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Physical Education programs in Korea – Mistakenly Undervalued

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ABSTRACT

Korea is well known throughout Asia and beyond as having a highly competitive educational system. The concept of the “tiger” mom is apt for Korean mothers who demand the most from their children in relation to education. These mothers spend enormous amounts of money on afterschool programs in an attempt to improve their children’s test scores and as such children often spend 10+ hours daily on education. This leaves little time for other activities such as organized sport or recreational physical activities. Thus, Korean students are not getting an all round education and are becoming less healthy because of an undervaluing of physical education classes in schools. Indeed, Korean students from a young age are widely known to have a higher level of stress about their education than many of their contemporaries and this can and does lead to potential health issues. A valued and structured physical education program in schools can, according, researchers such as Ahn & Fedewa, 2011; Fisher, 2005; Hardman, 2008; Sibley & Etnier, 2003; help to reduce stress and anxiety, improve physical conditions, and cognitive functioning. While there are of course negative aspects of competitive sports, physical education when done correctly can help to encourage more positive lifestyle choices from childhood to adulthood. Therefore, it is important for Korean schools to reexamine the importance and impact of physical education. This paper will analyze school policies towards Physical Education and recommend actions to show that a greater importance on physical education can help improve Korean students overall health and lifestyle.

Keywords: Education, Physical Education, Importance, and Health

Introduction

Researchers have debated the value of Physical education for several decades but yet physical education in some form has been a part of society since humans began searching for food. The history of physical education has been ingrained in society and has been used as a tool for training soldiers, developing leaders, and building moral characters (Coakley, 2010). Physical education as an educational discipline has come into its own over the last several decades and has become much more specialized and technical. Despite this increased specialization and research highlighting the benefits of physical education for students, countries around the world have slowly been decreasing the amount of physical education available to today’s students (Hardman, 2008). While, parents and teachers are lamenting about the decreasing health and the increasing stress levels of students, they have failed to appreciate that a remedy for these problems has been with them daily – that of physical education within the curriculum. Unfortunately, these same parents and teachers do not value physical education because of a lack of knowledge about its benefits.

One of the main reasons for a decline in the importance of physical education classes has been the questioning of the benefits to students education. In particular, in Korea, where

education is highly prized and extremely competitive, physical education classes are viewed as a waste of time and unnecessary. Unfortunately, while students in Korea are excelling at regular subjects, they are failing to receive an all round education and suffering from physical and mental concerns because they have little outlet for stress. This paper will examine the importance and need for physical education within the Korean education system and give recommendations on what the Korean government should do to have an effective and structured physical education program that will allow students to remain competitive and healthy.

History of Physical Education

Historically the Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians utilized physical activity as a way to train warriors going into battle and during the industrial revolution physical activity was used to educate young men to be a functional part of society. Researchers such as Mechikoff and Estes (2002) stated that those in ancient times focused on the concept that physical activity was essential for survival, military training, and entertainment. Throughout other significant historical periods such as the renaissance reformation, and enlightenment periods physical activity was received both negatively and positively according to Coakley (2010). During this period the Christian church was initially suspicious of physical activity as a waste of time but gradually physical activity became important because of the concept of Muscular Christianity (Coakley, 2010).

It was during the industrial revolution period of the early 19th Century that physical activity was to start being an integral component of society (Coakley, 2010). At the point physical activity became codified as physical education especially in England and Germany. Consequently, as the English and Germans immigrated to North America they brought with them the concept of physical education in schools. During this period, schools that included those from a higher economic background used physical activity or sport as a form of leadership training, entertainment and competition, while schools with those from a lower economic background were given physical activity in schools as a form of training for practical work in the belief that strong bodies would equal strong workers. (Coakley, 2010). It would remain this way in schools up until after the Second World War, when schools became more accessible, were educationally orientated, and a need to improve physical conditions. This was also the period when organized professional sports and college were becoming more influential in modern society and thus sports were beginning to play an important role in everyday life in general (Coakley, 2010). The most common form of physical education or activity was gymnastics, athletics, and team sports and these became important because of the influence of the early immigrants. The importance of team games in schools was because it was originally of importance in England and this was spread throughout the world as the English colonized. While gymnastics and athletics became influential because of the importance they played in Germany and northern European countries. Additionally, after World War Two, physical education took on a greater importance in the United States of America (U.S.) because of the need for strong bodies, strong characters, and good leaders.

