



They just need to move: Teachers' perception of classroom physical activity breaks



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Classroom PA was implemented due to affective (behavioral) and physical rationales.
- Teachers perceived different levels of administrator support for classroom PA.
- Time and infrastructure were barriers to implementing classroom PA.
- Collaboration with other teachers was an underutilized resource.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore 1) perceptions of preschool-8th grade teachers' in regard to classroom physical activity (PA) and 2) multiple levels of factors impacting preschool-8th grade teachers' ability to implement PA into the classroom. Sixty preschool-8th grade teachers from five school districts participated in semi-structured interviews following a guide developed from constructs of the social ecological model. All teachers implemented classroom PA but had varied levels of confidence for implementation. Teachers identified barriers to implementation and requested additional classroom PA resources. Furthermore, they identified collaboration with other teachers as an underutilized resource for promotion of classroom PA.

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1. Introduction

Regular participation in physical activity (PA) is essential to the optimal health and development of any child. PA has been associated with numerous health benefits including the development of healthy bones, muscles, and coordination; maintenance of a healthy body weight; reduced levels of anxiety and depression; and improvements in social development (World Health Organization, 2011). Despite these benefits, less than half of children in the United States meet the recommendations of engaging in

60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous PA every day (Troiano et al., 2008). In addition to a lack of PA, children are spending more time in sedentary behaviors (Bergouignan, Rudwill, Simon, & Blanc, 2011; Hamilton, Hamilton, & Zderic, 2007; Lou, 2014; Riddoch et al., 2004). Recent estimates suggest children spend six to eight hours per day in sedentary behaviors which results in an increased risk for obesity and other chronic health conditions (Lou, 2014). One reason for the reduced levels of PA and increased levels of sedentary behaviors is the lack of opportunities for PA in multiple settings, one of which is school (Mahar, 2011; Tremblay et al., 2011).

Due in part to testing and accountability pressures, schools have increased the focus on academic subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading, and decreased PA opportunities provided to children throughout the school day (Parks, Solmon, & Lee, 2007; Sherman, Tran, & Alves, 2010). The reduction in time allocated for physical education and recess are thought to increase the amount of instruction time, thus improving test scores (New York City

Abbreviations: PA, Physical activity.

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Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2009). However, multiple studies have shown physically active children are able to perform better academically than peers who are not as physically active (Ahmed et al., 2007; Carlson et al., 2008; Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin, 2007; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008).

Despite academic pressure, schools can serve as prime opportunities to improve children's PA because the vast majority of children attend (97%) and spend a large amount of time in schools (6 or more hours/day, 180 days/year) (Katz et al., 2005, pp. 1–12; Peterson & Fox, 2007). Thus, public health entities throughout the world have advocated for an increase of PA opportunities for children through comprehensive or whole-of-school approaches. In this approach, PA is no longer isolated to recess or physical education classes nor is it the sole responsibility of physical education teachers. For example, classroom teachers (those who provide instruction in core academic areas such as mathematics, science, reading, writing, and social sciences) are also intentionally embedding PA into their teaching strategies throughout the entirety of the school day.

For example, within the United States the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) along with the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) have developed and promoted the use of the Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) framework (SHAPE America, 2016; CDC, 2010). A major goal of the CSPAP model is to facilitate a healthy school environment by promoting PA within the school that enables students to take part in 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous PA every day. The focus areas of the CSPAP model include: physical education, PA before and after school, staff involvement, family and community engagement, as well as PA during the school day. Thus, increasing classroom-based PA is one method to increase PA rates for children during the school day. Incorporating PA into the classroom can occur in a variety of forms. Classroom PA can be included in class content (e.g., children jumping every time they hear a verb in a story), utilized during transitions between class subjects (e.g., walking to a different area of the room), or strictly as a pause in the current instruction.

Multiple classroom PA programs have been successful and several studies have explored teachers' perceptions of the use of these specific programs (e.g., Kibbe et al., 2011; Mahar, 2011). However, these studies have often focused on a specific program at a single school building or single school district (regional nomenclature referring to several schools physically located within one city or other delineated geographical area or schools operating under a common administrative structure). If this information were available, it could help guide dissemination of effective classroom PA strategies with both pre-service and in-service teachers across a variety of school sizes and locations.

