Examination of the factors that contribute to rural adolescent girls’ participation in physical activity

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Introduction

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity published a report that indicated there is a drop in the level and amount of physical activity accomplished by girls in grades six to eight (Brunette et al., 2016). The benefits of physical activity (PA) are well-documented and include reduced risk of depression, type 2 diabetes, and obesity. Despite the positive effects of PA, most children do not get enough. Furthermore, as children age their activity levels tend to decrease. Compared to boys, girls engage in less PA at every age. Because habits of PA throughout childhood impact lifelong participation, creating interventions that result in an increase in PA for girls is critical for the health of the population. Factors that could influence participation in PA include body shame, geographic location, negative associations with sport affecting perceptions of PA, financial resources, and time. There is a gap in research regarding Canadian rural girls in grades six through eight and what they think about PA. Thus, this research employs a methodology of focus groups.

Physical activity levels of girls in rural Alberta are low and declining; it is critical that interventions be created based on how girls perceive PA and sport. I critically examined the discourses about PA and sport generated by girls using feminist poststructuralism – furthering the understanding of the role gender plays in how girls see themselves with respect to their involvement in PA and sport.

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review is a condensed account of the components involved in grade six to eight girls’ participation in physical activity (PA). It begins with an examination of girls’ PA levels and a comparison to boys in the same age groups. The review continues with suggested reasons for the observed PA levels – focusing on body shame, rural or urban location, girls’ understanding of sport and PA, and other common barriers. Next, focus group methodology is explored as a means to gather evidence about PA levels in rural girls in grades six to eight. Lastly, this review examines feminist theory and how it can be used to understand girls’ perceptions of themselves, their understanding of PA, and their participation in sport and PA.

Levels of Physical Activity

Children’s PA is lower than the recommended level at all age levels and decreases over time, which correlates with an increase in the number of children who are overweight or obese across the globe (Colley et al., 2011; Cosoveanu & Bulucea, 2011; Trost et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2005). Boys are more active than girls in all age groups (Colley et al., 2011; Crespo et al., 2013; Crocker, Eklund, & Kowalski, 2000; Trost et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2005). A small amount of research has suggested pubertal development may contribute to the varying levels, but this does not entirely account for differences (Davison, Werder, Trost, Baker, and Birch, 2007; Sherar, Esliger, Baxter-Jones, and Tremblay, 2007). It also fails to recognize the differing motivations and barriers boys and girls experience (Crocker et al, 2000).

Suggested Reasons for Decreased Levels of Physical Activity

There are many possible factors that contribute to a person’s participation in PA including body shame (and its components), geographic location, the conflation of PA with sport, and finances. Body shame could contribute to a girl’s participation in PA and sport and is influenced by many factors including self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-perception, and objectification – I will go through each. Literature indicates that poor self-esteem (the feeling individuals have of themselves) is associated with lower PA participation (Kololo, Guszkowska, Mazur, & Dzielska, 2012; van Daalen, 2005). Similarly, poor self-efficacy (a person’s belief in their ability to
accomplish a task) makes it less likely that a person will try a new activity and less likely they will succeed at it (Kololo et al., 2012). Women tend to have lower self-efficacy than men (John & Ebbeck, 2008). Physical self-perception (how one views their own body) also affects PA levels. Negative self-perception contributes to poor self-esteem and subsequent body shame (Crocker et al., 2000). The weight gain associated with female puberty may contribute to negative self-perception (Davison et al., 2007). Lastly, objectification may play a role in girls’ participation in PA – with girls experiencing more self-objectification and subsequent body shame than boys (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007; John & Ebbeck, 2008; Lindberg, Hyde, & McKinley, 2006; McKenney & Bigler, 2016; Slater & Tiggemann 2010a). Self-objectification is the internalization of the perspective of an observer (‘the gaze’) and subsequent self-surveillance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2011). Self-objectification could produce body shame and contribute to avoidance of PA, especially during maturation when weight-gain is relevant (Bailey, Lamarche, Gammage, & Sullivan, 2016; Grabe et al., 2007; McKenney & Bigler, 2016; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Slater & Tiggemann, 2012).

