



Re-visioning what it means to be active

Kirsten Petrie interviews Joel Devcich¹

The importance of being active for one's 'health' is a constant mantra in today's society yet we know precious little about what physical activity means and looks like for primary school aged children. Are narrow perceptions of physical activity as running and/or exercising shaping how children can see themselves as active and engaged in movement related experiences? In this interview we profile the work of one primary teacher who has been exploring ways of supporting his students to think about activity and movement in diverse ways.

Interviewer - So Joel what made you think about broadening ideas about being active?

During the last two years I have been involved in a research project (A TLRI project - Everybody Counts) that has challenged me to think about how my students view what being active is. I also have a student in my class who is in a wheelchair for most of the day and I have continued to struggle with how best to meet his needs through the school and class Physical Education (PE) programme.

As the project has progressed I have questioned how the traditional, structured, sport and fitness based activity represented in our PE programmes have stopped my kids from feeling capable and competent as movers and how we might think about teaching and learning in HPE in primary schools in ways that are more inclusive of diverse bodies, motor abilities, interests and cultures.

Interviewer - So how did you go about shifting some of their thinking?

I had some key strategies. They included planning deep questions that would get students thinking; designing some tools (e.g. graphic organisers) that gave them the opportunity to record some of their thinking and feelings; and considering how I would do this in ways that meant that the next step was based on what was coming from them, as opposed to me trying to predetermine the 'correct' answers.

So I started by asking the students, "what does it mean to be active?"

We discussed together what they thought being active meant. Then we challenged our perceptions and broadened understandings through the use of graphic organisers to promote thinking. For example "what does being active look like? Feel like? For you? For others? Babies, elderly, at home, on the weekend, with friends and with family?."

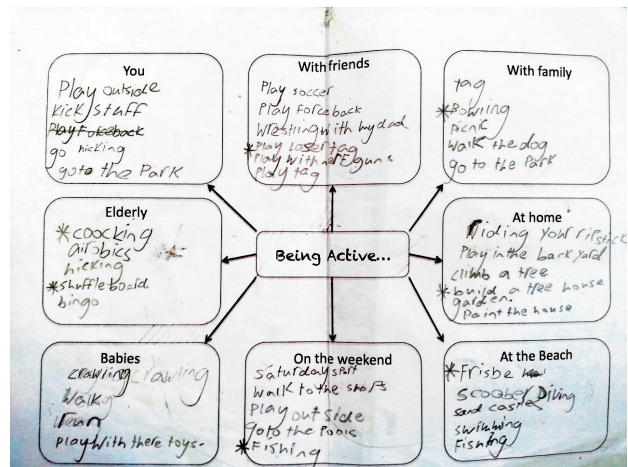
Through this the kids were able to recognise the diverse ways that different people are active. We also used an art activity where students were asked to think about the ways that people are active and find pictures showing different kinds of people being active. When they used the pictures to create a collage, this further confirmed the wide scope of what being active looked like for all members of our community.

From here we thought about the different activities that "I" really enjoy? I gave students opportunities to share and note down the activities they really enjoy. They honestly expressed that they didn't like some of the more traditional activities (such as running or T-Ball) but had other activities that they enjoyed (e.g. fishing, dancing, singing, crawling, playing shuffleboard, surfing, Laser Tag). This generated some discussion and sharing amongst the class as they realised there are many different ways that people can be active, rather than the traditional mindset that sports and running is the sum total of being active, and that their 'friends' do a really wide range of stuff. This process also supported the student in a wheelchair to recognise that he could be active in a range of ways, such as cooking, quad-biking, and swimming. My kids were able to identify that there are many different reasons that people are active, and that there wasn't one activity that was more important than another activity.

Interviewer - So why do you think it was important for the students to recognise this?

I think it helped them to realise that they could all be active in different ways and that just because they weren't good at 'sports and running' this didn't mean they were inactive. It seemed to take away some of the anxiety associated with not being 'good enough' to do stuff.

So then I was able to ask them "what skills do you need to participate in, activities you want to do (now or when you are older)?" Using the list they had already generated of what they enjoyed and wanted to do, we explored what different skills these activities involved. Not surprisingly, they could immediately list a whole range of movement skills such as jumping, kicking, and throwing. However, it took some sophisticated, guided questioning to get them to think about the people and thinking skills that they would also need to participate in a range of activities. We had an interesting discussion about what skills, 'thinking, people and movement' (TPM), were most important, without really coming to



a resolution. In so saying, the discussion in itself helped reinforce the importance of developing TPM skills as opposed to solely focussing on the physical. So for each activity they had listed they had to identify what movement, thinking and people skills were necessary.

Interviewer - So why thinking, people and movement (TPM) skills?

I wanted them to realise that participating and being active is more than just about being physically able. That to be a good participant you need to have good interpersonal skills and be able to think strategy, and technique. Also, I thought, maybe I hoped, that by doing it this way they would start to see how

skills cross over into many different activities, and that it's not about being able to play one sport, but having the TPM skills to participate in a range of activities.

Following this we, as a class, thought about what skills we needed to develop that would make us better participants in the widest range of activities and were most important for the class to be focusing on. The top ten were: Vision, Communication, Aiming, Accuracy, Honesty, Balance, Strategy, Cooperation, Dodging, and Defence.

Interviewer – So having developed this broader thinking, how did it shape your next steps?

What was both surprising and wonderful for me was that the process automatically shifted what they thought we should be doing in PE time, and it provided me with a clear focus of the learning needs and interests of my students. As a result I feel that what has been happening in my class this year for PE has truly been a student-centred programme – a programme that centres on the needs/interests of every-body rather than simply the bodies that can run fast, complete the beep test or excel at competitive sport.

(Endnotes)

'Joel is part of a research project Every-body counts? Understanding health and physical education in the primary school. This partnership has also involved Shane Keown (Knighton Normal School), Joanne Naera and Deirdre Duggan (Maungatapu Primary School), Kirsten Petrie and Marg Cosgriff (The University of Waikato) and Lisette Burrows (The University of Otago). This project was made possible with funding from the Teaching Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), the support of the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (The University of Waikato) and the generous support of school leadership teams, communities and the students. For more information on the project and access to future publications see <http://www.tlri.org.nz/tlri-research/research-progress/school-sector/every-body-counts-understanding-health-and-physical>, or contact Kirsten Petrie at kpetrie@waikato.ac.nz.