The belief that physical education could make strong leaders and good character concept was especially important in North America and Europe (Mangan, 2000). While, historically, sport was the domain of warriors and generals, the modern concept of leaders was aimed at business and commerce (Mangan, 2003). Physical education taught you teamwork, success, competitiveness, and intelligence rather than how to protect yourself from an enemy or an animal. It was also during this period that physical education became more open to the inclusion of women, who were previously ignored or prohibited from

physical education. While women could now participate in physical education, there was a different set of character traits that or leadership traits that were to be learned. Indeed, at this point, gender divisions became very delineated in that boys participated in physical education that stressed action and competition, while girls participated in physical education that stressed agility and femininity (Kirk, 2000).

Another reason why physical education became ingrained in modern society was because of a rejuvenated Olympics at the beginning of the 20th Century. These countries saw sport, especially team sports and athletics as a form of cultural power and thus it became popular in schools and universities to promote sports and training. After World War Two, the cold war became a significant aspect of daily life and as such world was divided into the “west” versus the “east” and this was transferred to the sports field. Therefore, many governments promoted the increased need for physical education and specialized training in order to produce elite athletes. This need prompted a strong focus on structured and formalized curriculum. Governing organizations were developed that were charged with developing physical education as an educational discipline. As such the later part of the 20th century focused on the study of physical education and its benefits.

Importance of Physical Education

The history of physical education is as long as the histories of man yet the benefits of physical education are still questioned in the educational setting. Despite the fact that physical activity or education has been an integral part of life from ancient times, there are still those who question the importance of its benefits in schools (Bailey, 2004). The importance of physical education is due to several factors such as improved physical fitness, skills development, personality and social development, healthy lifestyle and increased academic performance. Regular physical activity in schools can fight against the increasing sedentary lifestyles of school children today. Research has shown that there has been an increase in obesity and other major health problems in children and physical activity can help to alleviate them (Lee, Shiroma, Lobelo, Puska, Blair, Katzmaryak, & Lancet, 2012). Certainly many of these can be learned through other subjects but physical education can be a conduit for many of them to be learned in tangent. It is not just the activity itself that is important but rather it is the learning that comes as long with it – a learning that encourages a lifelong healthy lifestyle. Indeed, a physical education program should focus on quality and length of time simultaneously rather than focusing on solely length of time.

A quality physical education program can allow students to become a more rounded student overall and maintain a lifelong healthy habit. First, physical activity can improve a person’s physical strength, agility, flexibility, and endurance (WHO, 2009; Sallis, McKenzie, Alcaraz, Kolody, Faucette, Hovell, 1997; Sallis & Owen, 1999; Svoboda, 1994). For many students, physical education in school may be the only form of activity they may receive, therefore, a structured physical education program can lead to improved physical conditions such as muscle, blood pressure, and body mass (Gutin, Barbeau, Yin, 2004). Second, physical education can improve motor skills development of students (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998; Okely, Booth, Patterson, 2001). Students learn through sports how to be more coordinated and how to use their bodies (Abbott, Collins, Martindale, & Sowerby, 2002). A lack of physical education can inhibit students in performing tasks that require developed motor skills. Third, physical education can enhance social and personal development in young people. For example students can learn the concept of self-discipline, communication, compassion, and teamwork through sports and can learn how to develop relationships with friends. Students learn how to socialize with other children in an activity that is fun and safe and physical education gives the opportunity to learn positive people skills (Ewing, Gano-

