

Physical Activity can play a variety of roles in young people's lives and as well as being important for our health and wellbeing, ongoing participation can also contribute to a wider range of benefits. Through my research and involvement with physical activity I have found the interesting issue to be whether or not young people see physical activity as a significant part of their lives and also whether or not the opportunities provided for us are appropriate. There are many influences on young people's physical activity habits and these can be both positive and negative. This essay will look at these issues and link them to the appropriateness of our school programme.

Physical Activity is defined as "any bodily activity that enhances or maintains physical fitness and overall health. It is performed for various reasons" (www.wikipedia.com) while, sport is defined as "an athletic activity requiring skill or physical prowess and often of a competitive nature" (www.dictionary.reference.com). Therefore, you can see there is a difference between the two terms even though physical activity is often mistaken for sport. This can be problematic especially for people planning physical activity experiences for young people because not all young people want to be involved in organised sport but still find physical activity significant through other activities like going for walks with their friends or skating etc....

...As well as our class discussion, I gathered data from 50 other senior students not taking PE in our school. I wanted to find out what role physical activity played in their lives and if it was different to what we talked about in class. I was surprised at the variety of responses I was given. The top 3 reasons the 70 students I interviewed gave for (not PE students) involving themselves in physical activity were: fun (25), health/wellbeing (18) and friends/social (12). This data is in line with the SPARC participation survey which states that fun is the key reason for young people's involvement, however, it does note that there is a large variety of drivers towards fun. It was interesting to see that when we had our class discussion and the PE students discussed what role physical activity had in their lives – more seemed to be motivated because of things like goal setting and being competitive than the non-PE students surveyed. Only 6 out of the 70 non-PE students mentioned goal setting or competition....

In our class discussion, we all agreed that physical activity was a very significant part of our lives. Students in our class talked about things like it being part of who you are and your identity as a person and also how significant it was in terms of how much time we put into physical activity. At least half of the class were involved in physical activity well over the recommended 60mins per day and 2 students (a triathlete and a waterpolo player) were training in both the mornings and the afternoons most days. I believe most young people find physical activity significant in their lives because you have to choose to be involved and that means sacrificing other activities that we enjoy like hanging out with friends or watching t.v. etc. For example, I calculated that if you take into account all the travelling, training, game times and non-structured physical activity I am involved in at the moment it takes up 14 hours of my week. My parents are often on at me to get some part time work but that would mean I would have to give up some of my physical activity – we are still trying to agree on this.

When I looked at the national data about what type of physical activities were most popular with young people (SPARC, 2001), I noticed that the survey results overwhelmingly showed organised sport.

The top five sports played in clubs by boys aged 5 to 17 are:

- 17% Soccer
- 16% Rugby union
- 14% Swimming
- 8% Cricket
- 8% Hockey

I could not find any data in this study that asked the participants about their involvement in physical activity in general. From my experience, it seems to be much easier to get involved with organised sports through school or clubs but I have noticed there are not as many opportunities out there for other physical activities. Maybe it is expected that young people just prefer to do these on a casual basis though rather than having things like skateboarding clubs or walking groups organised. I think adults organising physical activity for young people need to be careful not to make assumptions that we all want to be involved in competitive sport. While most of our PE classes are definitely interested in this form of physical activity, my survey results suggested that many other students are not.

2

..Another thing that I brought up in our class discussion was that at school our Year 12 PE programme is also mostly based around organised sports and the aim is often to compete to get the best results possible. For example, in Term 3 when we participated in our turbo touch unit we split the class into two teams and everybody got really competitive. Some of the students in the class got annoyed with their team mates because they were not playing well enough. I think this is a common barrier for some young people that do not do participate in sport and the research I found seems to support this.

SPARC's "Obstacles to Action" study (2003) confirmed that one of the top three barriers to participating in physical activity was lack of support or encouragement from others. Often in our class people tend to get so competitive that we forget to support and encourage each other. In some situations, this may be enough to put students off the activity all together. I have to admit that I have often made the assumption that because I like activities to be competitive that everyone else should too. This has meant I haven't always been as supportive or encouraging to others as I probably should be...

2

A possible solution to some of the barriers I have identified could be that young people are supported to create their own opportunities for physical activity rather than the adults organising it for them. One of my friends at another school told me that one of their Year 12 units involved putting on lunchtime activities for other students. They had to research what they were interested in first and then organise it from scratch. This seems like a really good idea to me because everybody benefits. The students setting up the activities get to learn leadership, coaching and organisational skills and the students will probably be more likely to participate because other students will understand what they like better than the teachers. As our class discussion revealed, it is common for adults to make assumptions about what students want in their physical activity experiences and this is not always correct.