

Benefits and Outcomes of Physical Education and Sport in Schools

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Abstract: This paper explores the scientific evidence that has been gathered on the contributions and benefits of physical education and sport (PES) in schools for both children and for educational systems. Research evidence is presented in terms of children's development in a number of domains: physical, lifestyle, affective, social, and cognitive. The review suggests that PES have the potential to make significant and distinctive contributions to development in each of these domains. It is suggested that PES have the potential to make distinctive contributions to the development of children's fundamental movement skills and physical competences, which are necessary precursors of participation in later lifestyle and sporting physical activities. They also, when appropriately presented, can support the development of social skills and social behaviors, self-esteem and proschool attitudes, and, in certain circumstances, academic and cognitive development.

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I. Introduction

Advocates of physical education and sport (PES) have listed numerous benefits associated with participation in these activities. For example, Talbot claims that physical education helps children to develop respect for the body—their own and others', contributes toward the integrated development of mind and body, develops an understanding of the role of aerobic and anaerobic physical activity in health, positively enhances self-confidence and self-esteem, and enhances social and cognitive development and academic achievement. Writing specifically about sport, a Council of Europe report suggests that it provides opportunities to meet and communicate with other people, to take different social roles, to learn particular social skills (such as tolerance and respect for others), and to adjust to team/collective objectives (such as cooperation and cohesion), and that it provides experience of emotions that are not available in the rest of life. This report goes on to stress the important contribution of sport to processes of personality development and psychological well-being, stating that there is, "strong evidence . on the positive effects of physical activities on self-concept, self-esteem, anxiety, depression, tension and stress, self-confidence, energy, mood, efficiency and well-being. Such claims have often been criticized for lacking empirical foundations and for confusing policy rhetoric with scientific evidence.

II. Review of Literature

The review also stresses that many of these benefits will not necessarily result from participation, per se; the effects are likely to be mediated by the nature of the interactions between students and their teachers, parents, and coaches who work with them. Contexts that emphasize positive experiences, characterized by enjoyment, diversity, and the engagement of all, and that are managed by committed and trained teachers and coaches, and supportive and informed parents, significantly influence the character of these physical activities and increase the likelihood of realizing the potential benefits of participation.

This paper seeks to explore some of the scientific evidence that has been gathered on the contributions and benefits of PES for both children and for educational systems. In doing so, it will be using a framework and some of the data derived from a recent international research project. **Findings suggest that the outcomes of PES can be understood in terms of children's development in 5 domains:**

- Physical Development
- Lifestyle Development
- Affective Development
- Social Development
- Cognitive Development

As its title suggests, this article is concerned with “physical education and sport.” Since the relationship between the concepts “physical education” and “sport” continues to be a cause of debate. It is worthwhile clarifying the use of the terms in this review. In many, predominantly Anglophone, countries, the term “physical education” is used to refer to that area of the school curriculum concerned with developing students’ physical competence and confidence, and their ability to use these to perform in a range of activities. Sport” is a collective noun and usually refers to a range of activities, processes, social relationships, and presumed physical, psychological, and sociological outcomes

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The physical health benefits of regular physical activity are well established.¹⁶ Regular participation in such activities is associated with a longer and better quality of life, reduced risk of a variety of diseases, and many psychological and emotional benefits. There is also a large body of literature showing that inactivity is one of the most significant causes of death, disability, and reduced quality of life across the developed world. Evidence is starting to appear suggesting a favorable relationship between physical activity and a host of factors affecting children’s physical health, including diabetes, blood pressure, bone health, and obesity.

Basic movement skills, like those developed in PES, form the foundation of almost all later sporting and physical activities. There is evidence that those who have developed a strong foundation in fundamental movement skills are more likely to be active, both during childhood and later in life. There is also a frequently cited, but under researched, hypothesis that the development of a broad range of these basic movement skills through PES programs is a necessary condition for excellence in sport. Conversely, children who have not been able to acquire an adequate base of movement competences are more likely to be excluded from participation in organized sports and play experiences with their friends because of a lack of basic physical skills. So, as one of the most highly valued aspects of many children’s and young people’s lives, such omission from the activities that make up PES is likely to have far-reaching and harmful consequence to the development and education of many children.

