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## What Wallonian PE teachers do to promote a lifelong active lifestyle in their students. An analysis based on critical incidents technique

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### Introduction

Experts agree that PE can play a key role in the promotion of a lifelong active lifestyle (Pate et al., 2006). In many countries, the PE teacher is seen as the most appropriate staff member to coordinate health education at school. However, in Belgium the PE programme does not expressly mention lifelong active lifestyle as a priority objective (Ministère de la Communauté française, 2000). Nevertheless, PE teachers consider traditionally that they should encourage lifelong sport participation but there is no study verifying whether they actually do.

### Objectives

Our purpose was to verify whether Wallonian PE teachers were aware of their role as physical activity promoters by identifying the actions that they use in their schools.

### Method

Using a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), 238 PE secondary level teachers participating to in-service sessions organised at the University of Liège were asked to describe an action that they used to let their students know the importance of adopting a lifelong physically active lifestyle and to encourage them to become physically active youth. Answers were classified in an inductive system of categories. Intra- and inter observer agreements reached respectively 87.5 and 82.0%.

### Results and discussion

206 PE teachers out of 238 provided usable answers (86.6%). It is noteworthy that 11 subjects were not able to identify any specific action that they proposed specifically to promote physical activity of their students. Other discarded critical incidents were not describing some situation but were proposing potential strategies ("One could do ...") or were not understandable ( $n = 8$ ). It appeared that some teachers encountered difficulties to remember and describe specific actions aiming to promote physical activity in their students. This underlines that even if PE was traditionally focused on the promotion of physical activity a sizable portion of these school physical educators were not aware of how to do so. In Wallonia as in many other European countries, since the 70's, PE has mainly focused on sport skills acquisition (De Knop et al., 2005). In parallel, most PE teachers have a competitive sport past, explaining why some of them were not able to describe situations focusing on a more general objective like physical activity promotion. They appear not to have followed the recent shift of society. For them, teaching sport skills contributes most to the development of an active lifestyle by itself. Others encountered difficulties verbalizing what they are doing "naturally" in their classes (Charlier, 2000) but it seems they do work to guarantee the status of PE as the cornerstone of the promotion of physically active lifestyles (Tappe & Burgeson, 2004).

Twelve categories of actions have been identified among the answers. It emerged that most Wallonian PE teachers experiment with strategies dealing with their role as key physical activity promoters. The number of categories underlines the diversity of strategies that teachers use in order to reach the same objective. This is interesting as effective physical activity promotion requires a package of actions. As with motor learning, the more students are confronted with different experiences, the more they have a chance to acquire the behaviour. The truth is that students are mediating agents. This means that teachers' actions are not efficient if students do not process these stimuli.

Teachers' critical incidents emphasized also their interest towards actions that could motivate students to be active. There exists a clear parallel between what they are doing to let their students adopt an

**Table 1. Categories of actions experienced by PE teaching to promote physical activity**

Categories	N	%
Endurance's activities	46	14.5
Diversified activities	41	12.9
Objective « fun »	38	11.9
Student's enhancing	36	11.3
Health benefits of physical activity	35	11.0
Out of school's sport activities	29	9.1
Teacher behaviour	29	9.1
Justification of PE	29	9.1
Initiation into unusual sports	20	6.3
Questionnaire on students' interests	8	2.5
Respect of savoir faire	5	1.6
Students' notebook/portfolio	2	0.6
Total	318	

active lifestyle and those actions they are proposing in order to increase students' participation to PE lessons. For example, categories such as "Objective fun" (proposing game situations, underlining the importance of pleasure provided by physical activity, developing a positive atmosphere...) or "Students' enhancing" (underlining students' competences, removing the concept of performance by that of involvement...) gathered situations that might be used to increase time on task or attendance. It might be considered that convincing students to be active during PE lessons could contribute to open their mind to a more positive attitude towards physical activity. Students appreciating PE might be a first step in the direction of a lifelong active lifestyle.

Some more specific categories appeared such as "Health benefits of physical activity" (providing information about the role of physical activity on health, underlining the physiological effects of regular training, organising PE lessons according to hygiene principles...), "Out of schools sport activities" (proposing information on sport clubs, organizing intramural sport tournaments, inviting community's sport coaches, developing contacts with community's sport associations...) and "Justification of PE" (reminding PE objectives to the students, proposing exercises that could be used for the all life...). These teachers' answers showed that they clearly consider that we should improve the marketing of our subject matter and that physical activity must be promoted also outside the gym.

Surprisingly, collaboration with other educational partners for integrated actions, as a strategy, was not mentioned. While the question raised to the teachers was quite open, they were mainly focused on their actions with their classes and seemed to forget the role that they could play as coordinators of physical activity in the whole school. We suppose that most of Wallonian PE teachers are not yet aware of this potential mission. It is true that the status of PE is not always well recognized as educational actors consider it as an enjoyment provider rather than as a health promoter. Schools directors emphasize this role (Mees et al., 2001) while students propose health (+/- 45%) than enjoyment (+/- 30%) (Piéron et al., 1998).

## Conclusion

Our findings show that most of Wallonian PE teachers are able to describe actions that they propose to encourage their students to become lifelong active. On the other hand, they tended to limit these strategies to PE specific actions and seemed to not be aware of the central place that they could claim within the school. In-service preparation should provide them some support to better reach that objective. Moreover, it should promote the concept of Active School (Cale, 1997) while researchers might propose collaborative studies as well as investigations dealing with the analysis of the field situation.

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