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ROLE OF PLAY IN SCHOOL-GOING YOUTHS: EXPLORING PRIDE FOR PLAY

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PRIDE for PLAY is a school-based intervention programme, which allows schooling youths to capitalise on their innate proclivity for play on a daily basis. Play is a fundamental antidote to a youth lifestyle that is increasingly sedentary even though many useful things are accomplished while being still. Daily play provides a much needed balance between being physically active and being physically still. The innovative programme extracts 3-5 minutes from other time-tabled subject lessons and aggregates it to form an embedded play session that is incorporated as a daily activity. The benefits of daily play include the natural development and nurturance of social-emotional learning outcomes and values inculcation such as teamwork, racial integration, negotiation, responsibility, coping with winning and losing, confidence and resilience. Pilot research data on PRIDE for PLAY show improved teacher-pupil bonding and understanding, increased concentration and less disruptive behavior in class. School academic performance was unaffected by the additional daily time spent at play. The promising success of PRIDE for PLAY was attributed to an enlightened school leadership and widespread appeal of the programme. Current research on PRIDE for PLAY is focused on buttressing the evidence-base of the merits of the school-based programme across different school contexts at the primary, secondary and junior college schooling levels in Singapore.

1 Introduction

In Singapore, it is the Ministry of Education policy for schools to have at least 70 minutes of physical education per week for pupils in primary schools and for students in secondary schools and junior colleges. Many schools adhere to these guidelines and a few schools have embarked on daily physical education or extended physical activities and sport on some days of the week. Physical education has many laudable aims and objectives to fulfill- it aims to develop the young person in the psychomotor, cognitive and affective domains and the PE teacher competes for time and space to adequately focus on the accomplishments of these aims and objectives.

One of the expectations of physical education in Singapore is that they equip young people to be well-prepared youths in taking ownership and responsibility for their own

health and well-being, including appropriate choices for leisure now and in the future, and being discerning and intelligent consumers of sport and leisure. Together with sports co-curricular activities, physical education lessons are often positioned by schools to play a significant role in character formation and values inculcation, and in helping schools facilitate the desired outcomes of education (a confident person, a self-directed learner, an active contributor and a concerned citizen) as outlined by the Ministry of Education in Singapore (MOE website, 2009).

In Singapore, as in many parts of the developed cities in the region, progress, globalisation, westernisation and affluence have resulted in the increased prevalence of physical inactivity and concomitantly, the earlier onset of hypokinetic lifestyle diseases such as obesity and metabolic syndrome among the population. Indeed a youth survey by the Health Promotion Board of Singapore suggests that youths are spending a disproportionate number of their waking hours engaged in sedentary activities- schooling, doing homework, computer engagement for emailing, surfing the internet and playing computer games take up at least 15 hours a day (Health Youth Survey, 2006). This is confirmed by a study which revealed that children and adolescents spent up to 96% and 99% respectively of the waking hours on a weekday and on a weekend day at heart rates that were below 140 beats per minute (Chia, 2008).

The allure and attraction of cyber gaming pose a serious threat to engagement in physical gaming since the former is not vulnerable to the limitations of time and physical space, physical fitness or physical skill of the players, and also the notion of delayed gratification or satisfaction. Increasingly, it appears that youths are finding cyber gaming to be more attractive than physical sport as the nature of sport and the way it is taught, organised and promoted tend to alienate the less physically gifted whereas these limitations do not exist in cyber gaming. Table 1 outlines the relative merits of gaming in cyber space compared to actual physical sport.

Table 1. Cyber versus physical sport.

Cyber sport	Physical sport
❖ Anytime, anywhere, whenever - easy access to players and computer terminal	❖ Limited by time, number of players, location and access to facility
❖ Not weather-dependent - played in comfortable setting	❖ Weather-dependent
❖ Not dependent on physical fitness	❖ Dependent on physical fitness
❖ Does not depend on a high level of physical skill	❖ Dependent on physical skill
❖ Game skill level is not so important for game enjoyment	❖ Game skill level is important for game enjoyment
❖ Relative ease in skill mastery	❖ Time-consuming to master skill
❖ Gratification and enjoyment is immediate	❖ Enjoyment and gratification is delayed
❖ Low level of physical exertion	❖ Great deal of physical exertion

2 PRIDE For PLAY: An Innovative School-Based Programme

PRIDE stands for personal responsibility in daily effort for play (Chia, 2007). I advocate that beyond physical education which has many noble aims apart from developing physical fitness and encouraging physical activity, youths in school must take personal responsibility in daily effort for free play and structured play, which is over and above that prescribed for physical education. PRIDE for Play is a whole school project that all teachers can own and not be considered as simply a PE project.