Few Canadian studies have examined geography’s role in PA levels. There appears to be no difference in PA levels between rural and urban youth regardless of gender but the barriers may be different between groups (Plotnikoff, Bercovitz, & Loucaides, 2004; Loucaides, Plotnikoff, & Bercovitz, 2007). There are also differences in the factors based on country, suggesting that Canadian data is necessary (Machado-Rodrigues et al., 2014; Moore, Beets, Morris, & Kolbe, 2014). Season may also play a role (Loucaides, Chedzoyl, & Bennett, 2004).

The conflation of PA with sport may also play a role. Girls may prefer the social aspects of PA and/or sport and girls may resist socialization into sport because of the competition (Lenskyj, 1994; Lenskyj, 1995). Other studies have echoed this (Alina Anca & Sabina, 2005; Casey, Eime, Payne, Harvey, 2009; Crocker et al., 2000; Pate et al., 2010; van Daalen, 2005). No studies have differentiated between sport and PA. Physical activity is any bodily movement that requires energy, while sport is a subcategory of PA differentiated by its “structured competitive situations” (Livinstone et al., 2003, p. 681). Given that sport is competitive, girls may avoid it. However, lack of interest in sport does not necessitate avoidance of all PA. Problematically, it appears that girls’ level of PA (including sport) declines without differentiation between sport and PA. There exists a gap in knowledge regarding whether girls understand the difference between sport (and its associated competitive characteristic) and PA.

Other factors to consider include personal considerations, school and community resources, parental involvement, and social interaction (Gavin et al., 2016). Other studies have examined finances and their associated barriers like time constraints and scheduling demands (Duncan, Strycker, & Chaumeton, 2015; Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011; Jodkowski, Mazur, & Oblacińska, 2015; Reichert, Barros, Domingues, & Hallal, 2007; Vermeesch et al., 2015). It is clear that barriers are not isolated. Many barriers interact with and exacerbate one another, making the total barriers experienced far more challenging than each individually.

Focus groups

Focus groups are useful in social science research (Montell, 1999) and are inherently feminist. Unlike interviews, focus groups produce a “happening” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). A happening is a conversation that, although focused by the researcher, remains dynamic and narrative of cultural discourses. Focus groups allow for cross-talk, which dissipates hierarchies (Kitzinger, 1994). Regardless of how ‘accurate’ a participant’s reporting of their experience is, their perception of their experience is still valid and admissible as data (Montell, 1999). Focus groups are also useful in adolescent populations (Kennedy, Kools, & Krueger, 2001). There are
Theoretical Framework: Feminist Poststructuralism

Members of society, or subjects, are disciplined into and out of beliefs and behaviours based on what is deemed acceptable and valuable (Wooldridge, 2015). As such, understandings of sport can be critically examined through feminist poststructural perspectives. Luke (2011) explains that women lost their voice “because of a long period of time during which words to describe women, girls and their expressions were hidden or ‘included’ in words like ‘he,’ and ‘man’” (n.p.). The absence of women from language affects how they see themselves and the world. Furthermore, societal expectations of femininity, which are closely tied to expectations of females, influence how women navigate the world.

Young (2005) explains that “…a person’s subjectivity is conditioned by sociocultural facts and the behaviour and expectation of others in ways that she has not chosen. At the same time… each person takes up and acts in relation to these unchosen facts in her own way” (p. 18). Sport has been constructed as a masculine domain where women are imposters. For a woman to engage in PA or sport either means she is not a real woman or the sport is not a real sport (Griffin, 1998). Women are created as “Other” in society and do not have access to certain spaces. Instead of using the body’s full spatial potentialities, girls tend to isolate movement to the minimum amount (Young, 1980). A feminist understanding of language and discourse as influential of girls’ choice is relevant and important to this study.

