The Impact of Physical and Health Education Classes on Academic Performance

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As school systems face budget cuts and curriculum reforms, many electives are some of the first classes to be eliminated. Although health and physical education may not have been the favorite classes in school, they hold a lot of influence over our day to day actions. One example of this might be as simple as the importance of washing hands, another might be learning the right way to set a volleyball. These examples show an obvious connection between basic concepts we learn in school and how to then apply them to our adult lives but there are also less obvious but still direct ways in which health and physical education courses can help us to improve. Health and physical education courses in primary school not only enhance academic progress in students but also expose them to a different style of academic writing, which allows them to be more comprehensive and versatile as they progress into higher level learning.

**The Relationship Between Health and Physical Education and Academic Success**

The relationship between mentality and physique may seem like a strange one, but studies have shown that being physically active can have a positive impact on academic performance. For this study, I have chosen three articles that support the argument that physical health has a positive impact on academic performance. Each study took a sample of children and worked to implement a simple health and physical education class into the current school system. The researchers then looked at the before and after results of their curriculum on the students’ academic progress. In addition, I conducted an interview with a professor who had received his PhD in biomechanics about whether or not he believed that health and physical education classes were important in school systems. In the interview, the professor replied that while he believed these courses should be kept in schools, how school systems go about teaching them should be different (Personal communication, March 30th, 2016). By then combining the results and opinions of my sources I was able to support my claim that increased physical activity during the school day does not hinder, but rather enhances academics and in addition, creates a better overall well-being.

**The Results of CHILDSPlay, Knowledge in Action, and Project SPARK**

In an article titled “Physical Education and Literacy- The Odd Couple or a Match Made in Heaven?” author Sarah Daggett explains the importance of combining literacy with physical activity in order to create what she refers to as physical literacy. Essentially, physical literacy is the ability for an individual to use their body as a means of communication as well as their ability to be able to read and therefore react appropriately to their environment(Daggett, 2016, p. 3). The result was a program known as CHILDSPlay which stands for Character, Health-Related Fitness, Intelligence, Lifestyle, Development, and Skilled Play. Presented in a five column spread sheet, CHILDSPlay is a quick, general goal based curriculum for teachers to use with students who range anywhere between kindergarten to seniors in high school. At the end of her article Daggett defines the relationship between the two by saying, “in an academic class you are taught a lesson and then given a test…[i]n a physical education class you are often given a test that teaches you a lesson” (2016, p. 8). The complimentary relationship between academics and physical activity shows how the two relate to one another and impact each other in a positive way.

Like Dagget, author Michael Hodges began to notice that children were becoming increasingly ignorant to health-related fitness knowledge (HRFK). This concerned Hodges because HRFK has been shown to impact decision-making skills especially in adolescents. In an attempt to reverse this trend, the program Knowledge in Action (KIA) was developed which “is a series of student-centered fitness lessons that enhance all five components of fitness and teach HRFK in a short segment of the physical education class period” which makes it an easy way for teachers to integrate physical education into their daily curriculum (Hodges, 2015, p. 4). The lesson took on average approximately ten minutes a day and was in line with the National Standards. A before and after of the results found that after KIA not only had students’ scores on their health-related fitness tests increased by 20% but the students were also able to maintain high levels of daily physical activity afterwards (Hodges, 2015). Again we see a fairly simple lesson plan that does not detract time away from the regular academic curriculum but greatly impacts overall academic performance.

A similar study known as Project SPARK looked at the effects of health and physical education courses on standardized test scores. The project looked at 759 children over two years and divided them randomly into three treatments. The first treatment brought in specialists to teach a sports, play, and active recreation curriculum, the second used the same curriculum but had teachers rather than specialists, and the third treatment was the control group that used the same curriculum and staff as from before. The results found that even though the first two treatments devoted twice the amount of time to physical education classes, they did not have a negative impact on academic progress, in fact, they had a positive effect and the children’s test scores actually increased from their baseline (S, Sallis et al.,1999). The standardized tests that the children were given covered language and reading. Both groups that spent additional time on physical activity increased in both these areas, showing another positive association between health and physical education classes and the academic success of students.

**Combining the Results of Each Study**

All three of the aforementioned studies show how health and physical education classes can impact not only physical well-being but academic performance as well. Project SPARK looked at the effects of physical education courses on language and reading specifically, showing that physical activity does in fact improve comprehensive abilities in children. An important aspect of these studies to note is that they were all conducted using children and adolescents. Although they are a long way away from higher level learning, teaching children healthy habits early on will encourage them to maintain them well into their adult years which will impact how they perform in a higher level education setting. While in Project SPARK we looked at standardized language and reading tests, CHILDSPlay introduced a new type of communication, physical literacy. Physical literacy allows for individuals to express their thoughts and feelings in a non-traditional way, making them more versatile in the way in which they are able to interact with others. The results from the study CHILDSPlay suggests that physical activity may go beyond improving only academic performance and may also enhance an individual’s socialness and help them react better to their environment.

**How Health and Physical Education Relates to Writing**

In her chapter “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum” author Lucille McCarthy follows a college junior as he navigates the different writing expectations and guidelines set forth by each of his professors. In the beginning McCarthy defines successful students as “those who can, in their interactions with teachers during the semester, determine what constitutes appropriate texts in each classroom…they can produce such a text” (1987, p. 232). In her study, McCarthy believed that each assignment given, whether it be from a math, science, or English class, were all similar in the way a student could respond to them. The biggest obstacle her subject faced was how to see the similarities between each course and then apply that knowledge to his assignments. Based off of results shown through studies like CHILDSPlay, Project SPARK, and KIA, health and physical education classes provide the foundation that will later allow students to be successful in interpreting what it is that their teachers expect of them. Even adding as little as ten minutes of physical activity a day to a student’s routine could impact their academic performance substantially and therefore prepare them for success later on by giving them a head start.

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