

Reading for Reflection: how reading and critiquing a research paper can stimulate personal reflection

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I recently read the paper 'Physical Activity at Daycare: Issues, Challenges and Perspectives' (TACTYC's *Early Years Journal*, 30(2): 175-188). It raised quite a lot of questions for me – about how papers are selected for inclusion and about what happens when researchers from other fields, such as health, bring their view points to early years.

The title of this paper drew me in straight away. I'm interested in children's holistic development through movement and considerable part of my job is addressing a number of aspects of children's, and adults', physical activity in daycare settings. The national stereotype of the people of Canada – with its 738.5 million hectares of forest and woodland – is active and outdoorsy. I thought there might be a good deal I could learn.

So, I looked at the authors of the paper in more detail: Melissa van Zandvoort, Patricia Tucker, Jennifer D. Irwin and Shauna M. Burke. I noticed that all the writers have a background in public or preventative health and all have collaborated in different combinations to produce other pieces of research. Conclusions of their previous qualitative research include that:

- life coaching helps to reduce obesity in female undergraduates;
- greater understanding of neighbourhood recreational opportunities by 11-13 year olds and their parents leads to more physical activity by this age;
- town planners need to think more carefully about recreational space to encourage physical activity;
- the physical environment is a factor on children when they are travelling to school in an active or inactive way.

I also noticed that none of the writers is known for her experience in early years child development. Of the 47 references in the paper, 31 are from health related publications and 4 from early years or childhood related publications. I found this very interesting:

how would their perceptions and understanding of children's physical activity fit with wider understanding within the early years field?

The paper is an account of a qualitative study and the purpose of the study given is 'to gain an understanding of London, Ontario based childcare provider's perspectives on the barriers and facilitators to physical activity participation among pre-schoolers attending daycare' (p.175). In my opinion, what the paper actually presents is some unlinked pieces of data about childhood obesity and around practitioners' perceptions of young children's physical activity stitched together to justify the authors' pre-conceived outlook.

This is why I arrived at that opinion.

A number of assumptions are made at the start. The researchers express concern at worldwide and national rising obesity levels and assert that 'it is imperative that ways to increase the effectiveness of efforts to reduce and prevent childhood overweight and obesity... be identified' (p.175). They go on to talk about the health and other benefits of physical activity but from this point there is an assumption made that obesity levels can be reduced by ensuring young children take part in physical activity and they provide limited evidence to back this. The authors don't appear to include alternatives – like food consumption patterns or the way children travel to and from pre-school.

They state that 'the rising prevalence of overweight and obesity is a major public health concern' citing WHO statistics that 22 million under 5s are overweight or obese worldwide (2008). What are our own values and assumptions around statistics such as these – especially when we consider that worldwide, 148 million under 5s are underweight? (UNICEF, 2009).

The childcare providers, who I think in the UK we would call practitioners, work for one organization with 17 daycare setting (toddler and pre-school) across one city. The demographics of the participating practitioners appears roughly equivalent to that in daycare settings I'm familiar with in the UK: dominantly female, young, white, college educated), full time and inexperienced. The authors don't note the lack of inclusion of other kinds of child care or of other kinds of practitioners. Their conclusions are all

based on this small, possibly unrepresentative, group. I wonder, in the UK, what profile would represent early years practitioners when the field is so broad and varied?

The paper says that 56% of respondent said physical activity was important in their lives and 96% said physical activity was important for pre-schoolers. Almost half the respondents didn't think physical activity was important in their lives. With no definition provided for 'physical activity' this raises more questions than it answers: Is what Canadians call physical activity the same as in the UK? Did the researchers talk about aspects of physical activity like walking or cycling to work or just formal physical activities? As we are given no definition of physical play we are left with a workforce, almost half of whom don't value their own physical health but think others should be active. What implications does this have for a hidden curriculum or children's expectations of themselves?

90-96% of respondents were 'interested' or 'receptive' to 'innovative resources'. Again, a lack of definitions leaves us unclear about what this means. This could indicate a lack of understanding of child development. Practitioners appear to feel that extra, new or different resources are necessary to ensure children develop normally whereas my own practice has taught me quite the opposite. Informal discussions with early years practitioners I talk with regularly shows how wide the definition of 'physical play' is. When I asked which resources were best for good physical play the answers ranged from balls, and information on which games to play, to trees and slopes. So is it resources or attitudes that foster good physical activity most effectively?

Respondents defined physical play as taking place in 'Large Group' (indoor, communal, adult led) and 'Outdoor' (longevity dictated by State Act) times. There is no mention of any opportunities for physical play, or for building healthy attitudes to movement, outside of these times. Garrick (2009) defines attitudes to outdoor play as forming two 'distinct strands'. The organization involved in this research clearly descends from the 'playground or yard of the elementary school' strand which sees outdoor play as a break from other more structured activity. In most of our schools this strand appears to dominate. Is the same true of attitudes in early years or are they more influenced by the pedagogy of Froebel, MacMillan and Susan Isaacs?

The authors say that there is a 'large number and variety of outdoor activities: 'dance; ride bikes; pull each other in sleds; play soccer, hockey, tag, hopscotch; as well as games such as 'What's the time Mr Wolf?' There is an assumption by the authors that the number and variety of outdoor activities is large. Also, the physical activities the respondents list are all traditional, equipment based activities. The authors make no mention of this or of the other physical activities the children might be engaging in. Which physical activities do children initiate as part of their play that are not acceptable to the practitioners and consequently not identified by them as physical activities?

Additionally, the paper raises these questions for me:

1. Which children participate in 'Large Group' or 'Outdoor' activities? Are they the same? Are they the children that are sedentary in their other time at the settings?
2. Are the practitioners right in their views of the best ways to engage children in physical activities? My own experience is that there other models that might have more impact, such as looking at the environment as a whole, free flow play, and changing the practitioners views about play and physical activity.
3. Are particular activities inhibiting participation from boys or girls? What opportunities are boys/girls taking outside of the designated physical activity time?

For me, the biggest limitation of the paper is this: there is no understanding shown of children as complete beings. There appears to be an assumption that we, because we are adults, can do things to children to make them into better versions of themselves. Yet, researchers and writers such as Greenland (2000), Featherstone (2008), Blythe (2004), MacLean (2003) and Gill (2007) are showing us a picture of the child with an innate need and natural predisposition to move in order to develop in many ways and that given freedom and support children will seek out the movement opportunities they need. No-one can know all the learning that takes place in a particular activity, for a particular child at a particular time and structuring activities for only one purpose may have the effect of inhibiting children's holistic development with a possible consequent poor prognosis for their health in the long term.

Reading and reviewing the paper has made me think about my practice and question the activities I observe and support children doing. It has made me examine the training I do with practitioners in daycare settings. It has helped me question how I, and they, understand children and how adult preconceptions shape the experiences of children in their care. In conclusion, it seems very important that experienced practitioners in early years, like us, respect what we know and share our understanding with other disciplines in order that children benefit from our joined up thinking. I recommend that TACTYC members engage with each other through the stimulus of their journal to develop professional reflective practice and would be interested to know other members views on the questions I raise in the paper. How do you see physical activity developing through practitioners in settings in the UK? Do you have experience from another culture to lend to the debate?

Do you feel the same as Elizabeth about this article? What views would YOU find it useful to share professionally?

References

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