Methods

Upon approval from the Research Ethics Board of the University of Alberta, the superintendent of School Division No. 31 was contacted. The superintendent provided approval to contact schools regarding the study. Six principals of rural schools were contacted, five of whom responded and agreed to be part of the study. The principals selected girls in grades six to eight, having at least one girl from each grade in the focus group. The principals sent home consent and assent forms with the participants, which were signed by their parent or guardian. Consent and assent forms included a confidentiality agreement. Focus groups occurred between November 2016 and January 2017. Each focus group was audio recorded and had between four and six participants (n=28). Participants and researchers sat at desks in a circle. Participants were asked questions regarding their physical activity interests and the factors that affect their participation. The audio recording was transcribed; participants’ identities were anonymized. The transcripts were coded and the data was analyzed using feminist poststructuralism.

Data Analysis

Sports vs. Physical Activity

Despite initially establishing the difference between sport and physical activity (PA), the participants tended to answer questions in regard to sports rather than PA. The disproportionate discussion of sport over PA is indicative of the disproportionate importance our society places on sport. Sport is seen as purposive, and leads to achievement. An activity is considered useless if it is not competitive. Additionally, if it is not structured and organized, an activity is seen as less able to “build character” or discipline. Therefore, sport can be considered utilitarian, with clear productivity rather than ‘aimlessly’ engaging in PA.

Playing sports is associated with positive reception from peers. In one focus group, a participant expressed that she never did sports, unlike everyone else in the group, but did engage in walks with her family. However, when probed for more information she declined. For most of the focus group she remained silent, then, towards the end, she provided a vague account of
tryouts for sports. Her contribution seemed insincere and merely a means of fitting in with her peers.

*Like when you let your parents know that you have like tryouts or you have a game that day and then they forget about it and they like may-, and they have a family reunion or something and you didn’t know about it and you’re about to go to tryouts and they’re like “Okay, well we gotta go” and you’re like “Oh, I gotta miss my tryouts now or whatever.”* (4.739)

Another indication of sport being considered more valuable than PA are discussions around what is actually considered a sport. Dance was an activity of contention, with dancers often making massive attempts to declare dance a sport. The designation of “sport” gives an activity greater value. The language used to describe activities matters because it indicates what is important and what is not. Children understand that sport is a superior choice, and to have their activity categorized as sport brings praise from peers, parents, and society at large.

The only valuable PA is a structured one with a schedule, unlike self-directed PA. Instead of prioritizing other extra-curricular activities that could not be done on their own (like drama), they prioritize sport for its seeming benefits for health, which could actually be accomplished in free time outside of other extra-curricular activities. 

**Competition.** Many girls identified that sport and PA were different because sport was competitive. They generally considered competition to be enjoyable, though there were times when it was considered a deterrent. Given that competition is inherent in sport, and sport is considered more valuable than PA, competition is arguably a valuable component of sport that sets it apart from the less valuable PA. One girl cited competition as her “favourite part about sports” (2.925). Girls enjoy competing and winning, but if the activity is too rough or too competitive, they sometimes dislike it.

*Um, I don’t really like rough games like when you’re supposed to kind of be a little bit more rough.* (3.333)

**Challenge.** Being challenged was considered a requirement to enjoy a sport or stay interested. Those who did not feel challenged tended to seek out more challenging activities. The participants explained they enjoyed the challenge of their sport because it showed the capabilities of their bodies and it allowed for spectators to see that the participant had challenged themselves.

*That’s my favourite part about sports. Gives you a challenge and it shows what you can do, not just behind the scenes like you at home.* (2.925)

Being noticed was imperative to enjoying challenge. Being noticed for the effort the participants exerted ‘proved’ that the investment of resources was worth it. Conversely, not challenging oneself would mean that the resources required for the sport were being wasted.

