

Children's physical activity, health and physical education in isolated rural contexts: The views of parent educators in Queensland

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Abstract

This paper describes the views of parent educators of their children's levels and types of physical activity. The study was conducted at two mini-schools in western Queensland. These are occasions where students who undertake formal education through various Schools of Distance Education come together for a week of educational activity. Parents (mostly mothers) were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. The interview data were then analysed for dominant themes using a constant comparison method. The emergent themes related to nutrition and physical activity. Within the physical activity theme, notions of the great outdoors, work and organised sport skill development also emerged.

Introduction: General concerns over children's fitness and motor skill levels

The quality of children's participation in sport and physical activity is an issue of major significance in Australia (e.g. the Australian Senate Inquiry into Physical and Sport Education, 1992). There are considerable data on the amount and kind of young people's participation in physical activity generated mostly from large scale, purpose designed surveys (for example the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997, Booth et al 1997, Measurement and Consulting 1991). These studies have been motivated by a concern that the fitness levels, skill and participation of children and young people in physical activity are declining. Walkley, Holland, Treloar & Probyn-Smith's (1993) study describes worryingly poor levels of motor skill in children. As a consequence they argued for greater attention to be paid to school physical education. More recently, Kirk (1996, 1998) challenged Walkley et al's (1993) claims arguing that there is little longitudinal data upon which to make such claims.

Contextualising this study

It is apparent that within the academic literature, there is little that addresses issues related to children's physical activity in rurally isolated contexts. Similarly, little is written about parents' perceptions of their children's physical activity and more troublesome still, little about the delivery of physical education to isolated children.

Sher and Sher (1994) drawing from extensive literature, argue that the people who live in very isolated contexts in Australia assume incredible levels of responsibility to educate their children in the family home attempting to implement curricular requirements and a range of educational outcomes. Inevitably, there is heavy reliance on Schools of Distance Education or 'Schools of the Air' where through this support mechanism, parents (usually mothers) take on the role of teacher along with the many other roles managing a home requires. In this regard, Australia can be rightly proud of its achievements in the distance education enterprise. It is apparent however, that for isolated children whilst most curriculum material can be delivered in home study packs, the experiential subjects, physical education in particular, have always been problematic (Higgins, 1994).

The Study and Methods

The major study from which this work is drawn involved four groups of researchers from New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. This provided the means to target diverse populations that included parents and teachers in rural and isolated communities. For the major study, individual and group focus interviews were carried out with teachers and parents in fifteen sites in all. A survey was designed on the basis of early

interviews which all parents and teachers at each school were invited to complete. The parents in remote areas were interviewed only.

This paper then, reports on the views of geographically isolated parents related to their children's involvement in physical activity and their perception of its contribution to their children's lives. The interview data were gathered at two unique occasions called 'mini schools'. These are times when the isolated children normally educated in the home and served by the various Schools of Distance Education, come together, accompanied normally by their mothers, to a local rural centre. The school lasts for one week and consists of a series of activities designed to assess the children's progress through the school year. There are a range of other activities including an intensive swimming program and a host of social events to which equal importance is attached particularly by the parents and for obvious reasons.

The two schools that became possible to attend were held in Queensland and were attended by the Queensland research team. These were opportunities that only occur infrequently across the school year and as such the whole research team decided it would be prudent to attend the end of year schools even though interview questions had not been trialled and a questionnaire was not ready. Consequently, the research team agreed on a general set of questions/topics worth exploring with the Queensland research team responsible for carrying out the interviews in an appropriate and sensitive manner. The interviews were conducted in two rural towns approximately five hundred and eight hundred kilometres west of Brisbane with populations of between three and six thousand. Both towns serve an expansive region primarily devoted to cattle and sheep production. The parents involved in this study were from these primary industries. Not surprisingly, the regions of Queensland beyond these towns are sparsely populated with great distances between other much smaller country towns. The interviews were conducted under both one to one and focus group conditions.

The Research Questions

The relevant research questions that guided this part of the larger study were as follows:

- i) What are the orientations which adults - teachers and parents - have to the participation of young people in physical activity?
- ii) What are teachers' and parents' understandings of the relationship between physical activity and health?
- iii) In what ways do parents and teachers see themselves influencing the participation patterns of children?

