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Teachers' and parents' orientations to children's physical activity: A report from the ACHPER Advocacy Project

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The project described in this paper is the second part of a three phase project funded by the Commonwealth Dept. of Health and Family Services:

Health Advancement Project through the auspices of ACHPER. In the first phase of the project an extensive data base was compiled on children's participation in physical activity, the second phase aims at investigating parents' and teachers' perceptions of their children's and students' participation in physical activity and the third uses the first two phases to develop an advocacy kit.

The main outcomes of this second component of the research project are

- ¥ to identify the orientations which adults - teachers and parents - have to the participation of young people in physical activity.
- ¥ to identify teachers' and parents' understandings of the relationship between physical activity and health;
- ¥ to explore the ways in which parents and teachers see themselves as influencing the participation patterns of children
- ¥ to identify how all of these might be different for different groups of parents and different groups of children and from these
- ¥ to identify the needs of parents, teachers and school communities

Four groups of researchers from NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria collaborated on the research study which provided the means to target a diverse population including Aboriginal communities, parents and teachers in rural and isolated schools, ethnically diverse schools, inner city schools, community schools and urban comprehensive schools. Individual and group focus interviews were carried out with teachers and parents in 13 schools. A survey was designed from the early interviews in schools and this has been administered in all the schools involved in the project. The results from the surveys have yet to be analysed and will not be reported on in this paper.

The approach we have taken in this paper draws on an understanding of meaning as a socially constructed phenomenon. The parents' and teachers' talk about physical activity is interpreted in the context of the sets of cultural knowledge about physical activity and sport and the values associated with it. In this sense we understand the perceptions and values articulated not so much as the unique property of individuals but socially constructed in the context of their own experiences, investments and social location. Bourdieu (1986), for instance, writing about the French population, found that the working class were more likely to take up an instrumental relation to their bodies and to pursue sports which demand 'a high investment of energy, effort or even pain ... and which sometimes even endanger the body itself' (p.213). The middle classes and particularly middle class women, on the other hand, were more likely to be concerned with the cultivation of the healthy body. Different generations are also likely to take up different orientations and different practices in relation to physical activity, partly because meanings change over time but also because people's investments in physical activity change at different times in their lives. For instance in the

study the parents and teachers seemed to have very instrumental orientations to physical activity. While we did not interview children and adolescents, other research suggests that 'fun' plays a much larger part in their motivation to participate. What this indicates is that values about physical activity are not universal but change over time from one social group to another. It is for this reason that we begin the paper with a brief discussion of those meanings which have achieved prominence in the English speaking countries.

The discourses around physical activity and sport.

From origins of competitive organized school sport in the Greater Public Schools of Britain, values such as loyalty, courage and so on have been integrally associated with manliness and the development of leadership, loyalty and patriotism. While the Victorian concern with educating the leadership of the British colonial empire no longer had prominence, competitive sport in schools continued to be associated and legitimated in terms of its contribution to the development of good citizens of a capitalist democracy, particularly good male citizens. Sport earned its place in the school curriculum because of this contribution. In today's schools sport and team games continue to predominate in the physical education curriculum of government schools and continue to be associated with social values such as cooperation, fairplay, the ability to win and lose and to work hard towards a collective goal - part of the 'education through the physical' motif. It is in private schools however that the traditional values of character building, leadership and achievement through competition are most emphasised, in keeping with whole school values. This has always been evident in boys private schools, particularly those in, or aspiring to the competitions held by the elite private schools, but also in the second half of the twentieth century in many girls schools. The private girls school which participated in this study is one such school. Competitive sport is very important to the schools' ethos and all girls are encouraged to participate in some form or another. The most prestigious sports are those however in which the school competes against other schools in annual competitions which have a long tradition of school rivalries.

While competitive sport continues to dominate in secondary school curricula, a shifting social and economic context over the last twenty years has produced a greater emphasis on health and the benefits of producing citizens who are at less risk of cardiovascular disease. This has produced a set of discourses which link health with exercise and where fitness is defined in terms of cardiorespiratory capacity, usually demonstrated through a slim body and the absence of excess fat. In contrast to the sport discourses described above where the emphasis is on the individual as a member of a collective with a responsibility to that collective, as a member of the team and/or through competing for the school (though emphasis on achievement and winning moves this discourse more towards the individual), the new 'healthism, as Crawford (1987, cited in Tinning 1990) has called it defines health problems as essentially individual problems. 'Healthism' has been defined by Sparkes (1989) 'as a belief that the attainment and maintenance of health is a self-evident good which accepts unquestionably the link between exercise, fitness and health' (p.9).

