

“One CSPAP step at a time” : Promoting a physically active school culture in an Irish urban post-primary school – planning for infrastructural change

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Introduction

Globally 81% of adolescents (11–17-year-olds) were found to not be meeting the then World Health Organisation (WHO) physical activity (PA) recommendation of at least 60 minutes of daily moderate to vigorous PA (MVPA) for children and adolescents (5–17 years-old) (Guthold et al. 2020).

International and national PA policies advocate for a whole-school approach for PA promotion in schools, including the WHO's 'Global action plan on PA 2018–2030' (GAPPA) (2018), and the 'Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland' (NPAPI) (Ireland, Department of Health 2016). Major reviews of school-based PA programmes have shown that whole-school PA approaches have had a minimal effect on students' PA levels, mainly due to a lack of PA programme implementation fidelity (Neil-Sztramko et al. 2021; van Sluijs et al. 2021).

This study investigated the implementation of a whole-school PA promotion model, the 'Comprehensive School PA Programme' (CSPAP), in an Irish urban post-primary school. The CSPAP incorporates five components to increase PA of school communities: physical education, PA before and after school, PA during school, staff involvement and family/community engagement. The CSPAP aims to help students achieve 60 minutes of daily MVPA using a multi-stakeholder whole-school approach (CDC 2013).

CSPAP research to date has predominately taken place in primary school settings. A unique facet to this study is that this post-primary school is currently constructing a new school campus, presenting an opportunity to inform what is included in the new school campus that would promote a physically active school culture.

Aims

- To investigate the implementation of a whole-school PA promotion model, the CSPAP, in an Irish post-primary school, evaluating its successes and challenges
- To explore how the CSPAP can inform the planning of a new school building in an urban setting that is promotive of an active school culture

Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of current PA opportunities in school?
- What are the barriers/challenges facing the implementation of a CSPAP?
- What level of stakeholder collaboration is needed for the successful implementation of a CSPAP?

Methodology

- Convergent parallel mixed methods design
- Three phases of data collection over nine months
- Informed by the social-ecological perspective that underpins the CSPAP conceptual framework (Carson et al. 2014).
- Thematic analysis following method of Braun & Clarke (2006)

Phase One: March 2021 - September 2021

- Student PA Questionnaire: n=76 (45 f and 31 m)
- Student focus groups: n=15 (12 f and 3 m)
- Staff focus groups: n=5 (2 f and 3 m)
- One-to-one interview with senior management: n=1

Phase Two: October 2021 - December 2021 (Nine weeks)

- Teacher-researcher journal

Phase Three: December 2021

- Staff focus group: n=3 (2 f and 1 m)
- Student focus groups: n=8 (6 f and 2 m)

CSPAP intervention (nine weeks in duration)

- PA awareness poster campaign
- 1st Year students' (n=100) lunchtime dance programme peer-led by 5th Year students (n=5)
- Whole-school movement integration in academic lessons
- Staff steps challenge (n=21) & yoga programme (n=5)
- Staff and student wellbeing days with a choice of PA

Results

Evidence of a school culture that values PA

- Variety of activities are available to students after school, lack of before school
- Emphasis on participation over competition, but academic achievement prioritised
- 100 minutes of physical education timetabled for every year group per week (double class period) i.e. 167 hours across Junior Cycle, surpassing NCCA minimum requirement of 135 hours
- Variety of strands and activities in physical education classes
- Supportive senior management

A cohesive happy physically active staff through PA opportunities

Time is of the essence for school staff due to time constraints and other commitments

5th Year students empowered to lead successful 1st Year dance lunchtime programme

School uniform (long skirt and deck shoes) a barrier for girls' PA participation

A reluctance regarding movement integration (MI) in a post-primary setting

- Perceived by senior students to be more suitable for younger peers. Some embarrassed to participate.
- Opportunities sought by teachers to collaborate and share best practices for MI.

An urban post-primary school embedded in its community

Strong links forged with sports clubs and a leisure centre to secure PA facilities

Green spaces for PA desired as part of a new school campus

Grass/Astro-turf playing pitches and a walking/running track sought by staff and students.

Conclusion

- A CSPAP can be more sustainable by empowering students to lead PA with their younger peers and through the PA leader distributing leadership of PA within CSPAP committee.
- Communities of practice for PA leaders could be helpful in supporting them in their role.
- Both PA leaders and staff leading PA would benefit from adequate training, as well as opportunities to collaborate and share best practice.
- Barriers to PA participation should be considered when seeking to create PA opportunities, such as timing of activities for staff, and the school uniform for students.
- The new school campus' PA environment should incorporate green PA spaces.
- Expectations of the impact of the CSPAP or the scale of possible initiatives need to be realistic and relative to the human and physical resources at a school's disposal, given the time commitment and workload involved in establishing a CSPAP in a school and the coordination of the CSPAP committee and those facilitating PA opportunities.
- **Limitations:** Study conducted in one post-primary school, and teacher-researcher bias cannot be ruled out. CSPAP implementation fidelity cannot be guaranteed.
- **Further research** is needed on full five-component CSPAP implementation in post-primary schools, peer-leadership of PA and the impact of school uniform on PA participation.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Limerick, for the awarding of the Pat Duffy Teaching and Coaching Scholarship, and to the Teaching Council of Ireland for their support through the John Coolahan Research Support Framework.