The broader research questions which guided the larger study could not be addressed in this part of the work primarily because the teacher and the parent (or primary care giver) of the children were, in the overwhelming majority of cases, one and the same. Hence the interview schedules were adjusted to suit the particular situation. In this context, these parents or carers teach the children usually in a modified room in the homestead referred to as the 'school room'. As parents, they seldom have formal teacher education qualifications and in some cases their own education did not go beyond year ten. They make every effort to deliver the state curriculum and this is done with the support both in print materials from and radio contact with the Schools of Distance Education. The mini school weeks are as much a support mechanism for these adults as they are for the children. Staff at the Schools of Distance Education use these opportunities to conduct small seminars on teaching approaches, on assessment procedures and other professional activity related to schooling and education in general. In the limited time available, this is about as far as 'teacher education' can go. Minimally, it serves the needs of this particular community.

Physical Activity, Physical Education and Health: An Australian Rural Story

People from the isolated Australian bush are nothing if not resilient. This was apparent throughout both visits to the mini-schools, though our observations, field notes and in our discussions with various School of Distance Education staff. Notwithstanding the economic complexity and sometimes uncertainty within which these people are often required to operate, the delivery of the Queensland primary curriculum is a task of major significance which adds to the burdens of their day-to-day lives. One of the major themes to emerge was the notion of compromise. In spite of the efforts made by the home educators, they all to a person acknowledged their shortcomings, particularly with regard to the experiential aspects of the curriculum, most notably (though not exclusively) physical education. This area of the curriculum was, in all cases of these participants, not taught in the formal sense. Physical activity was encouraged and indeed one could say enforced by the home educators often by

way of 'reward' for time in the schoolroom. However it had little in the way of structure and motor skill development was more a serendipitous occurrence than a likely educational outcome. Grave concern was expressed about this both in the individual interviews and in the focus group discussions.

The views of health

It is important to note that there was a general perception amongst these parents (predominantly mothers) that their children were generally healthy. In the first instance, this was linked to their children's *physical* health. There was a view that the 'lifestyle' was for the most part 'busy' which included to varying degrees being active. Our own observations and field notes for example revealed an extraordinarily low incidence of obesity in the children. Indeed, there was little evidence of overweight children at all. Unlike the urban parents interviewed for the project, physical health was not so immediately linked with body weight and body shape but with poor nutrition. Health was less likely to be linked to problems of inadequate exercise as it was with the lack of fresh food. As one parent said:

You run out of things like fresh milk and cheese so you use long life food. Meat and potatoes and eggs are usually available so that is what is eaten. We're so busy with school or chores that lunch and dinner can often be quick and easy. The healthy quick options for meals aren't there. We can't pop down to the shops and get whatever.

On one hand, the parents in the focus group sessions unanimously felt that the absence of what they referred to as 'junk food' – that is food sold by major fast food franchises in more populated areas – was helpful from a health point of view. On the other hand, their isolation also led to problems with the purchase of fresh food. Fruit and other perishables were particularly problematic for these groups. Therefore, there was a reliance on some processed foods (with long shelf lives) or tinned produce and the facility to be able to freeze meat. There is something paradoxical about primary producers not being able to consume fresh food. However, the corporatised nature of primary production means that in Australia at least, primary production is an enterprise that tends to serve distant markets. Unless the farm managers or owners (of smaller stations) could make time for running a vegetable garden and perhaps baking bread at home, fresh food was sometimes at a premium. From a parent's point of view then, not being able to supply their growing children with fresh fruit and vegetables was more important than the amount of physical activity in which they were engaged.

When questioned further about physical activity specifically, a further health issue emerged, that of their children's long-term social well being. In particular, they were concerned that the isolated nature of the children's formative years would make it potentially difficult for their children to integrate when they went to urban boarding schools. There are few data to indicate whether this is so though Killeen's (1999) paper is an indication of parental concern in this area. In our view it would prove to be a fruitful area of research. Recent work by Baills and Rossi (2001) suggests this might be an over-cautious concern. However data or not, it was a genuine concern for these parents. Moreover, they linked their children's ability to integrate into the life boarding school directly to their children's competencies in team games – the dominant form of physical activity at the schools that these children were likely to attend. The women in the focus groups talked about their fear that their children's lack of exposure to many of the complex skills involved in team games would lead to a reluctance to become involved in a context where, as they saw it, urban children would have highly developed skills and a sophisticated understanding of sport. The mothers felt that if their children's lack of skills and understanding was exposed in a threatening way, they might be reluctant to be involved at any level and decide not to participate in the school's sport and physical education program other than in reluctant fashion. It was evident that for the parents, this was a health issue. Again it is important to indicate that there is a paucity of data related to these issues and this strengthens the case for more research in these areas, within these contexts.

