

RESEARCH AND LIBRARY
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BRIEFING NOTE 17/10

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY – ROLE OF EDUCATION

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1 Introduction

The following paper supplements the Northern Ireland Assembly research paper '*Barriers to sports and physical activity participation*' (29 January 2009), providing further information on education as a determinant of activity levels among adults.

2 Educational Attainment

Research suggests a correlation between educational attainment and levels of physical activity in adults. In certain cases this may be due to '*differences in problem-solving and coping capacity arising from educational experience, which in turn are likely to impact on self-efficacy for physical activity*'.ⁱ

Higher educational attainment may also result in:

- greater exposure to health messages and therefore greater awareness of the benefits of activity;
- greater exposure to a '*social network, sharing a similar hierarchy of values and set of social norms*'; and
- better general health, therefore improved capacity to be active;ⁱⁱ and
- greater access to resources that facilitate leisure time activity.ⁱⁱⁱ

With respect to the last of these factors, the emphasis on leisure-time activity is significant as '*some forms of physical activity, such as strenuous work-related activity, are known to be inversely related to education level*'.^{iv} In other words, those with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely to be employed in physically active work but less likely to engage in leisure-time activity. Conversely, those with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to be employed in less physically active work but more likely to engage in leisure-time activity.^v

3 Education as Socialisation

Socialisation refers to the processes by which individuals develop attitudes and behaviour throughout their lifetime.^{vi} Processes of socialisation occur throughout life, but are thought to be '*extremely important during childhood*'.^{vii} It is therefore thought that early experiences of sport and physical activity, whether positive or negative, affect an individual's level of activity throughout life. That is, active children are more likely to be active adults.

This can be seen in the experiences of women as outlined in a 2007 study by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation in which approximately a quarter of respondents reported that early experiences of physical education put them off sport in later life and that 26% of women were never encouraged to play sport.^{viii}

It should be noted however that experiences at school are only one of a myriad of factors influencing the behaviour and habits of young people. The family, for example, is another highly significant factor. As such, studies show that children of physically active parents (particularly physically active paternal figures) are more likely to be active in childhood and in later life.^{ix}

4 The Status of Physical Education

A 2002 study of physical education systems within the EU noted a number of factors which have had a negative affect on physical education provision and pupil experiences of PE.

- Sport and PE were in a state of neglect, with less time allocated to them in the timetable and the diversion of resources away from them towards other subject areas;
- PE/Sport were often afforded lower prestige than other subjects; and
- In most countries, PE curricula focussed almost exclusively on competitive sports, as such a curriculum based around physical activity and non-competitive sports were deemed to be 'unthinkable' in most regions.^x

The above results imply two things: firstly, that PE is viewed as less significant than academic studies throughout the EU and suffers from lower resource allocation as result; and secondly, the type of PE provision prevalent throughout the EU focuses on a very particular notion of physical activity, one which may lead to negative formative experience for some, putting them off sport/physical activity in later life.

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ⁱ Cerin et al. (2008) How socio-economic status contributes to participation in leisure-time physical activity, *Social Science and Medicine* 66: 2597

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Shaw et al. (2008) Examining the Association Between education level and physical activity changes during early old age, *Journal of Aging and Health*: 20(7) p3

^{iv} *Ibid* p2

^v *Ibid*

^{vi} The Family International *Socialisation* <http://www.thefamily.org/dossier/statements/socialisation.htm> (accessed 08/02/10)

^{vii} Yang et al (1996) Parents' physical activity, socioeconomic status and education as predictors of physical activity and sport among children and youths – a 12year follow-up study, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 31 p274

^{viii} Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, It's time – future forecasts or women's participation in sport and exercise

^{ix} Yang et al. (1996) Parents' physical activity, socioeconomic status and education as predictors of physical activity and sport among children and youths – a 12year follow-up study, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 31 p274

^x Hoye et al (2010) *Sport and policy issues and analysis* From Regulating Curriculum PE to Regulating Youth Sport p99-100