**Being a “Good” Parent**

**Investment.** Parents want to be considered “good” parents. Given that sport is considered valuable, parents believe that to be a “good” parent they must have their children engage in sport. Furthermore, their children must be successful at the sport; this means working towards a goal that gains recognition, like the Olympics. The Olympics are a marker of ultimate sport success
and parents are willing to invest resources (time and money) in their children to see that goal obtained. For example, one girl explained that:

_We wanna get to the Olympics level so my parents are paying for it all (1.189)_

Parents invest resources in their children in the hopes of a return; successful children reflect well on them and mark them as “good” parents. Although there are barriers to playing sport, these are not great enough to deter parents from ensuring their children are involved in sport.

**Liberal feminist ideologies.** Girls consistently described their parents as supportive. Although parents are subject to the greater discourse around sport being important, some also identify with liberal feminist ideologies. It was clear that some parents were passionate about their daughters having the ‘same’ opportunities as boys. At no point, however, was there any indication that boys and girls *are* the same; each gender should still play separately. For example, one girl explained that her parents pushed her to do hockey like her brother:

_My parents have tried to convince me to [play hockey] because my brother does but I just don’t really have an interest in it. (3.281)_

**Money**

Participation in sport requires financial resources; conversely, PA can be free. Pressures to play sport come with financial strain. Children recognize the financial burden their sports place on their families but also recognize the value of sport. Although parents make efforts to keep their kids in sport despite financial strain, sometimes this is not possible. Girls spoke about this, often in a tone of disappointment or shame. One girl in grade six explained that:

_... I quit this year because, well, the economy sucks and we don’t have as much money anymore, even though I’m not supposed to worry about that ‘cause I’m a kid. (2.811)_

If the goal of sport was health and wellness, free PA would do this. Yet, at no point did a participant voluntarily emphasize their non-sport PA. The focus of every focus group was sport, not PA, regardless of question phrasing. Money was sometimes too great a barrier to play sports that had financial expenses. However, there were participants who explained that although their activities were expensive, the cost to compete in their sport was worth it.

**Time**

Time for the activities was a large constraint in girls’ ability to participate in sport. Being successful requires dedicated time. For example, even if a girl wants to play several sports or do extra-curricular activities, she is constrained because one sport monopolizes her time. One girl explained how she was unable to try other sports because she allocated so much time to dance:

_...because I have dance four times a week, I always want to try and join basketball or like badminton or volleyball every year but I can’t because sometimes I don’t want to let down the dance team (5.564)_

This was reiterated by a girl in another focus group who explained how commitment to sport can mean sacrificing other extra-curricular activities like drama.

Because society creates a discourse that valorizes ‘success’ in a sport, girls feel compelled to play one sport and devote all their time to it. If they participated in several sports or activities
they would be “letting someone down”, which is seen as a failure. Rather than diversifying their experiences, they specialize early in the hopes of later success, even if there is a larger discourse of doing it because it is “fun” and “healthy”.

Rural Facilities

Rural location was a barrier to sport, not PA. Many communities have skating rinks, walking trails, and other facilities. Also, many girls lived on farms and had large outdoor areas to play in. However, when asked about access to PA the girls discussed what sports were available or not. This was because of a lack of facilities or participants. Thus, those whose parents could afford (time and money) to take their children to larger municipalities did so. Those whose parents could not afford the time or cost of traveling relied on school sports, which were often limited.

Rural location was not an inherent barrier to being active, but because society emphasizes sport, girls (and their parents) feel required to play sports that may not be offered in their town. If that is not possible, they settle for school sports. Also, if girls want to try new physical activities or sports, they often cannot because their town does not offer them. For example, one girl said,

_I’ve always wanted to try lacrosse but Camrose doesn’t really have any teams._ (4.547)

Other girls expressed disappointment because their town did not have a swimming pool so to go swimming was not a viable option because it meant driving over 20 minutes. However, their parents were willing to drive for structured sports. Because sport has a ‘purpose’ and can be ‘measured’, parents are willing to drive for it. Going swimming with friends achieves the same objectives – being active and building relationships – as sport, but is not deemed as valuable and is therefore not prioritized. When parents, and society in general, invest their time into sports but not PA, it indicates to children that sport is worth more than PA.