Sports coaching, organised through the major sporting governing bodies does not appear to be able to fill an important void. It emerged in the data that it is more serendipitous if children receive coaching and instruction in motor skills commonly associated with the popular sports in Australia. The usual scenario is that they do not receive such instruction and the forms of physical activity, which contribute to 'healthy lifestyles', appear to be restricted to the incidental. The prevailing mythology in Australia of the 'boy (usually) from the bush' who makes it in sport disguises the inadequate provisions for young people in rural isolated Australia.

Further talk about physical activity: Thematic constructions

The great outdoors

Not surprisingly, given the parents' perceptions of their children's physical health, physical activity had more to do with '...being outside in the fresh air' than with structured forms of physical activity learning. There was general agreement that physical activity whilst not paramount, was desirable. This tended to be expressed in terms of being 'outside' on the assumption that it induced general play which was assumed to include (and was described as such) '...running around'. Being outside also included bicycle riding which appeared to be a widespread activity. Other forms of physical activity depended on whatever happened to be in the home by way of equipment, parents' interests and history of activity. For instance, one parent indicated that whilst her children rode their bikes frequently, other possibilities did exist:

... but also there is an old set of golf clubs that they [previous owners] left there and they just go out and hit a ball around. Patrick is one of those kids that has to have a bat and ball in his hands so he will have a tennis racquet or a cricket bat or something like that. (square parentheses added)

Children were left very much to their own devices, opportunities for formal instruction even in the form of paid coaching were limited:

Researcher: And how does he go on? I mean does he throw it up and hit it himself or...

Parent: Yeah... he has had a little bit of tennis coaching we drove him into Augethella a couple of times and we access coaches wherever we can when we can get to them but they are just not often enough ... he just has a bit of natural ability with tennis and he has always had an eye for a ball.

While linking a healthy lifestyle with greater opportunity that rural children have to go outdoors in comparison with their urban counterparts, one parent wanted to also point out that being able to go outdoors did not in and of itself confer learning:

... I mean we can say that our kids have got a healthier lifestyle ... but that is because this is where we are - we are not in that situation where you can't send them outside to play in the yard because you don't have a yard or the yard may not be safe for them to play in, where we can say play outside and it can be the house yard or it can be within the house compound and the house paddock ... they have a much larger area whereas children in the cities or in town are a bit more restricted ... to say it's healthier, we think that yes it is but it may not necessarily be... it depends on the work that we put into it.

Work as physical activity

There was a picture of work that emerged that perhaps dispelled the socially constructed image of the rugged, pioneer farming family where all contributed to the family exchequer through a series of chores or tasks. The activities were described by most parents as neither exhaustive nor extensive and were generally associated with keeping rooms tidy, making beds and tasks like taking the rubbish out. For instance as one parent said, 'looking after animals is better than watching the TV but it's not vigorous'. Some older children did help with livestock mustering once they could ride a horse but examples of this were not common especially as much of the mustering work described is now done on motorcycles. One parent suggested that the children wouldn't do heavy work and nor should they be expected to. There was consensus however, that chores did represent an *active* feature of the children's lives and even though such activity was not of a strenuous nature it did keep them engaged for part of the day.

Formal instruction, coaching and sport: A tale of sacrifice.

The parents certainly perceived their children as having far fewer opportunities to pursue any structured forms of physical activity when compared with urban children. There were stories, for instance, of parents (again usually mothers) driving two hours each way for their children to be involved in the activities such as ballet or a cricket coaching session.