Crawford (1987, cited in Tinning 1990) claims that there are two dominant themes which structure our conception of health: 'control' and 'release'. Where 'control' is more likely to be associated with the middle class, health is more likely to be considered as 'release' by the working class and poor. Where health as control is more likely to be concerned with a goal achieved through effort, discipline, choice and determination, the notion of health as release emphasizes enjoyment. 'In the 'release' conception health is not rejected as a value, but it is often repudiated as a goal to be achieved through instrumental actions. It is perceived more as an outcome of the enjoyment of life and the positive state of mind derived from such enjoyment' (Crawford 1987, p.108).

There are a number of discourses involved under the rubric of 'Healthism'. For instance the recent rhetoric from the medical and exercise science researchers that accumulated moderate activity over the total day has health benefits has challenged the early exercise prescription model with its emphasis on fitness as a measurable outcome. With either of these models physical activity becomes a technical term assuming a value-added dimension. Physical activity in this sense has to be productive. To not be physically active is to be 'sedentary', to sit around collecting fat and losing out on health. Essential to these models however is the notion of the individual's responsibility for living a healthy lifestyle; both models ignore the structural constraints that not only influence priorities but which also limit the opportunities people have to engage in a variety of physical activities. With both come the moral imperative to be active. As the responses of the participants in the interviews indicated, to not be as active as one thinks one should be is associated with feelings of guilt.

The study

The study involved a range of schools from rural and urban areas and covering different socio-economic groups. However, researchers conducting the interviews all agreed that the parents who participated tended to be those with a close interest in their child's schooling and involvement in physical activity and with the time to be interviewed. They were also more likely to be women. These two factors together suggest that the values that they hold are more likely to be in keeping with middle class values and positions. And indeed our data suggests that this is indeed the case. We have to acknowledge that the picture is incomplete. What is absent are the values and positions of families who are struggling, and do not subscribe to the dominant middle class values about physical activity and health. On the other hand many of the interviewees are from working class families - their espousing of the discourses around Healthism and sport are indicative of the power and pervasiveness of these discourses as they are produced through television and popular magazines.

As a further proviso it must be said that this description of the analysis is partial in other ways. While the qualitative software package NUD*IST has been invaluable in coding the interviews this process is incomplete. The interviews on which this paper is based are only part of the larger sample. The table below identifies those schools in the larger study and those schools on which this paper is based. Educational sites ranged from a preschool to a private girls' schools and included interviews with parents who were home tutors in remote and isolated areas. Some of the interviews were with individuals and some with groups of two to four parents or teachers, or in one case the whole staff of a small primary school.

TABLE 1 School/teacher/parent interviews

The limitations of time for this presentation mean that only some themes will be discussed and not others. For instance, while the values the parents have placed on physical activity will be included, their comments about their own participation will not be covered in this paper.

The value of physical activity

Physical activity was regarded by all teachers and parents as an important part of their students or children's lives - the impression from the parents and particularly the young parents, at primary and preschools, is that they and their children are very active in a variety of ways. The reasons for parents valuing activity differed however, most markedly for young as compared to older children but also from one location to the next. In response to the opening questions about children's participation in physical activity, the teachers, rather than parents, were more likely to refer directly to health or fitness in relation to children's participation in physical activity. The parents, not surprisingly, were more likely to describe what their children did and did not do and how they were involved. Later in the interview they

were, like the teachers, likely to link health with physical activity, but this was generally not what they talked about initially.

The parents of younger children were much more likely to indicate a direct involvement in their children's physical activity than were the parents of older children and adolescents. What was striking from interviews with parents at the preschool and most of the primary schools was how early their children became involved in organized physical activity. The responses at one primary school in a more working class area (and where the interviewees were 'not well off') do not create the same impression - their children were more likely to be involved in a limited range of activities - netball, tennis and dancing for the girls and football for the boys. For these parents the school played an important role in introducing their children to sports. On the other hand at the NSW primary school and preschool, despite their being located in a working class area, the young mothers described a wide range of organized activities which their children had participated in from a very young age. Their comments were also much more likely to invoke the moralistic notions of participation which accord with Crawford's notions of control.

