

ID 186

## Students' perception of the role of their secondary school in promoting an active lifestyle

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### Introduction

School is traditionally associated with the provision of physical activity to children and adolescents. For many young people, it represents the only place where they can be involved in organised physical activities. The role of schools in reducing sedentary behaviour has become central with health agencies realisation of the fact that they potentially have a powerful influence on the health behaviours (including physical activity) of young people. Physical education's status grew quickly and it became considered as the cornerstone for the promotion of lifelong physical activity (Tappe & Burgeson, 2004). Nevertheless, physical education alone is not sufficient to modify student's lifestyle because its place within the school is often limited and in concurrence with academic accountability. Consequently, physical activity promotion must become a priority of all people involved in the school's life.

The concept of the "Active School" appeared a decade ago (Cale, 1997) and the effectiveness of multi-sectorial approaches to physical activity promotion in schools is becoming increasingly popular. This is illustrated by recent practice recommendations published by leading health organisations (Pate et al., 2006). Depending on the objectives of their educational programmes, schools can either provide real opportunities for students' lifelong participation or completely miss the opportunity. An increasing number of studies are exploring the situation and trying to determine the exact role schools play in promoting a physically active lifestyle during childhood and into adulthood. The ideal methodology would be to monitor students over a period of time but the risk with this is that the results would be available too late to affect meaningful change. In fact, when youth are become adults programmes that they achieved have evolved as well as the social characteristics of the youth. Researchers are only able to report whether programmes were effective or not and fail to implement interventions which meet the needs and characteristics of the students. One way to collect more direct information would be to analyse the schools' context and/or physical activities offered to the students (Cale, 2000). Another might be to ask students during their final year at secondary school if their schooling helped them to become physically active. This approach presents some similarities to that used by Portman (2003).

Moreover, it is expected that the schools' policies with regards to physical activity promotion will influence the students' opinions. Exploring the above would enable researchers and practitioners to verify if their "clients" are aware of what they are doing for them. In addition, by considering the differences between some schools and programmes in the attention they afford to the promotion of active lifestyles, elements of 'good' and 'effective' practices could be identified.

While England has an already well established tradition in health education (and in the promotion of lifelong physical activity), French and German speaking communities of Belgium are now beginning to gradually introduce the same objective within their schools (De Knop et al., 2005). In this respect, it would be interesting to compare what students think about the role of their school in promoting active lifestyles in the above mentioned European regions.

### Objectives

Our study focused on an analysis of secondary schools which were renowned for placing a real emphasis on physical education, sport and/or active lifestyles. The originality of this research lies in the fact that the study represents a comparison of schools from three different cultures in Europe. Our purpose was to determine whether the students were aware of the role their secondary school played in promoting an active lifestyle and influencing their physical activity levels. The findings should provide useful feedback to practitioners in terms of both their current and future practice.

### Method

Eight schools were selected and agreed to participate, allowing us to administer a questionnaire to a sample of their final grade students. The sample comprised: 4 schools in the French speaking part of Belgium, 1 school in the middle of United Kingdom and 3 schools in the German speaking part of Belgium. All Belgian schools were well renowned for the quality of their PE programme while the English school respected the requirements of the "Sport Colleges". Students completed the same questionnaire. Translations were validated by using a cross-cultural translation technique (Banville, Desrosiers & Genet-Volet, 2000). We collected respectively 128, 46 and 49 questionnaires in the three regions.

The instrument proposed 26 questions dealing with activity and daily life, attitudes towards the school and physical education, sport and out of school activities. This paper focuses only on selected questions (role of the school on student's desire to adopt a lifelong physical active lifestyle; current physical activity, and motivation to be physical active as an adult) which adopted four-level scales from which the students had to indicate their level of agreement (1: "I strongly agree"; 2: "I agree"; 3: "I disagree"; 4: "I strongly disagree"). Answers were coded in a database and processed

using the 2006 Statistica software. The test of comparison of two proportions was used to compare the subgroups with a limit of 0.05 of significance.

## Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the proportions of positive answers to the three questions. English students more clearly perceived their school to play a role in promoting an active lifestyle ( $p \leq .002$  for all agreements;  $p \leq .038$  for strong agreement – Q2 and Q3; non significant for strong agreement – Q1). Proportions of Belgian students who totally acknowledged the role of their school were particularly low. The English educational system has provided a relatively strong emphasis on health promotion compared to the Belgian education authorities who paid very little attention to this aspect (e.g. in re-organising the missions of school at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century - Ministère de l'Éducation, 1997). Following the official policy, one of the most important general objectives of Education (German community adopted the same text) remains "to lead all the students to adapt knowledge and to acquire competencies which prepare them for learning throughout life and for taking an active place in economic, social and cultural life". Only recently, under the pressure of the European Community, have they proposed a new policy focusing on health education (Gouvernement de la Communauté française, 2006).

**Table 1. Students' opinions about their school's role on the promotion of physical activity (% of the answers)**

Schools	Desire to adopt an active lifestyle		Support to become physically active		Motivation to be physically active as an adult	
	Only strongly agreement	All agreements	Only strongly agreement	All agreements	Only strongly agreement	All agreements
1	2,1	59,6	6,3	45,8	6,3	52,1
2	0,0	19,2	0,0	14,8	0,0	18,5
3	0,0	55,6	11,1	77,8	0,0	55,6
4	2,8	25,0	0,0	37,1	0,0	22,9
French Community of Belgium	<b>1,6</b>	<b>40,9</b>	<b>3,9</b>	<b>41,4</b>	<b>2,3</b>	<b>37,5</b>
5	<b>6,7</b>	<b>71,1</b>	<b>22,2</b>	<b>91,1</b>	<b>8,9</b>	<b>64,4</b>
England						
6	5,0	20,0	0,0	10,0	5,0	10,0
7	0,0	27,8	0,0	50,0	0,0	22,2
8	0,0	45,5	0,0	36,4	0,0	36,4
German Community of Belgium	<b>2,0</b>	<b>28,6</b>	<b>0,0</b>	<b>30,6</b>	<b>2,0</b>	<b>20,4</b>

Even if sport and physical activity is usually better considered in the German speaking culture, with the exception of all agreements on question 3, Belgian students' opinions did not differ. An unexpected finding revealed that proportionately more French speaking students considered that their school played a role in motivating them to continue to be active upon leaving secondary school ( $p = .027$ ).

## Conclusion

Given that the proportion of students who strongly agreed that their school played a role in promoting an active lifestyle was surprisingly low, we consider that additional efforts should be made by practitioners to better internally communicate and achieve their objectives (within the school). In the first instance, involving senior management in writing of the policies statements relating to the promotion of physical activity and encouraging PE teachers to coordinate efforts to promote physical activity should help to raise students' awareness. Given that data were collected in renowned schools, it seems that specific strategies are needed in both Belgian regions to improve globally the promotion of physical activity at school.

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