This is accomplished by taking 3-5 minutes from each of the time-tabled periods for academic subjects and collectively pooled to a period of extended play, either as part of an extended recess or just prior to recess. I advocate a “Teach less, Play more” concept that can collectively boost daily physical activity in school, school morale, ethos and school tone, better interaction among staff and pupils, better integration among the various races, higher school attendance and even better academic results. PRIDE for play can also be an instrument for values inculcation or provide a ‘mirror’ to life situations—that of winning and losing, compromise and negotiation, fair play and resilience. Importantly, PRIDE for Play will go some way in allowing young people to achieve a sizeable proportion of the current recommendations for an accumulation of at least 90 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous daily physical activity (Andersen *et al.*, 2006) or the accomplishment of at least 50% of the daily recommended step count of 6500 steps for girls and 8000 steps for boys (Duncan *et al.*, 2006), at least in the school context. Targeted community and home-based programmes that involve key stakeholders such as parents and other care-givers can help youths to accumulate the other 50% of daily accumulated step count.

In some instances, young people may have forgotten how to play or may be ignorant of the joys of movement and intervention programmes e.g. novel games, free access to safe playing equipment, and playing spaces, game markings on the playground, initially instructor or peer-led activities may be necessary to kick start the PRIDE for Play initiative. Alternatively, schools may consider setting aside 30-minute slots for free or organised play for all—before school, during school and after school, every day of the school week. This can also take the form of an extended recess, where children play first and eat later. This will go some way in allowing youths to have daily exposure to physical activity that is play-enabling and also allow for youthful exuberance of self either individually or in teams through physical activity.

Qualifying and quantifying the success of PRIDE for Play is important to ensure that beyond the novelty of the programme, there is sustainability of the programme and that the opportunity and academic costs of it are negligible or even non-existent. Contrarily, it is important to craft out questionnaires that help document improved attitudes toward play and physical activity, better school tone, improved integration of the various races, pupil-staff interactions and no significant drop in academic standards. Importantly, PRIDE for Play must be customised and contextualised to the situations in different schools to increase its impact and effectiveness. Pilot results from two primary schools

show a 10% increase in daily step count and improved school tone, better teacher-pupil bonding, better pupil concentration in class, among others and no discernable drop in overall academic test scores. An enlightened school leadership was also instrumental to the success of the programme.

3 Physical Activity Guidelines for Young People

The current guidelines for appropriate amounts of physical activity are that young people should accumulate at least 30 minutes up to several hours of physical activity every day of the week that is of a moderate to vigorous intensity. The physical activities can be in the context of free play, as part of physical education, as part of locomotion and as part of structured and organised sport or as part of co-curricular activities. Recent pronouncements based on research emanating from Europe suggest that an accumulation of 90 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous daily activity may be more appropriate for health benefits to accrue, and to keep the genesis of lifestyle diseases at bay.

Other guidelines based on body composition of youths suggest that young people should accumulate between 13 (for girls) and 16 thousand steps (for boys) daily in the context of school and also outside of school (Duncan *et al.*, 2006) to stay within acceptable body mass index. Emergent data suggest a close relationship between brain function, brain development and physical activity. Hence PRIDE for Play can also meet a more holistic development of both brain and brawn. Our PESS data show that normal weight youths from selected top schools in Singapore consistently performed better at a short-term memory recall task over a series of trials compared to overweight peers (Wong *et al.*, 2007).

4 Research Evidence on the Physical Activity of Young Singaporeans

Pockets of research conducted by PESS researchers show that children and adolescents of normal body weight accumulate about 24 minutes of moderate- to- vigorous intensity exercise on a weekday and only about 6 minutes on a weekend day. In terms of the number of steps accumulated in school and outside of school on a weekday, primary school pupils manage an average of 9600 accumulated steps. However, collectively, data suggest that Singaporean youths at primary, secondary and junior college levels are not sufficiently active on a daily basis and are up to 37% short of physical activity guidelines in terms of daily accumulated step count of 13 000 for girls and 16 000 for boys (Chia, in press).

5 Potential Challenges

Education in schools in Singapore is taken very seriously and can be considered as a 'high stakes' activity. After all, staff advancement in school is more easily justified from academic results which are easier to measure than the holistic and balanced development of the pupil. Any drop in academic standards can be interpreted as serious warning bells that must be immediately rectified, often at all costs- what that translates to is more time

on task in terms of academic subjects and higher stress for both pupils and teachers. Hence the scheme may find great resistance at the onset. However, a certain amount of “managed and considered messiness” may be necessary in the initial stages for the success of PRIDE for PLAY. Research is in progress to further buttress the evidence-based on the merits of the innovative school-based programme through the schooling years. Beyond increasing daily physical activity in school, inculcating social-emotional learning outcomes (SEL scales- self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship management and responsible decision making) using PRIDE for PLAY and using valid and reliable instruments to document these outcomes represent another challenge. Nonetheless, PRIDE for PLAY can play an instrumental part in contributing to the desired outcomes of education, articulated by the Ministry of Education of Singapore (MOE, 2010) at the end of 10 years of compulsory schooling- a confident person, a self-directed learner, an active contributor and a concerned citizen.

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