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Subject Area - Physical Education

Physical education and school sports.

Physical education and school sport is a crucial part of a well-rounded primary school education. The main goal of physical education for young children is to give them the skills and knowledge necessary to keep their bodies healthy as they age. Movement is an essential part of how children learn. In order to keep children engaged and motivated, the physical education activities must be fun and highly interactive. However, creating an enriching environment can be challenging for schools and teachers.

The National Curriculum tries to address physical education by providing the agenda used by all schools to ensure that teaching and learning consistent. The recommendations in the National Curriculum in reference to physical education are quite flexible. There are two Key Stages (1 and 2) that list the milestones each child should reach. Although much is open to interpretation for most of physical education, the rules are quite strict for swimming. Swimming remains a statutory requirement with measurable expectations, such as being able to float and develop effective swimming strokes.

In Key Stage 1, children rely mostly on their own creativity and enjoyment of play to reach a base level of education. They begin to become cognizant of the changes that occur when they exercise. In this stage, the goal is to help children develop a positive attitude toward physical activity. Other goals include being able to perform simple repetitive, or rhythmic patterns in response to outside stimuli, such as music. They should also reach a level of coordination that allows them to jump, turn, make gestures, or simply sit quietly. All games and gymnastic activities should support this goal. For instance, children should learn to play simple games that involve traveling with a ball. Teachers are encouraged to help them achieve the ability to roll, balance, swing, and climb on floor and gymnastic apparatus.

During Key Stage 2, the skills mastered in Key Stage 1 are expanded upon and strengthened. Both physical and mental capacities are broadened during this stage. Their physical abilities should now allow them to send and receive a ball with more accuracy, perform various dances, and take part in more tumbling activities. Their emotional and mental growth should now allow them to play as part of a team, understand the ideas of offense and defense, plan their own activities and measure their accomplishments. As children grow, their knowledge of safe sporting practices and procedures should also grow. (Hopper et. al, 3-6)

As demonstrated in the Key Stages, physical education is a serious form of learning, unlike other type of movement, such as free play. Although it can, and should be fun, its goal is to help children learn about their bodies while fostering good health, self confidence, and social and cognitive development. One of the primary benefits of physical education and sport in the primary schools is that they can help set up a lifelong habit of regular exercise. It is a well established fact that exercise is one of the major factors in preventing obesity. Obesity is a problem that is currently on the rise throughout the UK and other developed countries. A Commons Health Committee inquiry found that as of 2001, 8.5% of six year olds and 15% of 15 year olds are obese. Obesity can lead to a host of chronic and even deadly illness, such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers (Postnote, 2005).

The situation is even more troubling in Scotland. In December, 2005, the NHS released statistics showing that the number of obese children in Scotland is just about double the UK average. More than 33% of Scottish 12-year-olds are

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currently overweight. Twenty percent are obese and more than 10% are severely obese.

The problem of childhood obesity is not just limited to the UK, but is also on the rise in the United States. Since 1980, the prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States has increased 100%. The prevalence of severe obesity in children aged six to 11 has increased an astounding 98% since the 1960s. A total of 25 to 30 percent of all children in the U.S. are overweight, and the numbers continue to increase every year (Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, 2000). While looking at these trends, the Health Development Agency, reported that current data suggests there has been a decline in the number of young people playing sport at school. It states:

“A survey commissioned by Sport England showed that the proportion of young people spending two or more hours a week on sport in school declined from 46% in 1994 to 33% in 1999.” (The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2003:3)

A recent study showed that even very young children are not getting enough exercise. When looking at toddlers in the UK, it was reported that three year olds were in getting only 20 minutes of physical activity a day in some cases (Downs, 2005).

This wide scale lack of physical activity is alarming. Not only does physical activity decrease the chances of obesity, it also provides other crucial health benefits. Children need movement to foster the development of bones, lean muscle, and healthy joints. Researchers at British Columbia Children's Hospital demonstrated the benefits of physical activity by measuring the bone density of girls in the fifth and sixth grade. One group took part in weight-bearing, resistance exercises, such as running or jumping, twice a week. The others did not. The study showed that the girls who worked against resistance developed bones that were 5% stronger than the girls who did not take part in weight-bearing exercises. The biggest improvements were seen in the spine and hip bones (Davis, 2004). Regular exercise can also increase mood and decrease feelings of depression.

Unfortunately, many children more children are now engaging in sedentary lifestyles then ever before. It is well documented that modern children are far more inactive than the generations that came before them. As a group, they watch more television, play games that do not require as much movement (such as video games) and often live in urban areas where they are not free to run outside (Epstein, et al. 1995, 110). All of this increases the need for children to receive more physical activity at school.

