

.... Over the past 10 years there has been a growing interest in the significance of physical activity in young people's lives and organisations such as SPARC, local gyms, sports councils, local sports trusts and our own schools have been prominent in sending messages to young people what they deem to be physical activity ideals. In our school, there has been a lot of debate around issues, such as, which activities are supported the most and why, are the stereotypes surrounding certain physical activities and who are the decision makers in our school when it comes to issues related to physical activity opportunities. This critical discussion seeks to explore the varied roles of physical activity in young people's lives and how these role are significant. It will examine the influences and assumptions surrounding the debate.

The World Health Organisation defines physical activity as "Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that define movement". It is important to be aware that physical activity is not just sport. In a lot of research I found about how young people participate in physical activity I was annoyed to see the surveys focused a lot on sport and therefore did not take into account that young people might be active through other physical activities. For example, the Stay and Play study suggests that 70% of kids drop out of sport between 13-17 years, 62% indicate they are highly likely to drop out of sport and 50% don't do any sport. However, whose to say that some of the 50% reported who do not do any sport are not still active through participating in other physical activities like jogging or skateboarding? ...

...Why young people participate in physical activity and what sort of role it has in their lives was researched by SPARC in the NZ Physical Activity Studies (2001). It suggests that the two most important reasons young people participate were fun and social factors. I found this interesting because for me personally while fun is important I prefer to participate in physical activity because I like to push myself physically and I like being fit enough to compete at the best level I can. Sometimes this means my training is not always fun and I do not necessarily have to participate with my friends to get something out of it. However, I can understand that this is not the same for everybody...

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..Fun and enjoyment can also be a key driver for young people involved in high level and competitive physical activities. There are numerous cases of teenage burn out in sports and adults involved in young people's physical activities need to be aware of this. As referred to earlier, the 'Stay and Play' study indicates that 70% of kids drop out of sport between 13-17. The study also found that one of the most common excuses kids give for dropping out of sport is that they take up too much time, however, the real reason is often that it has become too competitive...

A good example of this is one of my good friends who gave up national level waterpolo last year because she said it was not fun anymore and took up too much time. Apparently, the coaches were pushing them too hard in trainings and they had to get up at 5am 4 days a week and were also training after school. My friend told me that she was too tired to out with us after school and she felt like she was starting to miss out so she quit. One of the positives of her quitting was that she could spend more time with friends and maybe that gave her back a balance in life although I also saw it as a negative that she felt she had to stop playing completely. I suggested that she should look at playing for a social team. That way she could have still hang out with her friends but also kept fit and kept up her skills in case she wants to play again later on....

When we had the class discussion about physical activity I noticed that lots of students play social sports like netball and touch rugby. This is not for me because I am too competitive and think I might get frustrated if people do not have trainings but I thought it was really good that other students who were not competitive still wanted to stay fit and really loved playing sport with their friends. In taking this into consideration, I believe it to be very important that physical activity opportunities are offered at all levels...

...Physical Activity has lots of benefits for young people and some of the ones we talked about in our class discussion were better health and wellbeing, improved concentration at school, confidence, leadership skills and appreciation of the outdoors. We talked about a wide range of these benefits but I found it interesting that lots of organisations who offer physical activity programmes for young people are often focussed on the physical health benefits like getting fit. We are always hearing about the obesity epidemic in the media and it seems lots of organisations are always trying to push us to get more active. I guess that is because organisations like SPARC have reported that there has been a slight decline in activity levels for young people over the past few years,

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however, I think care needs to be taken that we do not create a stigma around body weight (especially for teenagers). The NZ Herald recently printed an article on this issue titled "Amid war on obesity – skeptics warn of stigma". The article reports that stigma is not an effective motivator and in fact young people are less likely to exercise if they are teased or stigmatized....

... I think it is important that when organised physical activity is offered to young people that it should not just focus on getting people 'physically' fit. By focusing only on this, the assumption is that all teenagers are inactive, overweight and unfit. My personal survey of 40 Y12 PE students showed that 82% of my sample were involved in 60mins of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day. Many of these participated for their personal health and wellbeing, however, we discussed a much wider definition of health than just the physical dimension. Many students participate for social and emotional wellbeing too. For example, one student discussed training as a stress relief from busy exam times....

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... I realise that this sample may not be representative of the general population as they have chosen PE as a subject but nevertheless my own observations of people my age tell me that most teenagers would prefer to be involved in physical activity than not....

Our Year 12 PE programme had some variety of practical components to it. At the beginning of the year we all had to choose an event to train for. We could choose any event that interested us so long as we designed our own training programme to learn about training methods and principles. I chose the Mission Bay triathlon because I really enjoy running and swimming and I have not done much cycling but wanted to give it a go. Students in my class all took lots of time choosing their events and in our class discussion lots of us commented how surprised we were at the huge variety of events out there. It was also good to see that you could choose what distances you wished to enter for the triathlon and while I wanted to enter the full distance I noticed 2 others in my class enter the shorter distance. I thought it was really good that the organisers allowed for participants of all levels and cater for different needs, unfortunately this does not always happen in our PE class.

In term two our class had to take part in compulsory climbing activity unit for NCEA performance standard. I guess the assumption was made that this would be a new activity I think the teacher also thought that students would find it challenging and enjoyable. Unfortunately, some of us did not...

The positives I took out of the unit were that it gave me an appreciation for the courage and physical abilities that rock climbers have, however, for a few of us in the class the experience was often terrifying and we dreaded our usually favourite subject. I felt embarrassed when it was my turn because I was so scared of heights and it felt like everyone was watching me. In the end, I ended up with an achieved for the performance standard unit, which I was really disappointed with. I felt disadvantaged because I had to be tested for rock climbing but if I could have been assessed in waterpolo I know I could have got an excellence. A friend in my rep waterpolo team from another school said her teacher let them choose what they wanted to be assessed in and she chose waterpolo. It doesn't seem fair that she could get an excellence and I had to be assessed in something somebody else chose for me. I believe that teachers will need to consider the bias that occurs if the physical activity is limited to one context...

... After taking into account the class discussion and all my research on young people in NZ, my position on the role and significance of physical activity is that it should come in all shapes and sizes and most importantly the activities should be developed in consultation with the students. This would be easy to do for our Year 13 programme next year if we filled in questionnaires for the teacher or even the teacher met us at the end of the year to ask for feedback...

...The NZ Council of Educational Research is investigating a process to get secondary students to have more say in the curriculum. So far, they have found that students recognize some key dilemmas that teachers and policy makers grapple with. I believe the student voice will be a very important part in offering the right physical activity opportunities for our class in the future...

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In general, I have been really happy with the physical activity opportunities offered to us this year but would like to see more choice like we had in term one choosing an event. It would be great if we could also choose our own performance standard context ...