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Understanding the Perspectives of Teachers Who Engage in Regular Physical Activity and Subsequent Implications on Teacher Well-Being

Seleste Eftoda

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Research Coordinator
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation
2317 Arlington Avenue
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Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

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Researcher Background

As a Métis educator, I have worked in northern Saskatchewan in both the federal and provincial education systems. I have served as an educator for 18 years working as a classroom teacher and as a student support service teacher. My personal experience has been that engagement in physical activity has helped me to withstand the stressors of the profession. In addition to the stressors of an ever-demanding job, physical activity has helped me to heal from the daily effects of vicarious trauma where the exposure to traumatic experiences shared by the students results in emotional strain. As the researcher, I did not embark on this research journey with assumptions regarding the effects of physical activity on teachers rather with curiosity of the experiences of others. Teacher well-being is an area that I care deeply about and exploring the perspectives of teachers who engage in regular physical activity has the potential to provide deeper insights in the topic of teacher well-being.

Research Questions

What are the perspectives of teachers who engaged in regular physical activity in a rural school division in Canada on teacher well-being?

Supporting research questions were:

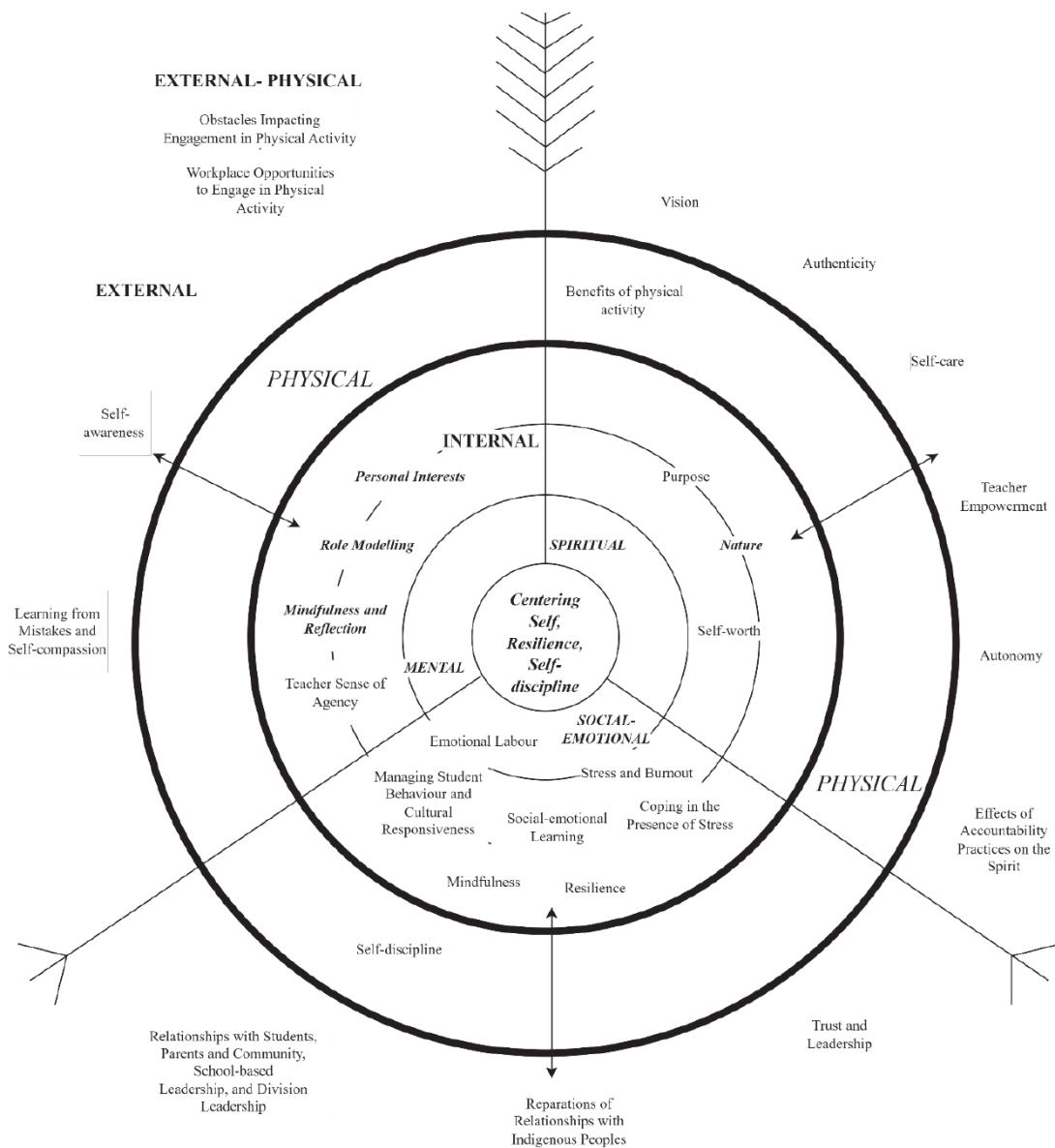
- What are the potential impacts of physical activity on the social-emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical domains?
- What external and internal factors influence one's intention and ability to develop the physical domain?