It was apparent that there is a great divide in the sporting opportunities available for urban children and those from rurally isolated communities. Earlier we indicated that there was in these parents, a great lack of the confidence to

deliver a formal curriculum in physical education. Indeed one went further to suggest that she "didn't have a clue". When fathers were able to spare time away from the farm duties they would become involved by trying to teach sports in which they had once participated but were now a distant memory in terms of how to 'perform' them. Hence the instruction they provided depended on memory. This itself was a problem in that it included a narrow range of activities most usually one of the football codes popular in Australia or cricket. To get around this, parents would invest where possible in outside expertise. This invariably meant going to the nearest town. So stories of making a 400 kilometre plus round trip for a 45-minute ballet lesson or tennis lesson were not uncommon. Similarly, in the summer breaks, mothers were prepared to take the children to the nearest large regional town for swimming camps and other sports clinics. The financial investment to service this is substantial requiring fuel costs (for a 1000 kilometre plus round trip), the cost of accommodation, the cost of food and the cost of the clinic itself. Even this had its shortcomings. Many of the parents described how they would take every opportunity available for professional coaching in as many sporting areas as became available. However, this did not solve the fundamental problem that these isolated families faced and that was the social involvement with other people that sporting activities provide. As one parent talking about her son said "... he has never had a game of cricket other than with the rest of us but he would dearly love to ... he has had tennis coaching and he will definitely do that again...". The mothers in the focus group supported this with similar comments. They indicated that they were more than prepared to make such a sacrifice and take children to local towns for sporting opportunities and coaching clinics. However, given the tyranny of distance, such clinics would be few and far between, were often narrow in scope and the general lack of expertise in these regions meant there was lots of repetition. In other words, the same clinic was repeated several times with little opportunity for development. This was a thinly veiled expression of disappointment about the lack of commitment sporting agencies showed to isolated families and it certainly strengthens the case of discriminatory treatment that these parents perceive exists.

Stings in the tale: Acts of contrition, false images, economic hardship and hoping for the best

Like most research we have here an incomplete story. Whilst parents' views about their children's participation in physical activity was the focus of the research, we were also interested in the level of participation of the parents themselves given that much of the literature related to children's involvement in physical activity is related to parental involvement. It was here that acts of contrition and false images emerged. The women we spoke to, to a person, expressed guilt that they were not more active, or that they had 'put on a bit of weight' or needed to 'tone up a bit' or perhaps worse still some disclosed a fundamental guilt in having let themselves 'go a bit'. Whilst it cannot be clear what this means precisely, these women in remote areas of Australia seem to be internalising the contemporary notions of femininity and the female body promulgated by the print and electronic media. While they link their children's health with physical nourishment and social and emotional well-being in ways that are specific to the conditions of remote living, their judgements of their own health were in terms of body shape and appearance with the attendant guilt of not measuring up (see Bordo, 1990). In this research, such indications only emerged as tangential to our central concerns. The women's low levels of satisfaction with their bodies and their feelings of having no control over their body shape because of busy, often stressful lives are however rural health issues and merit further inquiry.

A further false image came into sharper focus when we spoke at length to the School of Distance Education staff particularly the administrators. Again they reshaped the romantic image of the rugged farmer riding boundary fences, effecting repairs, rescuing lost sheep and cattle and so on. The dour but realistic image was one of a sedentary farmer confined to the cab of a tractor for hours on end who was economically hard pressed, invariably highly stressed and with a good chance of cardio-vascular problems. Moreover, suicide, injury, increasing workloads brought about by the lack of financial resources to hire help dispelled the myth of the rugged individual winning the challenge of the land. It was apparent that there were serious health concerns related to living in isolated rural communities in the primary industries sector. However, the unintended concealment of these broad-based problems, in this research at least, again underpinned the resilience and perhaps time honoured stoicism of such communities. It is perhaps typical of this section of Australian society which would see itself as a 'can do' community, no matter what the hardship.

Concluding thoughts: Running on faith

In spite of such difficulties, there was a view, even optimism, that these people would endure and that their children would lead happy, content and healthy lives. The parents' view was that during the primary years of schooling they do their best to prepare their children for high school and that their children will probably be 'OK'. Some mothers knew that their children would find a niche at high school in which physical activity would be part of their lives, others were not so confident and saw the transition to high school as something of a leap of faith. In the absence of any meaningful data in this regard, we believe such a research agenda should be established and work by Baills and Rossi (2001) has begun to address this.

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