Value of Gendered Sports

There appeared to be two streams of sports. Those that are more masculine, and those that emphasize femininity. Given that sport has been created as a masculine domain, only fully accessible to men, women who engage in sport are either not real women or the sport they play is not a real sport. Feminine sports that were discussed in the focus groups included gymnastics and dance. In one instance, there was a discussion of whether dance was considered a sport; those in the focus group agreed it was but there was mention that other people in the girls’ lives did not feel it was a sport. Dance has all the components of sport – it requires people to compete and use physical energy. Dance differs from other sports because of its aesthetic component. The aesthetic component enhances femininity and is used as an argument against sport status.

Conversely, some girls felt they could engage in sport and resist the discourse of femininity. They engaged in more masculine sports like basketball and rugby. Moreover, there were examples of these girls explicitly citing feminizing actions as something they avoided in sport.

_But a lot of girls that we played against, they worry too much about their make-up. Like you’re playing and you’re gonna like sweat it off. Kind of gross. Or they curl their hair before games and it’s like “Don’t do that”, it’s gonna get gross._ (5.671)

Make-up was considered incompatible with real sport. When some girls discussed make-up in a negative way and suggested it was not compatible with sport, girls who danced and wore make-up expressed that they did not actually like make-up.
One thing I don’t like about dance is all the make-up that you cake on your face. (5.683)

When the discussion around make-up became negative, the girls who wore make-up in their sport separated themselves from their actions in order to still be considered legitimate athletes by their peers. In relinquishing any identification with the process of feminization through make-up, they could share a common understanding with their peers in regard to make-up and sport.

In addition to expectations of girls, there were a few times where the girls made statements that suggested what boys should be or act like. In general, boys were seen as less invested in their sports. Additionally, boys should be big while girls should be thin. For example:

...my brother’s really wimpy, he is like all you can see is his bones so she, we get him to eat as much meat as he can and chips and pop but like not pop or whatever, just like things that’ll get, make you fatter or whatever ’cause he’s really skinny. (1.430)

The same girl mentioned that the reason her parents pay for her to be in gymnastics is because they want her to “…not get fat” (1.398). Although this was not a major theme in the focus groups, it is worth mentioning. Certainly, gender-related body expectations affect the girls and their perception of how they can or should behave, as well as how they believe boys should behave.

**Female Inferiority**

Although girls said they felt just as capable as boys, they cited times when they felt inferior. Young (1980) explained two reasons for girls not using their full capacities, including fear of inability and fear of getting hurt—both were described in the focus groups. Girls also described times where boys were explicitly created as superior, which they usually identified as unfair.

**Fear of inability.** Whether explicit or not, there were several instances when girls said they did not do certain activities because they physically could not do it. One explained that “It’s hard to play sports when you’re really short” (1.609). There is a certain body that is best for sports, which is created through a masculine athletic body discourse. Girls use the discourse of who is an athlete to measure if their body is adequate to perform an activity. If they are not big or strong enough then they are unable. However, most people do not have the ideal athletic body, yet they still play the sport. Given that this belief came from discourse, I suggest girls are also conditioned into thinking their body is useful for something else. If they are not ‘big enough’ for a certain sport, they may try another one in the hopes of ‘passing’ as an athlete in that one, or aligning with the greater discourse around it. Having a feminine figure may subject a girl to expectations of engaging in feminine activities and discipline them away from more masculine sports because their corporeality does not align with them. Girls may code this language as their body being unable to do the skill, and, if they never try it, will assume this to be truth.

**Fear of getting hurt.** In some cases, the girls mentioned that playing against boys who are rough or against girls who are “…built like bricks” (1.664) is scary and they do not want to play.

...you can actually see their [girls ]’ muscles...and then they just like, you’re scared to get the ball because then they’ll run after you and like throw you to the ground. (1.668)

Young (1980) explains that girls’ fear of getting hurt comes from their unique situation, which is “conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society” (p. 152). Girls and women have been conditioned to believe that their bodies are a “fragile encumbrance” (Young, 1980, p. 144), which can be easily hurt. Rather than fully relying on the capabilities of their
bodies, they question themselves and fail to give their full effort. Young (1980) goes on to explain that girls often decide a task is beyond them and so they only put in a partial effort, which results in a less than ideal result, thus fulfilling their own prophecy.