According to the World Health Organization, physical activity, including taking part in sports, is vital to a person's health and well being. Currently, the world is experiencing a sharp increase in non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and respiratory illnesses. A 2003 World Health Report states that one of the biggest risk factors of developing these non-communicable diseases is not getting enough physical activity. Furthermore, “unhealthy diets, caloric excess, inactivity, obesity and associated chronic diseases are the greatest public health problem in most countries of the world” (WHO, 2002). Physical inactivity is estimated to cause 1.9 million deaths worldwide. People who are active as children have a better chance of growing up to become active adults. Furthermore, adults who do not follow the minimum physical activity requirements for good health have a much higher chance of developing cardiovascular disease (WHO, 2003).

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There is also some limited evidence that physical education can increase a student's academic performance. Researchers monitored nearly 550 primary school students in Trois Rivieres, Ontario, Canada. The students all received an extra five hours of physical education a week. At the end of the study, these children had consistently better grades than those who did not receive the extra physical activity. Perhaps the most interesting element of this case was that the students who received the extra physical education actually received less classroom instruction because the additional activity time was taken from their time spent in academic pursuits (Shepard, et. al p. 62). According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), numerous studies show that when physical activity is increased in schools, grades do not drop. In some cases they actually improve. It cites a comparison of children who exercised for five or more hours week with a group of children who received less than 40 minutes each week. The children who exercised had a greater intellectual performance than those who did not (UNESCO, 2005).

UNESCO also lists additional benefits of physical education and school sport that are not commonly considered or discussed. For instance, it maintains children can learn about human rights, gender equality, and peace through physical education. It also recognizes the value of healthy competition (UNESCO, 2005). However, despite the wide-scale acknowledgement that physical education is a vital part of education as a whole, most countries worldwide do not stringently implement physical education requirements. In a sample of 126 countries, 92% legally required physical education in schools, but few nations enforced their own standards (UNESCO, 2005.)

In January, 2005 The Physical Education Professional Bodies with CCRP called on the Government to make physical education a larger part, in fact a "central part", of school curriculum. Many research papers were presented as part of a summit in London. One of the most shocking findings discussed was that today's generation of children in the UK will be the first ever to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents, largely because of the decrease in levels of physical activity and the increase in obesity. Furthermore, 30% children have access to physical activity only at school and in school time (www.ccrp.org.uk). Professor Margaret Talbot, Chief Executive of CCRP commented:

"School is the ONLY opportunity to access ALL children, and it is therefore crucial to their physical development and health that they receive a high quality experience that encourages them to continue to participate in physical activity, teaches them the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and the life skills to enable them to become active and involved citizens. Physical literacy is as important to a child's education and development as numeracy and literacy" (CCPR, 2005).

Although there are great benefits to receiving adequate physical education and school sport, many teachers are not fully aware of them. A joint initiative by the Scottish Sports Council, the Health Education Board in Scotland, and the sports governing body Fitness Scotland has explored this problem as part of an initiative called "Start Young Stay Active" (SYSA). Started in 1995, the goal was to work with teachers to increase the amount of physical activity that children of primary school age received. SYSA practitioners also wanted to help teachers' understanding of the need for increased physical activity. During survey, the majority of instructors agreed that there needed to be an increase in the amount of physical activity. However, when asked about the benefits of physical activity, very few seemed aware of all of the benefits. Very few mentioned cognitive benefits or fun and enjoyment as a benefit (Healthscotland.com).

Organized school sports in primary schools have many of the same psychological and physical benefits as physical education. Taking part in sports can foster a positive self-image, teach children how to work as part of a team, and develop healthy exercise habits. School sport leads to social competence, which is the ability to get along with others,

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including peers, family members, and teachers. School sport can also make children feel more worthy and successful. (Ewing, 1997).

Although there are many challenges to providing high quality physical education, primary school instructors can overcome these obstacles by developing strong leadership, management, and teaching skills. First, primary school teachers must understand the depths of the challenges they face. It is not enough to simply say physical education is important. In order to lead, primary school teachers must be well versed on the issues. For instance, about one third of boys and nearly a half of all girls do not get the minimum physical activity required to benefit their health (Department of Health, 2004). Even more troubling is that many schools are not doing enough to ensure children receive adequate physical education.