As Featherstone (1991) has pointed out the body in a consumer society is imbued with value. In middle class families it is the bodies of children as well as their parents which are markers of achievement and identity - parents have investments in their children's bodies as markers of their own value as parents. Weight and body shape is the first and foremost marker of this bodily investment, but also skill, achievement in sports, the ability to socialize with other team members and to form friendships. One honest comment from a preschool mother provides a telling example;

When K was doing the soccer, all things aside I'm not going to get down there and yell and scream and make my daughter, you know intimidate my daughter because she's not the best. But at the same time, privately in the back yard, 'come on Kate let's kick this ball'. You don't want your child to be the clumsiest, fumbliest kid on the soccer field.

and from another preschool mother;

I could see him developing his skills and he scored a goal the last game of the season and that was good, he got his three dollars cause that was the prize money. Well that was what I said, 'if you score the goal you get three dollars, you know to give him a bit of incentive'.

For many of the parents in the study, particularly the parents of young children, organized physical activities were important in remediating any problems they perceived or anticipated their child as having. For instance, one primary parent hoped that it would 'stop (her daughter) being shy'; for another it would provide the organizational skills that she lacked; for many more it would provide opportunities to meet friends. The other side of this is that while most of the primary and preschool parents describe their children as using the backyard and the street, they also talked about how playing with friends has now to be more carefully organized, through telephone calls to ensure that there will be someone at home.

In the same way, the traditional discourses around team sports provides the means to claim that participation will be 'character building', that it will instill 'a sense of responsibility' and 'teamship' (male parent, prim); teach children to cooperate; provide a context in which children will have to demonstrate commitment and develop priorities. 'I teach them that you have to sacrifice some things if they want to do well at their sport', and where they will 'learn to win and lose'. These comments are mainly from the parents of young children. These parents still, in some sense, seem to feel responsible for 'shaping' their child, for providing them with experiences which will lay the foundations for their future personality and social relationships. Like Crawford's middle class notion of health as control, these parents want to and do believe that they can intervene; that through effort, discipline, close monitoring and the choice of appropriate activities they will be able to produce a more rounded, better, more socially adjusted child.

Both primary and secondary teachers generally brought up fitness and health when talking about physical activity participation in relation to the students at their school. Their investments were more likely to lie with the benefits of physical activity with the school curriculum rather than an investment in the development of individual children, as was the case for parents.

The parents and teachers of young children all talked about the benefits of activity for the development of young children. Teachers, particularly those in South Australia primary schools, made links between physical activity and academic development - hand eye coordination and 'everything you see them doing in a classroom even reading and writing'. For some it was seen as a way in which to calm children down, a form of behaviour management (prim, male). Not only primary but a non-specialist male high school teacher also suggested a 'link between physical fitness, alertness, acuity and readiness to engage in educational tasks is proven'.

Health and physical activity

When teachers and parents were asked how they would define health, they rarely articulated a simple relationship between physical activity and health. Nutrition, as a parameter of health, was as important or more important for many of those interviewed. The parents tended to be more holistic than the teachers in their descriptions of health. This could have been because the parents seem to respond to the question from a personal basis - what health meant to them at this time in their life.

Not being ill, not having to go to the doctor, not having a cholesterol or blood pressure problem. Feeling reasonably fine. (parent).

Everything is working properly I suppose, or even a sense of well-being, you feel fine basically. (parent).

On the other hand the teachers - primary teachers and particularly specialist PE teachers - were more likely to make a stronger link between health and physical activity.

Healthier you are the more physically active you are. (female teacher, primary school).

Research has proven that being physically fit is good for you ... for keeping all the organs in the body in peak condition and being mentally alert and active, helps manage stress. (male non-specialist high school teacher).

Can't be completely healthy unless you are fit. (male non-specialist high school teacher).

Need exercise for health. Important. Can live without it but quality of life especially later in life will depend on involvement (female teacher, primary school).

There were some stirrings of resistance

T1: Don't have to have physical activity to be healthy. Can be healthy by just having a healthy diet and just do normal activities.

T2: I would have thought you needed extra
and

Some people I know are healthy but don't do any physical activity.

This last statement is worth a closer look. It demonstrates how the words 'physical activity' have become a technical term, sometimes equated with purposeful exercise but always associated with a value-added activity - activity that will have some benefit in terms of health. So walking or cycling to school becomes a measurable component on activity charts to be counted towards a health benefit. On one hand, for some people, this has been very liberating, they can count their everyday activities into their account, and this absolves some

of the guilt that accrues with the fitness prescription model. On the other, the degree of self-surveillance that this engenders leaves very few parts of our life without a positive or negative value in the 'healthy lifestyle banking system'.