Overway, Branta, & Seefeldt, 2002; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). The process of socialization allows students to work with others in a manner that is conducive for a well-rounded social experience (Hassmen, Koivula, and Uutela, 2000). Additionally, physical education teaches students the idea of building self-confidence and self esteem where working as a team member encourages positive interaction with others (Fox, 2000; Lee, Burgeson, & Fulton, 2007). Fourth, physical education can teach students to embrace a holistic healthy lifestyle (Ferrer-Caja E, Weiss, 2002; Freedman, Kettel, Dietz, Srinivasan, & Berenson, 2001; Trudeau, Laurencelle, Tremblay, Rajic, & Shephard, 1999). Students learn the benefits of constant exercise for their bodies and the idea that sport can act as an outlet for stress reduction and emotional strength. Physical education initially teaches students the benefits of activity in lowering the chance of becoming overweight or obese and in turn lowering potential adult health risks due to a sedentary lifestyle (Kelder, Perry, Klepp, & Lytle, 1994; Shephard R, Trudeau, 2000). The activities that students learn in physical education classes remain with them for the rest of their lives in many different forms. Researchers such as Fox (2000) and Hassmen, Koivula, and Uutela (2000) have shown that being active at a younger age translates into being active in adulthood.

Finally, physical education can help to encourage students to be competitive in their other subjects and with the skills learned can increase their overall academic performance through goal setting. Research has highlighted that physical education can enhance academic performance through increasing mental alertness, self esteem, and self belief in their abilities to succeed (Lau, Yu, Lee, So, & Sung, 2004; Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). Similarly, Trost (2008) emphasized that physical activity in schools does not adversely affect educational performance. The results are important because many parents believe that physical education classes take away learning opportunities in schools and this is one of the main reasons why many Korean parents do not place any importance on physical education. Likewise, Trudeau and Shephard (2008) noted that adding physical education courses and activities to a school curriculum does not take away from a students overall academic performance.

Research has shown that physical education can and does have a positive effect on students and their overall development. From physical, cognitive, to social benefits, a structured and organized physical education program in a schools curriculum can lead to a stronger and more well balanced student. Certainly, sport does have its negative side effects but when physical education is taught properly and embraced within an overall educational curriculum then the potential positives outweigh the negatives.

Education in Korea

The value of education has always been important in Korean and many East Asian cultures based on Confucianism. The teacher has been viewed as someone to be respected, feared and ultimately revered (Shin & Koh, 2005). After the Korean War, the greatest asset that Korea had was its people and the modern concept of education became ingrained into the minds of the parents and students – to be successful you must have an education. Korean students attend schools at a higher level than many other developed nations for example; Korean students attend school for nearly 40-50 days more than students in the U.S. (Shin & Koh, 2005). Additionally, many parents spend an exorbitant amount of money on private lessons for their children to get ahead of the competition and this in turn only increases the potential educational gap between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged.

The Korean education system is one of the most competitive in the world and Korean students are continually at the top in relation to many subjects (Gray, 2013; Sistek, 2013). The environment within Korean schools is demanding of the students and students push

themselves to be the best, in part, because society and family demand the best. According to Gray (2013) Korean students also top another OECD that of the world's unhappiest students and an alarmingly high level of suicide because of the huge demands for perfection in the classroom. Korean parents do not place an importance on subjects that offer a release valve in the high stress school environment such as physical education, art or music. As such, Korean students do not get the opportunity to participate in these subjects or if they do get the opportunity then it is not given much structure or emphasis.

The emphasis of the Korean education system is based on test scores. Park (2012) and Sisteck (2013) highlighted that Korean students spend an innumerable amount of hours on going to school, homework, and memorizing for tests. The authors go further and stress that many students are not prepared for the global market and despite this many Asian parents are critical of western schooling because it does not overly emphasize test scores and constant studying for students. For Park (200?) the high-test scores are all the counts in Korea and this leads to an unhealthy student because they do not develop overall skills. For a large part of the modern Korean educational history, the national exam, College Scholastic Ability Test, has determined what university you went to and alarmingly was used to determine your future capabilities and opportunities and students would start preparing for this exam at a very young age (Park, 2012; Sisteck, 2013). The outcome of this test was that Korean students had high-test scores but did not have a good overall grasp of everyday skills or even skills that needed to work in international organizations.