“PE is a compulsory part of the National Curriculum up to age 16. While the government is committed to every child receiving at least two hours PE and sport each week at school, a poll by Sport England shows only 1 in % primary schools meet this target.” (The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. 2003:3)

However, primary school teachers are finally getting some support in their quest to provide high quality physical education and a sport curriculum. Some of this help has come from the government, which was recently commended during CCRP's 2005 Summit. CCRP cited the £1 billion currently being spent in England on physical education and school sport (CCRP, 2005). In order to help students achieve the level of physical activity they need, the government decreed in 2004 that by 2010 every child should receive at least two hours of physical education and sport each week during school. The goal is to increase the number of five to 16-year-old children engaging in at least two hours of exercise by 85% (BBC, 2005).

In 2005, the government also announced that it will spend £1million on the Youth Sport Trust scheme. The goal is to help children improve their basic sports skills. By the end of 2006, it is estimated that 800 clubs could be operating in Britain. Sports Minister Richard Caborn was quoted by the BBC as saying, “The clubs provide a stepping-stone from high quality PE in schools to high-quality club sport” (BBC, 2005). The CCRP strongly supports this goal, saying that committing curriculum time to physical education is one way to make sure children get enough physical activity.

The interest in physical education extends to the United Nations, which named 2005 “The International Year for Sport and Physical Education.” The effort was aimed at raising awareness about the need to focus on physical education in school systems. The UN encouraged governments worldwide to recognize the value of physical activity. Under Article 1 of the International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, UNESCO, 1978, it is stated “The practice of physical education and sport is a fundamental right for all.” This latest initiative was undertaken to further reinforce and expand the 1978 declaration (UNESCO, 2005).

Other leadership initiatives were unveiled in December 2005 at the 2nd World Summit on Physical Education, which was sponsored by the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE). Representatives from 40 different gathered to demand stronger emphasis on physical education from both politicians and school administrators. The problems addresses were varied and included both rising childhood obesity rates and the lack of organized sport. For instance, some participants complained that too often primary school teachers lack adequate physical education training. The result is there are “still many teachers who send their students outside with a ball and leave them to their

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own devices" (ICSSPE, 2005). In response to the concerns voiced at the summit, ICSSPE is now compiling quality criteria for physical education programs and developing a way for their impact to be quantified and analyzed.

While these are certainly positive steps, there remains several major stumbling blocks to instituting a consistent program of quality physical education and school sport in primary schools. Many of the global challenges addressed by UNESCO are evident in the UK, including human resource constraints and a lack of financial means to carry out physical education plans. For instance, UNESCO said there is a dearth of primary school teachers who are well-trained in physical education. Additionally, set times for curriculum are not established, schools lack equipment and space, and too many educators do not fully appreciate the benefits of physical activity (UNESCO 2005). All of these issues can also be seen in the UK's school system.

In addition to becoming knowledgeable about the current political debates surrounding physical education, primary school teachers must all consider their own preconceived notions about the subject. There seems to be a wide-scale perception among teachers that physical education is less important than other forms of education. Proof of this can be seen when comparing what educators say with what they actually do. While many educators may verbally agree that physical education is important, they do not practice what they preach. They also do not always fully embrace the government's stated goals because they are afraid that focusing on physical education will make it even harder to accomplish their main agenda of teaching children how to read and write.

It is very easy to blame schools for not having solid physical education programs. However, many schools in the UK must often battle shrinking budgets, poor facilities, and overcrowded student populations. Many times there just doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to fit physical activity in. These concerns have led many to wonder that if in an environment where teachers are already stressed by their workload, is it really fair to ask them to add even more to their curriculum? One innovative suggestion is to increase the number of extended schools, where children can take part in physical education and activities after the normal school day. Still, paying for these types of programs costs money that many schools simply do not have.

The CCRP says that among physical education teachers, there is a feeling that their profession is losing ground. Despite concerns from teachers who worry about core curriculum, it maintains that physical education goals can be reached without damaging current academic programs. Some of the problem can be attributed to the way teachers are trained. During Initial Teacher Training (ITT), future teachers are spending less time on physical education. This is in part due to the increased focus on English, math, and science. Trainee teachers also often say they do not feel properly trained or confident enough to teach physical education (Hopper, et al. 2000). In fact the authors of Teaching Physical Education in the Primary School say they wrote the book because they found the existing material on physical education very lacking. They could not find anything to recommend to trainee teachers that could supplement their short physical education ITT courses (Hopeer, et al. 2000.)