School and the curriculum

The crowded curriculum was a recurring theme for the teachers. Primary, secondary, specialist and non-specialist staff all agreed that physical activity was a valuable and important aspect of student's lives. All agreed that the school had a responsibility to provide access to a range of competitive and non-competitive activities. There was a compensatory role of the school in depressed areas - if it wasn't for the school transport and financial assistance, then lack of time and interest on the part of the parents might mean that students have no other opportunity. For many primary and secondary teachers one of the main obstacles was the many other demands on their and their students time within the context of the school, and also outside the school for secondary teachers. In the primary schools the pressures around literacy and numeracy and in the secondary school the competition between subject areas for time in the curriculum often meant that the support needed for a whole school commitment to providing opportunities for students was difficult to sustain. This was much more likely to be the case in secondary as compared to primary schools. In most of the primary schools in the study there was a whole program in place for 'daily fitness' or something similar. 'Daily fitness' was a covering term used for a range of structured physical activity program, some of which were daily and some not. It could include opportunities to learn skills, to engage in dance and/or to do daily health hustles. These different opportunities might make up the program in one school or vary from teacher to teacher depending on their enthusiasm. Where there were whole school programs however, it usually meant a school commitment so that individual teacher reluctance did not mean that their children missed out.

These programs did seem to rely on ongoing funding - two schools were funded for their programs through Disadvantaged School Project money but were not so sure of being able to maintain the standard of equipment without continued funding - and/or a specialist or at least a committed teacher. The participation of enthusiastic and reliable parents also seems to be a large factor in the ongoing success of any physical activity program including school sport. The following quote from a State primary school stands in marked contrast to the comments by a teacher at the girls private school (which has a junior and senior school) that they 'employ really good coaches, maintain equipment and hire what we don't have'.

Older children need the structure of organized sport. They respond to it well. One of our difficulties is forming and keeping teams going. (Because we lack the) expertise to coach, we rely on parents to do it. Netball we cover internally but all the other sports have parent coaches and they might commit themselves for a couple of seasons and then move on to something else. For a small school with limited expertise it's hard to run and maintain a sports program that is suited to all children. Soccer is offered as boys, girls and mixed sport. Some kids would rather it was Aussie Rules. We are never meeting all needs. We try to get around that by offering coaching clinics from time to time. Golf, basketball, squash - basically anything that's available. When we have parent support (coaching etc) for a sport it does work effectively (prim teacher).

The combining of several primary schools into one large school had also placed one of the smaller school programs in jeopardy. The whole school programs in primary schools seem always at risk and always vulnerable to changed circumstances because they are seen as going beyond the mainstream curriculum, an add-on which most teachers agree is important but few by themselves have the energy, confidence and knowledge to maintain. An interesting conundrum is that the whole school approach seems to work because each teacher feels responsible for the education and well-being of a group of children with whom s/he has been entrusted for the year. Where specialist teachers work to assist teachers

through writing a whole school program, the whole school approach seems likely to be maintained. However if the specialist teacher takes over the physical activities instead of the classroom teacher, the fragmentation that occurs in high schools may very well follow with classroom teachers ceding their role to the specialist.

In primary schools there were also more likely to be attempts to encourage activity during recess and lunch by making equipment available, teacher supervised games etc.

In secondary schools the main issues seemed to be around the difficulties of involving students in physical activity because of competing interests and calls on their time, their reluctance to participate in activities that were not 'cool' and their rejection of traditional competitive sports. In the secondary schools the talk shifted much more to what the students wanted. The PE teachers seemed to take the more traditional line that physical activity was good for you and that the students should do it. In interviews, secondary PE teachers were more likely to bring up students weight as an issue. For instance two PE teachers at high schools in two different states both lamented the fact that sport or PE was not compulsory in years 11 and 12. On the other hand most of the other non-specialist teachers talked about the challenges of getting students to participate in ways which would have them enjoying physical activity and wanting to participate beyond school.

The non-specialist teachers in particular pointed to the need for more opportunities for a wider range of activities, particularly non-competitive activities. They suggested that the girls in particular were turned off by competitive sports. This, like most of the other observations and positions is clearly context related. At the girls private school, many of the girls seemed to be deeply engaged in competitive activities although the one most often mentioned - rowing - is not a traditional team sport.

