Educating the student body. Taking physical activity and physical education to school, written by Kohl, Harold W. and Cook, Heather D. [book review].

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I found this book a most enjoyable read. It said everything I believe about physical education’s role in public health, and it is all communicated in a clear, common sense, logical manner. Whilst the content is inevitably written from the perspective of the United States (given that it is authored by the U.S. Institute of Medicine), I consider that most of the messages and recommendations are transferable to the UK and Europe. I particularly liked the clear focus throughout the book on curriculum physical education as the central foundation for lifelong health, development and learning, sensibly recognising, nonetheless, that it cannot do all of this by itself and that a whole school approach to the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles is needed. I found the explanation of key terms throughout the book most useful in developing a shared understanding of key concepts. The book also helpfully includes a concise list of key messages at the beginning of each chapter and a succinct summary at the end. In addition, the book incorporates sensible recommendations, based on sound evidence, and usefully summarises these recommendations in the final chapter. I must admit to finding the book a little repetitive in places but I doubt that many readers will read it from beginning to end in one go, as I did; I suspect that most will focus in on particular chapters or sections, depending on their own particular interests and needs.

In terms of content, the book informs readers that, from a public health perspective, physical activity is central to health (beyond its role in addressing obesity) and that the global health burden of physical inactivity is almost as great as that of smoking and obesity. The prevalence of physical inactivity is described as close to a pandemic with, at most, about half of young people meeting the guideline of one hour a day of vigorous or moderate intensity physical activity; furthermore, there are substantial disparities in opportunities for and uptake of physical activity across different racial/ethnic or socioeconomic groups.

Evidence is presented that regular physical activity promotes growth and development and has multiple physical, mental, psychosocial and cognitive benefits that contribute to learning. Given this, the role of schools in promoting physical activity is seen as key, especially as schools reach and can influence nearly all children and, the earlier in life that physical activity is ingrained, the greater the impact will be on lifelong health. As schools are where children spend more than half of their waking hours on school days, they are clearly well placed to play a pivotal role in increasing pupils’ physical activity levels by providing access for all to quality physical education, along with physical activities throughout the school environment. The point is well made that a comprehensive physical activity plan with physical education at the core, supplemented by other varied opportunities for, and an environment supportive of, physical activity throughout the school day, can make an important contribution to children’s health and development, thereby enhancing their readiness to learn.
The U.S. Institute of Medicine states that physical education curricula should provide developmentally appropriate experiences that build the motor skills and self-efficacy needed to underlie lifelong participation in health-enhancing physical activity. The Institute also considers that curriculum physical education is the only subject that develops the knowledge, skills, and motivation to engage in health-enhancing physical activity for life, and that it often provides the only opportunity for all school-aged children to access health-enhancing physical activity. Given this, there is a strong call for physical education to be a core subject in the curriculum and this represents one of six key recommendations from the U.S. Institute of Medicine. Additional recommendations specific to curriculum physical education are that primary school pupils should spend 150 minutes and secondary pupils 225 minutes per week on physical education, and that pupils should spend at least 50% of physical education lesson time in vigorous or moderate intensity physical activity. Emphasis is placed on the fact that trained physical education specialists are uniquely qualified to deliver curriculum physical education and these individuals need to receive adequate and appropriate initial and ongoing professional development to be able to do this effectively.

The U.S. Institute of Medicine is clear that curriculum physical education cannot and should not be the sole source of the recommended daily amount of physical activity; efforts must go way beyond this. In addition to physical education, schools can and should offer pupils opportunities to engage in physical activity before, during and after the school day (e.g. classroom physical activity breaks; activity before and after school and during break times and lunch times; clubs and teams). Importantly though, it is emphasised that, while school-based physical activity should be used to support physical activity in the school environment, it should never be used as a replacement for curriculum physical education.

The book firmly advocates a whole-school approach to physical activity that fosters and provides access in the school environment to at least 60 minutes per day of vigorous or moderate intensity physical activity, more than half of which should be accomplished during regular school hours. Opportunities for physical activity should be cohesively designed to bring about a culture of active living, and education and public health agencies should monitor policies and behaviours pertaining to physical activity and physical education in the school setting.

Whilst there is recognition that not all children will or can opt to participate in the full spectrum of potential physical activity opportunities in schools due to a range of complex issues and barriers, the U.S. Institute of Medicine believes that much more can and needs to be done to leverage schools to help children meet the recommendation of at least one hour per day of physical activity. The quality of physical activity programming is also considered critical; psycho-social outcomes and improvements in physical competence, for example, are likely the result of programming designed specifically to target these outcomes rather than just a result of increases in physical activity per se.

The book culminates in the following six sound recommendations: a whole school approach to physical activity; considering physical activity in all school-related policy decisions; designating physical education as a core subject; monitoring physical education and opportunities for physical activity in schools; providing initial teacher training and professional development to enable teachers to embrace and promote physical activity across the curriculum; and ensuring equity in access to physical education and physical activity.
In conclusion, this book is very readable and well worth reading. I would recommend it to all practitioners and those who help develop and support practitioners. The book is clearly focused on the importance and uniqueness of physical education as the cornerstone of all physical activity promotion, hence the call for it to be a core subject in the curriculum. This aligns with the same recommendation made in a report commissioned by the Welsh Government in 2013 and which was endorsed by a cross-party Parliamentary Committee which considered that it should be replicated across the UK. It would be great if a similar book emanated from a comparable group in the UK. This would integrate well with the new Physical Activity Implementation Framework from Public Health England.

Finally, I would like to thank afPE for asking me to review this book. I thoroughly enjoyed the read and am in total agreement with the authors that schools’ and physical education’s role in promoting physical activity is currently undervalued and underplayed and firm preventative action is needed sooner rather than later to combat the worrying increase in sedentary behaviour amongst young people in the UK.

Dr Jo Harris
Loughborough University
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