Despite all of the challenges faced by educators, can we as a society really afford to neglect physical education? The answer is a resounding "no." Hardman summed up this position when writing, "Neglecting physical education is more expensive for the public health system than investing in the teaching of physical education" (Hardman, 1999). In fact, if 33% of the global population would take part in regular physical activity, public health costs would be reduced by \$778 (US). For each US dollar spent worldwide, \$2 to \$5 could be saved (UNESCO, 2005).

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The solution must come from a joint effort by government, school administrators and managers, educators, and parents. First, the government must recognize the crisis of physical inactivity. Educational efforts must be made to show teachers, parents, and students that children of all ages need to be active in order to be healthy. Physical fitness is not just for adults, despite popular beliefs that children get enough exercise during their regular play and that only adults need to worry about expanding waistlines. It must be widely acknowledge that healthy children become healthy adults. Overweight children have a much higher risk of becoming obese adults.

In order for physical education and school sport to be effective, it must also be an accepted belief that it is a valid form of education. First, it must be widely acknowledge that there is a true and undeniable link between lack of physical activity and a host of medical problems, including heart disease, diabetes, and depression. When these connections are validated, it becomes clear that school is the ideal place for physical education. Children spend so much of their day in school, making it the perfect place for this type of instruction. Also, since children must be guided into making good lifestyle choices, they can benefit from having teachers who reinforce both the short and long-term benefits of physical activity.

It must also be realized that fears about safety have also created a situation that discourages physical activity. Parents who are worried about crime in their neighborhoods are less likely to allow their children to walk to school or play outside. Additionally, children with working parents are often told to stay in the house until their parents return home (Downs, 2005). This makes the activity received at school more important than ever.

Fear of crime is only one factor in a society that increasingly encourages sedentary activity. Children are spending more and more time in front of the television, which can be attributed to less physical activity. Therefore, it has to become the role of the schools to make sure the youngest members of society are getting enough daily exercise.

For all of these reasons, schools must validate physical education and state that it is as important as other intellectual pursuits. A child is educated in many ways, not just by sitting at a desk. Physical education is the training of the entire person and when properly taught encourages valuable behaviors and social interactions. Despite the lip service paid to physical education, there is a common misconception that physical education is an "extra", not necessary part of the school day. True physical education is not the same as play or recess, it is a crucial learning tool that can help children sharpen their deductive reasoning skills, encourage creativity, and develop mind-body awareness.

Teachers must also displace some of their own notions about what makes physical education rewarding to students. An over-emphasis on competition and natural athletic ability can demoralize students who are not gifted athletically, making them more apt to stop taking part in sports. Primary school teachers should emphasize to their class that sport is for everyone, not just those who have the potential to set records for speed, strength, or agility. While there is certainly a place for healthy competition, winning can not be the motivating factor in primary school sport. Every child should be taught to feel good about his or her individual skill level. No child should be humiliated or feel left out by classmates who have superior athletic abilities. A student who is embarrassed by his or her performance will most likely withdraw and not get the physical activity they need to achieve and maintain good health. These feelings of physical inadequacy can follow a child into adulthood, setting up a lifelong pattern of avoiding sports and other forms of exercise.

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Teachers should encourage a long-term interest in sport by explaining to children that everyone can enjoy physical activity, no matter their genetic ability. When planning a curriculum, primary school teachers should consider the skill levels of each individual child and pick appropriate group and individual activities, using the National Curriculum guidelines.

Primary school teachers can help their students meet the National Curriculum goals by focusing less on winning or losing in sport and paying more attention to reaching the key stages. In order to maximize the benefit of physical education, teachers should include games that are age appropriate and assist in developing coordination skills. Once these skills are mastered, children will be ready for more complex movements and game strategies.

The Key Stages allow for a wide range of activities and skill levels, without a strong focus on winning or losing. This acceptance of all levels of skill may also benefit the teachers themselves, who often say they do not feel skilled enough to teach physical education. Teachers might feel more confident about their own abilities and authority to teach physical education once they acknowledge that regular exercise is for everyone, no matter if a person is an athlete or not. After all, many exercises, including walking and simple strength exercises, require no special ability.