Where engaging students in sport is a quandary and challenge for the government coeducational schools, and where part of that challenge is being able to provide affordable and attractive activities and good coaches for teams, this is not a problem at the girls private school. As mentioned above sport is very much part of the whole school ethos. They have a sports committee 'made up of girls whose task it is to encourage girls to play sport and provide 'awards for effort and excellence and improvement'. As one teacher at the school says there is a 'culture (here) that sport is a good thing to do for its benefits and (as) a contribution as a citizen of the school....' and from a parent, '(You) can't get away without being involved in something at school. Not just peer pressure. Whole thing is to be involved and they do it otherwise (there is) a feeling that you are missing out'.

In some of the government schools, particularly those in more depressed areas, the teachers saw the schools as having a compensatory role, providing opportunities for physical activity when finance, transport, time and the lack of interest from parents prevent students from playing sport. 'In a lot of cases if the school doesn't provide it, they won't participate' (male Art teacher). This however is not an easy task. Many of their adolescent students are often turned off school let alone PE or sport. There is a need to find alternative forms of physical activity as traditional PE lessons do not appeal, they are not cool'. 'Physical activity is absolutely important. The ones not involved are those who have all sorts of other problems; nowhere to go and nothing to do'.

Different groups of parents and different groups of children.

The parents of children in isolated areas provide a different voice again. For the parents tutors in the isolated education program, their children were seen as fairly active because of the work they have to do at home. However, they would like their children to have more opportunities to play sport because, like the other parents mentioned above, they see it as being good for their children - as 'character building' as developing 'sportsmanship', 'the ability to win and lose' in competitive situations and as a way that their children can integrate into the wider community and particularly the community of the boarding schools. Their opportunities however are very limited because of distance and because of the limited range

of sports available. The current, very constrained economic situation in rural Australia has also meant that where families might once have socialized around tennis, they are too preoccupied with surviving 'difficult times, company take-overs, individual phones, so the weekly get-togethers don't happen'. Similarly, attempts at organizing weekend camps and sporting associations fail because 'time is always a problem'.

The parents feel guilty about not being able to provide their children with opportunities to extend their talents and to prepare them for boarding school.

Team sports are important for learning to feel adequate in groups of people your own age. Distance ed kids don't get the skills for team sports. They feel inadequate.

One parent suggested instructional videos as a way of providing their children with the skills they will need at boarding school.

The parents, and it is really the mothers, are aware of the current thinking about health and physical activity. 'I have more of an understanding now through the educational literature'. But the prevailing isolation and distance prevent them pursuing activities to the level that they would like. While some parents described their children as being very active, moreso than the 'town kids', another parent said that they spent a long time in the one room being tutored and rarely had the reason to move any great distance. She had to manufacture reasons for riding to the gate. The parents are also concerned about their own health, again because of the limited opportunities they have to even take a walk.

As one parent says, she used to walk around the property a lot and ride but is now more inactive due to the demands of teaching her children. She see her fitness and health as having decreased because she sits around all day.

It's time consuming to go for a walk - can't always fit it in. We can't fit our housework in because we are teaching school and now we've got to fit in exercise, the property work has gone by the by.

For some of the parents nutrition is more of an issue for their children's health than physical activity because of the restricted availability of fresh food.

You run out of things like fresh milk and cheese so you use long life food. Meat, potatoes and eggs are usually available so that is what is eaten. We're so busy with school or chores that lunch and dinner can often be quick and easy. The healthy quick options for meals aren't there. We can't pop down the shops and get whatever.

Again what the parents seemed to want was information and relevant information, particularly for their adolescent children: 'There is a lot of information (about health) for younger children but not much for teenagers' and finally '(k)ids in regular schools have PE teacher to help guide them with their health'.

Conclusion

At this stage it is difficult to draw too many conclusions. What does seem important is that how people talk about health, physical activity depends very much on their location geographically, socially and culturally. It also depends on their children's ages and their own experience of physical activity, health and illness.

For most of the schools providing physical activity opportunities for their students was perceived as a challenge. For the primary schools where the students were generally enthusiastic and willing to participate, a crowded curriculum, the lack of perceived expertise and enthusiasm on the part of teachers were more likely to be barriers. For secondary schools, the changing interests of students, the requirement for a wider range of offerings and the financial and other constraints which preclude this presented problems. The difference in the financial and other support offered by the private school and the government school was particularly marked. Where girls were perceived as reluctant

participators at the government high schools, the culture of the private school and a set of very different expectations together with fewer constraints on the range of activities on offer produced a very different scenario.

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