

RESEARCH INTO THE VALUE OF QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SPORT

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Abstract:

This paper provides an overview of the findings and implications of recent research that is relevant in considering the prospective benefits and thus, the value, of Physical Education. We acknowledge physical activity and sport as central to Physical Education and therefore also discusses research examining physical activity and sport in schools. Physical Education is emphasised as being 'an educational endeavour and experience', focusing on the provision of learning experiences that potentially have a key role to play in providing young people with skills, knowledge, understanding, values and attitudes that are fundamental to their health and lifestyles. The paper draws attention on the benefits of physical education in relation to young people's: physical development and well-being; social and emotional development and well-being; and their cognitive/academic development and achievement. 'Potentially' remains a crucial proviso, however, in addressing the benefits of Physical Education. The prospective and previously claimed benefits of Physical Education are many and varied, and this is reflected in the sections that follow.

KEY WORDS:

Physical, Achievement, Methodology, Lifestyle.

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive review of research was undertaken addressing the benefits and outcomes of Physical Education and school sport in terms of five domains: physical, lifestyle; affective; social; and cognitive. The term Physical Education and sport, abbreviated to PES, was used 'to refer to those structured, supervised physical activities that take place at school and during the school day' Notably, it was concluded that...there is evidence that PES can have a positive and profound effect.

That provision of Physical Education and sport in schools is the only means of assuring that all children will experience physical activity and more specifically, physical activity experiences appropriate to their developmental and learning needs, is a key premise in considering many of the prospective benefits of Physical Education, but particularly, physical development and wellbeing.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Physical Education represents a 'window of opportunity' not merely for an immediate involvement in activity, but also for the development of skills, knowledge, understandings, values and attitudes that underpin children's ability to access and enjoy physical activity and sport in childhood and in later life. The review stressed the need to consider the consequences of children not developing what we might term basic physical and movement literacy and specifically acknowledge that children face the prospect of exclusion from physical activity and sport thus denying them of the physical, social and emotional benefits that can (but will no means always or automatically) arise from participation.

Physical Education can be invaluable in providing for the structured development of movement skills that are fundamental to participation in physical activity and sport. The widespread development of

RESEARCH INTO THE VALUE OF QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SPORT

Fundamental Motor Skills (FMS) programs across Australia and internationally has been directed to precisely this outcome. The work just published by Bailey et al. (2009) reaffirmed that 'there is suggestive evidence of a distinctive role for PESS in the acquisition and development of children's movement skills and physical competence' (p.1). Bailey et al. (2009) also stated that 'It can be argued that these are necessary, if not deterministic conditions of engagement in lifelong physical activity' (p.1).

Further research may be needed to explore the extent to which Physical Education positively influences patterns of participation in physical activity and sport during and beyond the school years. It was reported that while there is some evidence pointing to the likely maintenance of health-related behaviours that are established in childhood, evidence relating to the maintenance of physical activity patterns overtime is mixed. Physical Education and school sport will ultimately be one influence among many that can impact positively or negatively upon current and long-term patterns

of behaviour and participation in physical activity and sport. An ongoing challenge for all physical educators is to seek to ensure that all children feel that they are valued in physical education, physical activity and sport contexts.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Amidst inactivity and its negative consequences for future health assuming such prominence in popular media, it is important to consider the health-related benefits that may arise by virtue of children experiencing physical activity in the context of Physical Education. Research evidence is compelling in relation to the significant role of physical activity in reducing risk factors associated with many chronic diseases. It was reported that 'Evidence is starting to appear suggesting a favourable relationship between physical activity and a host of factors affecting children's physical health, including diabetes, blood pressure, bone health, and obesity'. Furthermore, physical activity has been identified as enhancing health in physiological, psychological and emotional terms. The most recent review reaffirmed an ongoing need for research and therefore, for caution in relation to claimed significance of physical activity experienced in Physical Education and school sport for children's health and wellbeing. It has been found that school-based programs can contribute to physical activity levels, both during youth and later in life. The potency of PES' influence on physical activity seems to be greatest when programs combine classroom study with activity, when they allow students' experiences of self-determination and feelings of competence in their own abilities, and when they emphasised enjoyment and positive experiences.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION, SPORT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

It has been suggested that by increasing blood flow to the brain, Physical Education and sport may enhance mood, mental alertness and self-esteem. 'The evidence base of such claims is varied and more research is still required. However, existing studies do suggest a positive relationship between intellectual functioning and regular physical activity, both for adults and children' Effects rather than the underlying mechanisms are arguably of greater interest here. Direct indicators of academic achievement and that grades in specific courses; measures of concentration, memory, and classroom behaviour can be deemed indirect indicators. Their study was a longitudinal study of students in kindergarten through to fifth grade, and involved a nationally representative sample group.

Time spent in physical education (calculated in minutes per week) was ascertained and used as a basis for categorising children as involved in low (0-35 minutes per week), medium (36-69 minutes per week), or high (70-300 minutes per week) amounts of physical education. Academic achievement in terms of performance in mathematics and reading tests was scored on an item response theory (IRT) scale. Gender differences were observed in this research. For girls, there was some evidence of a positive association between time engaged in physical education and academic achievement: Girls in all grades who were in the low physical education category had the lowest IRT scale scores for mathematics and reading, although only in kindergarten and first grade were these differences significant for reading and mathematics (in kindergarten, only the difference between the low and medium category was significant). In fifth grade differences were significant for reading only.

The research evidence discussed in this chapter is compelling; Physical Education and sport in schools can result in many very significant benefits for young people. Equally apparent, however, is that the benefits are far from inevitable or assured and certainly, not for all students. Repeatedly, research studies stress that achieving the benefits relies upon targeted investment, carefully planned curricula implemented by skillful, knowledgeable professionals who have the support of colleagues, parents, and education authorities. The frequently cited challenges of inadequate time and limited support from teachers can only be addressed through strong commitment from local and state school personnel who view physical activity

RESEARCH INTO THE VALUE OF QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SCHOOL SPORT

as a vital part of the school day and a contributor to academic achievement.

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