For the inexperienced primary school teacher, there are many programs from which to draw inspiration. Using other successful programs as a template, teachers can build a physical education program that best suits the needs of their students. One of the best examples of this type of physical education is the "Schools on the Move" program. This progressive program, managed by the Youth Sports Trust, is funded by the Department of Health and Department of Education and Skills. It is a simple idea that involves giving thousands of English children pedometers. The small devices attach to a child's pants and count the number of steps taken. So far, 50 schools are taking part in the project as a way to fight obesity. Teachers encourage children to keep track of their steps and incorporate the pedometers in other academic subjects, such as math, health, science, and geography. This has proven to be a fun way for children to learn about the value of physical activity, while complementing classroom lessons. The British Heart Foundation National Center for Physical Activity has developed materials and lesson plans to help teachers use the pedometers in the most effective ways possible. For instance, students submit their steps to the program and they are tallied. As of 17 January, 2005 the young steppers had taken 514,118,759 steps. The program's website notes that this is the equivalent to walking to the planet Mercury. This kind of cross-curriculum, fun activity is a good way to keep children motivated to stay active (Schools on the Move, 2005).

Other cost effective programs are introducing some popular activities into physical education. For example, in Dundee, Scotland, school officials are planning to make physical education more diverse and modern by offering a more options. They are currently holding meetings with the City council to discuss building a skateboarding park for physical education classes (Schools on the Move, 2005).

However, making physical activity fun for students is just one part of an effective physical education program. In order for children to fully benefit from physical education and sport, they must be told why they are taking part in it. Running around and getting exercise is important, but it is just one part of true physical education. Teachers should include cognitive learning instruction. By explaining to children what they are doing and why they are doing it, students will be more likely to take interest in the activity, feel more pride when they accomplish a goal, and accept more personal responsibility for their physical education. In other words, children need to know why they should care about achieving

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a level of fitness. With this in mind, it is clear that the primary goal of sport for young children should not be winning. Instead, it should be laying the foundation for accepting personal responsibility for a lifetime of physical activity.

Other innovative approaches to physical education can be seen in programs now underway in the United States. Many school districts have had to cut their sport budgets in recent years. The effect has been devastating to physical education. In the United States the number of children engaging in daily physical education dropped from 42% to 25% in the four years between 1991 and 1995. In an attempt to stress wellness, some teachers are turning their focus away from expensive sports and emphasizing individual fitness. For example, in Pennsylvania teachers at a small secondary school are encouraging students to exercise on fitness equipment. They don't necessarily compete against each other. Instead, they try to perform at their individual best during their physical education classes. Schools that can not afford expensive exercise equipment, such as treadmills or weight benches, have started to use fun group exercise activities, such as jumping rope, aerobics, and even just simple walking (Klotter, 2003).

At a Washington D.C. primary school, instructors have instituted a dance program. They report that it is a fun method of working all of the body's major muscle groups. The class is part of an after-school program aimed at getting kids away from television. Other activities include untraditional exercise like rock climbing and even juggling. The physical educators who developed the program call it the "New PE", which means moving away from competitive team sports that left some students feeling left out. Also missing from the New PE is some old, traditional exercises, including jumping jacks and push-ups, which left many students feeling bored. The hope is that these new activities and programs will spark an interest in fitness that the children can maintain throughout their lifetimes (Rivera, 2004).

In Mitchellville, Maryland, primary school teachers who were frustrated by the growing obesity rates in students and the lack of physical education required by law, decided to take matters into their own hands and came up with ways to involve more movement in their curriculum. One of the teachers, Yvonne Baicich, at Kingsford Elementary School reported, "We see kids running around the green top in the middle of the day for five minutes, and it's just great." In another primary school, students pretend that they are running around the country when they jog around the school's track. They log their progress on a large map (Larkins, 2003).

The results have been inspiring, both in terms of physical fitness and self-image. In the Pennsylvania school, teachers have noticed a major improvement in the children's attitudes about exercise and physical education because they no longer feel embarrassed if they can't compete with others on a playing field. One teacher, Tim McCord, said, "You'll notice they don't hang out in groups of athletes and non-athletes anymore. The kids talk to each other now. They don't worry so much about being different" (Klotter, 2003).

In conclusion, it must be recognized by government officials, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students that a person who is truly educated knows that physical health is an important learned skill. This is more important than ever before, as we have become a society filled with stress and inactivity. Until the recent past, physical activity was necessary for human survival. Our bodies are built for, and therefore depend on, continuous movement to stay healthy. It has only been in the last century that large numbers of people in developed nations have become inactive. This disturbing trend affects children as well as adults. Modern luxuries, like cars, computers, and televisions, encourage children to sit for long hours each day, and it is taking a deadly toll on our society. Millions are suffering from diseases that could be prevented simply with regular exercise. Despite all of the amazing medical breakthroughs developed by modern

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scientists, there is no such thing as exercise in a pill. Nothing can replace physical activity. When this fact is widely accepted and physical education becomes an ingrained part of the learning experience, all members of society, including our youngest, will benefit.

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