

Exploring the Extent, Type and Effectiveness of Physical Activity in Schools

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Summary

SPARC guidelines recommend that throughout each day, children and young people need at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity for improved physical and mental health.

Purpose

To seek information about levels of physical activity in schools to help us reflect on our current practice in comparison with other schools, with a view to school-wide improvement.

Background and Rationale

Five key points influenced the choice of investigation:-

1. my concern about apparent low levels of physical activity by our students in breaks during the school day
2. the positive impact that the recent introduction of student “Physical Activity Leaders” has had
3. the pressure on staff to include both Fitness and Physical education in an already over-crowded curriculum
4. my belief that regular physical activity has a positive impact on students well-being, including their learning
5. The importance placed on physical activity at a variety of levels:-
 - (i) at my current school, Waimate Centennial
 - (ii) in South Canterbury, led by a South Canterbury DHB initiative and
 - (iii) as stressed at government level via a drive to improve the quantity and quality of physical activity amongst school-aged children

Methodology

I developed a survey that addressed the key issues I wanted to investigate using “Survey Monkey”. By using personal contacts and Principals Associations I circulated the survey through as many schools around the country as I was able to.

After establishing U grade, decile, and type of school, questions sought the answer to the following:-

“How much time do Junior class teachers (Years 1-4) regularly dedicate to class PE & Fitness each week?”

“How much time do Senior class teachers (Years 5 – 8) regularly dedicate to PE & Fitness every week?”

“What effect do you believe the revised NZC has had on levels of Physical Activity at your school?”

“Does your school have a formal programme in place designed to encourage children to be more active during breaks in the school day?”

“If yes, who takes responsibility for organising it?”

“Do you believe that Targeted Funding for Physical Activity has had a positive impact on your school this year?”

“What benefits do you and your staff see in regular physical activity for students?”

Findings

There was a steady flow of responses to the survey, and by cut-off date over 100 schools had replied. Of these,

12% were U1
7% were U2
20% were U3
35% were U4 and
27% were U5+

Decile Rankings were as follows:-

1	= 2%
2	= 7%
3	= 4%
4	= 7%
5	= 11%
6	= 5%
7	= 23%
8	= 13%
9	= 9%
10	= 19%

40% of the respondents described themselves as “rural” and 60% as “urban” schools.

In Junior classes, 16% of teachers dedicate less than 1 hour each week to PE & Fitness
83% dedicate 1 – 3 hours and
1% dedicates 4+ hours

In Senior classes, 2% of teachers dedicate less than 1 hour each week to PE & Fitness
93% dedicate 1 – 3 hours and
5% dedicate 4+ hours

This indicates that physical activity is still seen as a vital component in New Zealand primary schools and children are receiving this regularly as part of the school programme.

A significant number of schools (63%) have formal programmes in place designed to encourage children to be more active during breaks in the school day. These programmes are generally organised by teachers, with Principals and students also taking some responsibility.

A huge majority of Principals (80%) believe that the revised NZC has had very little effect on levels of Physical Activity in their school. 12% believe that there have been increased levels, while 8% believe there have been lower levels of Physical Activity.

By contrast, “Targeted Funding for Physical Activity” is seen as having a positive impact this year. 45% of respondents indicated this, 22% thought not, and 33% were not sure.

The final question, “What benefits do you & your staff see in regular physical activity for students?” unearthed a wealth of comments & ideas. Educators throughout New Zealand obviously have very strong beliefs and opinions on this subject! Comments were 100% positive about the positive effects of regular physical activity with the “healthy body, healthy mind” message cropping up numerous times.

Implications

In the previous Health & PE curriculum (1999) under “Regular Physical Activity”, “*daily exercise programmes*” were expected from Level 1 to Level 5. The revised New Zealand Curriculum is less prescriptive, suggesting only that from Level 1 up, children take part in “*regular and enjoyable physical activity*”. Bearing in mind SPARC’s recommendation of 60 minutes each day, and considering a reasonable expectation that children will participate in some vigorous physical activity outside school hours, it appears as though most children are still doing well. There was a strong theme running through many responses to the final survey question that parents have strong views on the importance of physical activity and support their children’s involvement.

On surveying teachers at my current school using similar questions to the survey circulated around the country’s primary schools revealed that children at Waimate Centennial School receive similar amounts of class time on PE & Fitness each week. Our Physical Activity Leaders boost levels of physical activity by organising regular lunchtime sessions. Observations indicate that the children are constantly active in the playground with informal netball, miniball, soccer, skateboarding, adventure playground play and an extensive range of other unstructured activities.

Benefits

There have been many for me personally & professionally, and also for Waimate Centennial School. Having the time to seek, collate & reflect on responses from principals all around New Zealand on: current levels of physical activity in our schools, the impacts of the revised curriculum and of increased targeted funding, and the benefits of regular physical activity, have been especially beneficial. Also having the opportunity to observe my current school “from a distance”, the time to consider what is currently happening and think of how it could be improved have been valuable to me personally.

Conclusions

Teachers and principals who responded to questions on the value of regular physical activity in schools were virtually unanimous in agreeing with SPARC’s assertion that it results in improved physical and mental health. It therefore has a positive impact on children’s learning and behaviour – on educating the “whole child”.

Quite clearly it is an aspect of life in primary schools that is deserving of the time and attention that it currently receives.

References

- “The New Zealand Curriculum” 2007
- “Health & PE in the New Zealand Curriculum” 1999
- “Activity Guidelines (5 – 18 years)” SPARC (Sport & Recreation NZ)