1.1. Classroom PA

Numerous classroom PA programs have been developed for teachers. Several programs have been found to increase children's PA, on-task behavior, and academic outcomes (Bartholomew & Jowers, 2011; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dunn, Venturana, Walsh, & Nonas, 2012; Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Kibbe et al., 2011; Mahar, 2011; Mura et al., 2015). Even when classroom PA is delivered in brief sessions, students are able to improve on-task behavior and academic performance in areas such as mathematics and reading (Kibbe et al., 2011; Maher, 2011). In fact, PA may have the greatest impact on students who are in the most need of academic support, those with cognitive impairments or learning disabilities (Erwin, Fedewa, & Ahn, 2013; Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). Importantly, studies have found such improvements with minimal staff training (Donnelly et al., 2009; Dunn et al., 2012).

Due to the potential impact that classroom PA may have on children's overall physical and academic well-being, several studies have focused on teachers' perceptions and use of classroom PA (Gately, Curtis, & Hardaker, 2013; Howie, Newman-Norlund, & Pate, 2014; McMullen, Kulinna, & Cothran, 2014; Stylianou, Kulinna, & Naiman, 2015). Understanding teachers' use of and perceptions of classroom PA is essential to understanding how to promote the use of classroom PA to all teachers, especially those who are not currently implementing (Webster, Russ, Vazou, Goh, & Erwin, 2015). Additionally, because implementation is the responsibility of all teachers in widely varied classroom contexts, the fidelity and consistency of any classroom PA program is contingent on what teachers may perceive as benefits and barriers of incorporating PA into their instruction.

In general, educators have positive views of classroom PA and can identify the physical, mental, and academic benefits of PA (Cothran, Kulinna, & Garn, 2010; Howie et al., 2014; Martin & Murtagh, 2015; Parks et al., 2007; Stylianou et al., 2015). An additional benefit is students' enjoyment of classroom PA (Martin & Murtagh, 2015; McMullen et al., 2014; Stylianou et al., 2015). These benefits have been more likely to be realized and classroom PA utilized when classroom PA was easy to implement, integrated into academic concepts, and lasted five minutes or less (Howie et al., 2014; McMullen et al., 2014). However, the day-to-day realities of classroom instruction may create barriers to actually implementing PA.

As previously noted, in an environment of high-stakes testing and strict adherence to the prescribed scope and sequence of the curricula, classroom teachers may be reluctant to implement PA or feel they do not have the instructional autonomy to do so (Cothran et al., 2010; Gately et al., 2013). Unless teachers can identify how PA supports academic standards or content areas, they may resist incorporating them into their lessons (Erwin, Beighle, Morgan, & Noland, 2011; Gately et al., 2013; Gaus & Simpson, 2009; McMullen et al., 2014; Parks et al., 2007; Sherman et al., 2010). Researchers need to better understand the ways in which classroom teachers utilize classroom PA (e.g., how often, how long), what core academic content areas may be well-matched for classroom PA, and what can be done to increase the use of PA by teachers who either minimally use classroom PA or do not use classroom PA at all (Webster et al., 2015).

Other commonly identified barriers include limited time, lack of infrastructure (e.g., materials or physical space), concerns about classroom control, lack of experience, negative attitudes about PA, and teachers' perceptions that PA may interfere with daily routines or academic demands of the classroom (Dwyer et al., 2003; Erwin et al., 2011; Evenson, Ballard, Lee, & Ammermann, 2009; Gately et al., 2013; Howie et al., 2014; Goudeau, Baker, & Garn, 2014; McMullen et al., 2014; Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Parks et al., 2007; Stylianou et al., 2015). In addition to these specific barriers, teachers' lack of interest and/or motivation in increasing PA may be a broader philosophical barrier limiting the implementation of classroom PA (Erwin et al., 2011; Evenson, Ballard, Lee, & Ammermann, 2009; Morgan & Hansen, 2008).

Notably, teachers' past experience with integrating classroom PA can impact their efficacy for implementing PA (Webster et al., 2015; Parks et al., 2007). Teachers who lack confidence in their ability to understand movement and the use of PA to promote learning, may be reluctant to implement PA (Breslin, Morton, & Rudisill, 2008; Parks et al., 2007). This may be a particularly significant barrier for beginning teachers in that pre-service teacher education programs do not systematically include the use of PA in their courses of study (Goh et al., 2013; Wadsworth, Robinson, Beckham, & Webster, 2012). However, if barriers related to PA are to be thoroughly investigated, the impact of staff development,

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