LIFESTYLE DEVELOPMENT

The mechanisms by which active young people become active adults are unclear. However, research suggests that a number of factors contribute to the establishment of physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle. There is some evidence that health-related behaviors learned in childhood are often maintained into adulthood. A review of retrospective and longitudinal studies reported that physical activity and sports participation in childhood and youth represents a significant predictor of later activity. Interestingly, studies also show how strongly inactivity in youth tracks to adulthood, so exclusion from PES can be associated with a legacy of inactivity and associated ill-health in the years to come.

There have been frequent claims that school PES create important contexts in which physical activity levels are influenced. Studies have 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 emphasized enjoyment and positive experiences.

AFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

One especially relevant set of findings, in this regard, relates to the development of perceived physical competence. It has been suggested that self-esteem is influenced by an individual’s perceptions of competence or adequacy to achieve, and that It is also worth considering the growing interest in the relationship between PES and students’ general attitudes toward school. The evidence supporting such claims is limited and is mostly based on small-scale studies or anecdotal evidence. However, some studies report generally positive outcomes in terms of pupil attendance following the introduction of PES schemes, and there is evidence from studies of pupils at risk of exclusion from school that an increase in the availability of PES programs would make the school experience more attractive .So it would be misleading to suggest that PES will necessarily contribute toward positive attitudes to school in all pupils as inappropriate provision might actually increase disaffection and truancy. More positively, though, there is a great deal of research showing that when PES activities are presented in attractive and relevant ways to girls, they can enjoy participation as much as boys.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The idea that PES positively affect young people’s social development and prosocial behavior goes back many years. PES settings are considered an appealing context because both naturally occurring and contrived social interactions frequently emerge⁵⁴ and because the public nature of participation usually makes both socially appropriate and inappropriate behaviors evident. The most encouraging findings come from school

based studies, especially those focusing on PES curriculum programs. While a wide range of physical activities seem able to offer valuable environments for social development, school-based programs have a number of advantages, such as access to nearly all children, fewer external pressures to emphasize outcome and competition, and the ability to integrate social education with the similar teaching across the school curriculum. Intervention studies have produced generally positive results, including improvements in moral reasoning, fair play and sportsmanship, and personal responsibility. It also seems that the most promising contexts for developing social skills and values are those mediated by suitably trained teachers and coaches who focus on situations that arise naturally through activities, by asking questions of students and by modeling appropriate responses though their own behavior.

However, positive experiences do seem to have the potential to, at least, contribute to the process of inclusion by bringing individuals from a variety of social and economic background together in a shared interest, offering a sense of belonging to a team or a club, providing opportunities for the development of valued capabilities and competencies, and developing social networks, community cohesion, and civic pride.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

There is a long tradition claiming that a “healthy body leads to a healthy mind,” and that physical activity can support intellectual development in children. Researchers have suggested that PES can enhance academic performance by increasing the flow of blood to the brain, enhancing mood, increasing mental alertness, and improving 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. More recent studies have found improvements for many children in academic performance when time for PES is increased in their school day. A review of 3 large-scale studies found that academic performance is maintained or even enhanced by an increase in a student’s levels of PES, despite a reduction in the time for the study of academic material.

Overall, the available research evidence suggests that increased levels of physical activity in school—such as through increasing the amount of time dedicated to PES—does not interfere with pupils’ achievement in other subjects (although the time available for these subjects is consequently reduced) and in many instances is associated with improved academic performance.

III. Conclusion

Clearly, PES have the potential to make significant contributions to the education and development of children and young people in many ways, although further research and evaluation will help us better understand the nature of these contributions. Nevertheless, in each of the domains discussed—physical, lifestyle, affective, social, and cognitive—there is evidence that PES can have a positive and profound effect. In some respects, such an effect is unique, owing to the distinctive contexts in which PES take place. Consequently, there is a duty for those who teach and acknowledge the value of PES to act as advocates for its place as a necessary feature of the general education of all children. They need to argue not just for the inclusion of PES within the curriculum, and for the provision of sufficient time, but also to stress the importance of the quality of the program and share information on the benefits of PES among administrators, parents, and policy makers. Contexts that emphasize positive PES experiences, characterized by enjoyment, diversity, and the engagement of all, and that are managed by committed and trained teachers and coaches, and supportive and informed parents, are fundamental.

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