**Boys explicitly constructed as more capable.** Girls consistently identified when boys were treated differently than them and identified it as unfair. However, boys’ physical superiority is normalized. At one school, the girls said when they score in gym class it counts as double. This rule was implemented to encourage boys to include girls. However, it communicated to everyone that girls are incapable. Boys are ‘rewarded’ for including the girls and come to understand that the rule exists because girls must be inferior athletes.

*Uh, boys, sometimes like think they are better than girls at sports (3.711)*

The girls also receive messages of inferiority when teams are picked and girls are picked last. Some gym classes rely on picking teams using captains as opposed to random draw, which very clearly indicates who is valuable and who is not. Also, those who are picked last typically do not try *because* they were picked last. Being unwanted by the team damages the confidence to put an effort in, which would warrant an earlier selection the next time.

There were less overt indications of boys being considered better; these were discussed in ways that indicated that *someone else* could do an activity *but not me*. For example:

*I like skating but with hockey it just seems like it’d be a lot harder than skating... You have to go a lot faster and if you fall then everybody notices... If you fall when you’re just skating then someone will come and help you but it won’t depend, like... winning the game. (3.289)*

This girl explained that other people can play hockey, but not *herself*. Her ability to skate is irrelevant to hockey – *just* skating is easy, but once skating is part of an activity associated with performance and scoring like hockey, it is too much. Moreover, hockey is a masculine sport, which may influence the girl to feel less capable. Because women are perceived as imposters in sport, she may feel that if she plays she needs to be perfect to ‘prove’ her value.

**Recognition and Being Noticed**

Sport includes recognition for achievement including medals and award ceremonies. Being noticed for an accomplishment is critical for it to be considered valuable. Sport is entwined with the idea of winning and being noticed. Furthermore, sport success reflects well on the parents. Without recognition, sporting achievement would be worthless; personal achievement and success, even if it makes you ‘feel good’, is not enough. Need for success and requirement of recognition was ubiquitous in the focus groups.

*Then afterwards they have these like third, second, and first. So, then you stand on those [podiums] and you have your medals and like you get a certificate and stuff like that, it’s really fun. (1.200)*

Although being noticed and winning is coded as “fun”, it is more than that. Satisfaction is not gained through personal achievements, but instead through others noticing. There is no clear motivation to engage in an activity that has no goal or recognition. Sport in a public setting is important because it “shows what you can do” (2.925) and is not “behind the scenes” (2.926).
Social Component
The social component of sport was important for participation. Many participants, however, suggested they would still play their sport if their friends were not there, it would just be less fun. This indicates that even if personal relationships are important, the sport itself is more important, or at least it is important to say it is. Lenskyj (1994) suggested that girls find the social side of sport the most appealing component and that for girls to try new activities they need to be in a supportive environment with friends. This sentiment was echoed in the focus groups:

I would want someone with me because... if you were just learning and you were really terrible at it then you’d have someone there to encourage you. (3.609)

When trying new activities, girls need a positive, non-judgmental environment. Girls have been conditioned to believe that they must be excellent at an activity if they are to be seen doing it. Only trusted people are permitted to see them try and potentially fail.

Autonomy
Having choice in activities was essential for enjoying an activity. One girl explained that the reason she did not like basketball was because she was forced to play it:

I definitely didn’t wanna play on the team but the coaches made me play... so my parents and the coaches basically made me even though I really didn’t like it. So that’s why I don’t really like playing other sports. Well, other than gymnastics, especially basketball. (1.634)

Although having choice was indicated as an important component of enjoying an activity, true ‘choice’ was not necessarily present for the sports or activities the girls enjoyed. Discourse around autonomy creates a belief that any choice is autonomous. If a girl “chooses” to do dance or gymnastics, she is truly doing it out of her own free will according to discourse. However, if a girl’s “choice” is considered in the context of the greater expectations of girls and femininity, the “choice” to engage in feminine sports is questionable. Likewise, the “choice” to play more masculine sports often comes in a discourse of being unlike other girls.

