but there is also the fact that today there are more and more students who bring medical notes for paramedic reasons (unexcused).

From the kinesiological point of view it is important to mention that neglecting or preventing exercise is one of the key causes of disorder in the development of an individual, including education.[2,3)] The need for movement is a natural necessity, and if that necessity is not realized, the organism weakens and perishes.[2)]

Numerous articles constantly spread and round the awareness of this particular issue. One must point out those articles which emphasize/warn about the fact that numerous social mechanisms, especially industrial propaganda, oriented towards forming and shaping a lifestyle is against natural needs of individuals among which is the undoubtedly most important need for moving. Under the influence of propaganda, one gets an impression that it is better to sit and strain as

little as possible, that it is more appropriate to watch others while engaging in exercise and sport than do it yourself..[2)] The emergence of some deranged states and illnesses is attempted to be solved by mass production of pharmacological treatments, and not the natural way – everyday moving in free time, exercise, change of work space and lifestyle, etc.

In observing the health status of students as a dynamic state of the organism susceptible to constant changes and under constant influences of healthy and harmful factors and taking into consideration the definition of health by the world health organization where health is defined as the state of complete, physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not only as absence of senility and illness, the aim of the teaching process in PE at this level of education should be aimed at programs set for individual and a selection of adequate kinesiological operators with which a student would increase his/her work performance and improve his/her health status – quality of life.[3)] Throughout the process of education high school students are intellectually loaded which has as a consequence tiredness, decreased attention and concentration which in extreme cases leads to increased neuroticism, that is, psychiatric disorders (Plavec)[14)].

Although the fact that there exists a number of difficulties (poor working conditions, inadequate materialistic and technical base, work in shifts, a large number of educational programs, big classes – large number of students in classes, problems with students with health problems) cannot be neglected, it still does not justify a number of teachers who in lacking knowledge, effort, interest and creativity question the quality of teaching and realization of basic aims and tasks of PE teaching, and respectively the proven values of physical education as a teaching area as a whole.

It is important again to stress the problem of complex and efficient activities of teachers in physical education. It is known that success in educational aims and tasks of physical education primarily depends on the layered and efficient activity of the teacher. Due to its specific aims and tasks, content and organizational forms and working conditions, this claim is especially stressed in physical education teaching. Observing the quality of a teacher's work with young developing people can lead to solving the issue of teacher education, a balances structure of teaching programs in schools and colleges, taking into consideration the uniqueness of scientific, professional, pedagogical and psychological components, but also traditional human values and freedoms to which today's society is striving.[4,6,7,10)]

If that is the case, and today's level of awareness and experiences proves so, then how can we explain the fact that next to often mentioned comparative advantages of physical and health education in comparison to other educational areas, and the fact that physical exercise is an irreplaceable means for maintaining and improving health, in physical development, development of character and ability, acquiring motor knowledge, improving motor abilities and at the same time is a strong means for spiritual development, the phenomenon of avoiding PE classes which has reached alarming levels?

The answer to this question demands one integral research. In the following phase of research we have focused our attention on finding those factors responsible for students' avoiding (partially, or entirely) PE classes, which is also the task of our next paper.

CONCLUSION

In search for the answer to the question: «To what extent do high school students in Split participate in physical education classes, that is «To what extent are high school students exempt of physical education classes», we have conducted a research on a sample of 1136 students in five highs school, between the ages of 15-19, of different gender, degree of education and vocation. Based on the results obtained, the following could be concluded:

The vast majority of the students (76%) attend PE classes regularly; about 13% are partially exempt, while 11% of the students are completely exempt from PE classes. Considering gender and the degree of education there are no significant differences between students when talking about being partially or entirely exempt from PE classes.

Male students in comparison to female students, are more regular in attending PE classes, however they are more prove to occasional or even frequent avoidance of those classes. Second grade students are leading (occasionally), as well as third grade students (frequently). It is interesting to observe that Grammar school students attend PE classes most often, while on the other hand, Technical school students often avoid PE classes.

Female students generally, if avoiding PE classes, spend that time at home, while their male colleagues spend that time downtown. Furthermore, female students in the Business school spend time allocated for PE, downtown, and their Grammar school colleagues at home (studying, doing homework, etc.).

We established that students do not mention physical education among the first five teaching subjects that they listen to or attend eagerly.

The research results show that students' attitudes carry a lot of useful information, and therefore should not be avoided in evaluating basic values of physical education teaching.

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