Korean parents have an invested future in their child's education and thus emphasize hard work and commitment in attaining the best possible scores. The parents spend a large portion of their income on additional education in order to be the best but this pressure means that students have a high rate of stress, unhappiness, and unfortunately suicide because of the constant educational competition.

Physical Education in Korea

While physical education is given a place in the educational curriculum in South Korea, it is undervalued. Despite the obvious benefits of physical education and the unhealthiness of the Korean education system –competitiveness overrules healthiness in the system. The priority of the Korean educational system is based on test scores and the college entrance exam (Sang & Ha, 2005). School staff members and parents encourage students to study and deemphasize physical activity (Cho, 2001). Physical education within the system has been marginalized and accepted as long as it does not interfere with regular subject studies. It is also rare for parents to allow students to participate in any after school physical activity programs because it takes away from regular studying according to Sang and Ha (2005). Additionally, the negative attitude of students and parents towards physical education is based on factors such as poorly trained teachers and the lack of knowledge of the overall benefits of a structured physical education program (Yoo, 2002, 2003).

Kim and Taggart (2004) and Yu and Kim (2010) reported that in fact Korean physical educational classes offered a negative experience and environment because of poor facilities, lack of knowledge, over sized classes, and uninterested students. Classrooms were unstructured and students were given free play according to Kim and Taggart (2004) and this led to students doing no activities during the class. The value of physical education has rarely been taught as essential for students or as a valued discipline for professionals (Kim, 2003; You, 2002). A structured physical education program can address these concerns if it was given a more meaningful position within the curriculum. For example, Kim (2014) highlighted that many schools do not have facilities that allow physical education teachers to actually teach and for students to enjoy. Students cannot expect to learn how to have a

healthy lifestyle when schools or governments do not allocate resources for an effective physical education program. Additionally, the lack of focus on physical education is even more apparent for girls in Korea where according to Yoon (2015) nearly 70% of teenage girls do not participate in any physical activity. Unfortunately, the lack of facilities has led to a lack of physical education in schools and has resulted in an increase in obesity and childhood health problems (Lee, 2012).

Besides the lack of facilities, another major obstacle in the valuing of physical education is because of the perceived poorly trained teachers. When teachers are not properly trained they revert to what is most comfortable and that is game based activities. According to Kim and Taggart (2004) many poorly trained teachers teach the same activities in their classes such as soccer, basketball, or dodgeball throughout the different age levels. This method of teaching is both boring and inadequate because teaching the same sports to different age groups results in only one outcome, the students just run around and play rather than learning skills or knowledge. This in turn explains why students have apathy towards physical education. When teachers of physical education classes do not underline its importance then students will replicate such behavior. Kim and Taggart (2004) emphasized this point when their research showed that many teachers had an insincere attitude towards physical education and were willing to allow students to skip the class.

Certainly, if students and parents perceive that the schools and teachers do not value physical education classes, understand that teachers are willing to allow students to skip classes to study other subjects, notice that teachers do not participate in professional development, and see that schools do not have appropriate facilities, then why should those same students and parents put a value on physical education. It is apparent that while physical education is an important aspect of a lifelong healthy learning concept, it is not valued as such in the Korean educational system.

An Improved System in Korea

Professional Sports within Korea are only a few decades old and while important within society, they are not as ingrained as in many western societies. Similarly, Physical Education in Korea is a relatively young discipline and as such does not get given the same respect as other subjects. The Korean education system is a system that demands the best and intelligence is highly prized. Physical education along with other “art” subjects have been seen as not really important because of the lack of value after school. This has resulted in physical education in schools (at all levels) being a place where a teacher does not actually teach but gives students “free time.”

This lack of importance placed on teaching physical education, the poor teaching environment can lead to a class that is unstructured, passive, and undervalued. While Korean physical education teachers are well trained they are not given the opportunity to have an effective and structured program. The structure of the Korean education system also does not allow for a more open and educational environment but rather a vertical, military approach to physical education. Taken with the overall lack of student passion and the large class sizes it leads to an overall ineffective approach. The Korea government does not have to reinvent the wheel but only has to examine the more developed physical education disciplines in other countries.