Expression and Freedom
Girls discussed the enjoyment of being alone and having time to think while doing PA. The expectations and stresses that everyday life places on the girls, especially as a result of their subjectivities and lack of power, influences them to seek peace. They can shed some of their subjectivities through PA, if even for only a brief time. For example, one girl said:

It’s like an escape from the real world. (1.161)

For her, the real world involves power relations that she cannot control. Physical activity acts as an escape and allows her to experience her body. Sport and PA act as a break from their reality and subjectivities. So, although they may be conditioned to engage in certain activities, they still find enjoyment and satisfaction from them.

Bad Experience
One of the largest contributors to quitting an activity or sport was having a bad experience. Whether this was a result of a coach or peer, those who experienced a negative event tended to stop playing. “Mean” coaches influenced girls’ choices to quit participation. The structure of sport typically requires the presence of a coach, who is given power through discourse. Coaches
are older than the girls, which offers power strictly because of age, and they are also given the title of coach. “Coach” is given value in our society and as such holds a high level of influence on those around them. Consequently, what coaches say and how they behave contributes greatly to what kids perceive as acceptable and valuable.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Given that sport is considered more valuable than PA, an issue arises when organized minor sports or school sports are no longer available. When a girl is cut from a team (or a team dissolves) or she is too old to play minor sports, there is a lack of PA options from her perspective. This is not because other activities do not exist. Because sport is more valuable, children devote their time to one activity, which means they never experience other activities they may enjoy for life rather than the finite time they are eligible to play organized sport. Most adolescents will not participate in varsity sports or play professionally, so emphasis should be placed on exposing young girls to a variety of activities that they can participate in for a lifetime.

Parents, although supportive of health, encourage competitive sport and recognition. Girls, too, are motivated by being recognized. Unfortunately, having to perform perfectly in public is not conducive for trying new activities. Girls face a barrier in trying new activities because of their fear of failure. Consequently, they do not try new activities. Parents can be active agents in exposing their children to new activities and emphasizing the importance of supportive environments. They can encourage their children to do activities with supportive friends.

Given that parents are subject to discourses that encourage them to enroll their children in sport, options other than sport need to be made more accessible. Rural communities can work to provide activities other than those provided by schools and minor sports associations. For example, organizing a day camp that exposes girls to many activities could enhance awareness among girls about the variety of PA. These programs could emphasize participation and the importance of trying for the sake of trying. Additionally, for those families who experience greater financial burdens, communities can work to create subsidization programs with community organizations to allow low-income youth to participate in these PA camps. Communities can also ensure that there are programs throughout the year. School sports are typically less expensive than minor sports association costs, so girls from low-income families who rely on school sports may struggle to participate in activity in the summer months. Conversely, if the only activities available during the winter are school sports and girls are not interested in those, they may participate in no PA whatsoever. So, if communities organized other options, PA participation among rural adolescent girls may increase.

In regard to schools, physical education teachers can improve the gendered discourses that may permeate their classes. Abolishing double-scoring would be a positive step towards gender equality. Instead of rewarding boys for passing to girls, emphasis should be on inclusivity in general, rather than making it a commodity. Additionally, physical education classes can emphasize non-sport activities. Sport can be a vocation that girls learn in physical education class, but it is important that they engage in a variety of activities. Lastly, schools can emphasize lifelong participation in PA. Engaging in school-wide PA days (like a Terry Fox Fun Run) are beneficial, but it is important to avoid declaring winners.

Overall, it is important to increase girls’ exposure to many activities as well as making the activities accessible to girls from low-income families. These activities need to emphasize participation and prioritize inclusivity while minimizing competition and performance. It is evident that girls enjoy being physically active. If the barriers to being physically active can be removed, it is more likely they will be active for a lifetime.
References