The first strategy that should be focused on within the Korean educational system is that of implementing a well-designed curriculum, which currently is lacking according to Yu and Kim (2010). This should include a standard that is nationally based and is available to all students. It should be designed to keep students active throughout the class and this means involving more non-based games activities and more fitness activities. A national board

should set the standards for physical education and regional boards should assign individuals that are focused on developing a quality physical education program in conjunction with physical education teachers and the schools themselves. Finally, the national government and regional bodies should establish a taskforce that continually collects measurable outcomes and utilizes the concept of best practice in its policies.

The systems provided by a national strategy should allow teachers to use a well balanced approach to the class and offer a wider variety of programs, should be focused on teaching skills, knowledge, and understanding rather than just the concept of free time, provide a framework to ensure student learning and student centered approaches. The system should also be flexible for change, where administrators and teachers are not burdened when programs that are not working need to be changed.

The second strategy is to increase the training of physical education teachers. While Korea does have numerous university teaching programs the practical application does not match the theory. Therefore, more time should be given to practical teaching for the teachers. Physical education teachers should be given more training on classroom management, be provided with more feedback by a national physical education association, have a mentor program for new teachers, and offer teachers an opportunity to gain more professional development. Additionally, an online database of activities and educational materials should be made available to all physical education teachers throughout the calendar year. A final idea for helping teachers is that Korea should establish a program where they have individuals within regions that travel around schools and are there to help supervise and educate physical education teachers on current best practices.

A third strategy is that schools should collaborate with each other to ensure that teachers have access to other potential activity ideas. On many occasions schools are very protective of what they do and the success they have and while it is admirable that some schools achieve greater success – it is imperative that schools work together to make available the best practices of physical education. These schools should also partner with the local communities to foster a relationship that helps to highlight the importance of physical education in a lifelong healthy lifestyle. Schools should invite parents to come and visit the physical education class; schools should also provide an opportunity to give a physical education class to parents after school so that they can experience what their children are learning.

An effective physical education program is one that has been developed with the student in mind to ensure that they develop skills and a healthy lifelong activity habit. The program should offer constant and high levels of physical activity and offer students to learn new skills, develop social interactions, develop an appreciation of hard work and respect for challenges, and provide a safe and fun experience for students. Additionally, schools themselves have an important role to play in changing the perception of physical education in the community and the parents of the students. Schools should demand a developed and effective curriculum with opportunities for feedback. Schools should also work with the local community to offer school facilities to the community for free and to expand the idea of physical activity from beyond one class to a lifetime of learning.

Conclusion

Schools have been teaching physical education for many decades and for many different reasons. Today, physical education research has indicated that the discipline can have personal and societal benefits if done properly. Having a program with qualified teachers, a structured and comprehensive overall strategy, and a government that promotes physical education can result in a more healthy and industrious student. Unfortunately, the

Korean educational curriculum only pays lip service to the concept of physical education classes and Korean parents are unaware of the potential student benefits.

Korean parents value education but at a cost to the students themselves, students are investments in the future and as such all efforts must be placed on being the best in regular subjects such as math, English, and the sciences. Korean parents spend millions and millions of Won on sending their children to private tutors to gain an added advantage on their peers and the average student spends most of his or her time studying and stressing about exams. Therefore, they do not see any real value from participating in physical education classes despite the unhealthy habits of students today. This is the fault of the schools and the national governing bodies and this failure has put the overall health of students at risk.

Research has shown the benefits of physical education and as such those in charge of the Korean education system must reevaluate their attitude and commitment to physical education in the curriculum. The government and schools need to place importance on teacher training, on improving facilities, and on promoting the personal and social benefits to the wider communities. The Korean government is at a cross roads because of the low birth rate in Korea and increasingly sedentary society being developed. If the undervaluing of physical education is not addressed and addressed quickly then a generation of unhealthy students will grow up and produce future generations of people who will have no value on physical activity and the benefits associated with it. Presently, Cho (2014) has shown that the rates of unhappiness and suicide are all too high among Korean students because of the competitiveness of the system and lack of release valves for stress. If there is a continued lack of importance placed on physical education then the future will most likely be markedly worse.

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