Methodology

Qualitative case study methodology grounded in a constructivist epistemology was used for the design of this research. Following an extensive literature review, eight teacher participants from a rural school division in Canada were asked to reflect on their engagement in physical activity in relation to the social-emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical domains. Teacher participants reflected on their engagement during semi-structured interviews, writing tasks, and word art. Additionally, the researcher examined school division documents relating to teacher well-being which offered insight into the environment in which these participants worked. The resulting data were analyzed using a four-stage coding process that involved categorizing, cleaning, and condensing codes until themes emerged from the data.

Conceptual Framework

The foundation of the conceptual framework was built on the holistic understanding of well-being and demonstrates the researcher's understanding based on the literature review and the perspectives shared by participants. The framework demonstrates that there are both external (the individual does not have control) and internal (the individual does have control) factors that affect the four domains of well-being: social-emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. It is evident within the framework that leadership has been shown to have a significant impact on teacher well-being as can be seen depicted in the external factors. Additionally, teachers have agency in their own well-being as the internal factors portray in the framework.



A significant change in this model, versus typical models of well-being, was that the physical domain moved its position to surround the other domains. The reason for this move was that the physical domain, when enacted, was viewed as a protective shield that protected the self from external factors. Additionally, physical activity fed positively into each domain, thereby enhancing the goals within the social-emotional, spiritual, and mental domains. Finally, the positioning was altered due to changing modern environments. In the past, physical activity was embedded in daily living. Improved technology in daily living has resulted in a need for a deliberate effort to add physical activity back into one's life.

It became evident in the perspectives shared by the participants that to foster one's well-being required centering the self, resilience, and executing self-discipline to remain committed to engaging in physical activity. Therefore, centering the self, resilience, and executing self-discipline were placed in the centre of the framework as participants shared that this was essential in supporting their engagement in physical activity.

Respecting the situated, cultural, and contextual components of one's life a snowflake image (dendrites at the ends of the intersecting lines) was used. The snowflake image represents the uniqueness as well as the fragility of one's well-being, which is dependent on the conditions of the environment. Relationships with Indigenous peoples was also viewed as essential to one's well-being and is represented in the framework as the feather at the top.

Linking the external to the internal are the intersecting lines. The concentric circles as well as the intersecting lines are what provide strength to the framework. Depending on the internal and external conditions the concentric circles can grow or shrink. Removing the physical domain would mean that the social-emotional, spiritual, and mental domains and therefore the self would no longer be shielded by the physical domain from external factors, thereby compromising one's well-being.

The body can be viewed as that which holds our being. This idea is supported by Levine (2012) who quoted a Sufi saying which stated, "The body is the shore on the ocean of being." The ocean represents the interior domains including the social-emotional, spiritual, and mental domains with the self at the center. Acting as the shore is the physical domain which breaks the swells, or the challenges, of life. Similarly, the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (2015) stated that the body is the vessel which holds one's spirit. It can be said that it is the physical domain, the body, that holds us.

The idea of the body supporting and protecting the other domains was a perspective shared by the participants. This is a powerful finding regarding teachers as well as others. One may consider adding the physical domain to protect the self from external factors as well as advancing the other domains including the social-emotional, spiritual, and mental (Eftoda, 2023).

Those are some long days and sometimes I can't even get in a 20-minute walk because you are on lunch supervision and then you go right to parent teacher interview and then by the time you get home you got to deal with your own kids.

– Participant

Findings

Mitigating the Challenges of the Profession

Participants centered the self and engaged in physical activity to heal, thereby enabling them to serve others. Engaging in physical activity required self-discipline and provided participants with a focus other than their role as teachers.

Positive Impacts on Relationships

Relationships with students were enhanced through a) engaging in physical activities with students, b) through positive role modelling, and c) because the teacher was able to be perceptive to the needs of their students. Relationships with friends were enhanced through engaging in physical activity with others. It also provided an opportunity for solitude and connection with nature.

Enhanced Professional Competencies

Participants reported an increased presence during interactions with students. Physical activity provided an opportunity for enhanced mindful self-reflection, improved mobility, energy, and helped with emotional regulation.

Systemic Barriers to Optimal Physical Activities

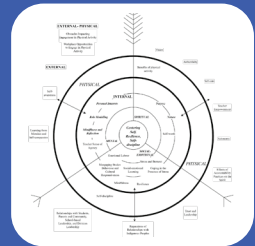
While divisions encouraged participants to take care of themselves, the demands of teaching did not decrease, therefore there was not an increase in access to engage in physical activity. To increase access, participants requested additional prep time, space to engage, an area for reflection, and an increase to counsellors for staff and students (Eftoda, 2023).

Understanding Perspectives of Teachers who Engage in Regular Physical Activity

A qualitative case study whereby the researcher sought to understand the perspectives of eight K-12 teachers in a rural school division in Canada.

Key Features of the Conceptual Framework

- Built on the holistic understanding of wellbeing (social-emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical)
- Both external (the individual does not have control --> role of leadership is depicted in external factors) and internal (the individual does have control)
- Physical activity is no longer embedded in daily living therefore had to be added back into one's life
- Centering the self, resilience, and executing self-discipline were required to remain committed to engaging in physical activity (center)
- Snowflake image represents the uniqueness as well as the fragility of one's wellbeing
- Relationships with Indigenous peoples was also viewed as essential and is represented in the framework as the feather at the top



Findings



These teachers found that physical activity:

- 1 Helped to mitigate the challenges of the profession
- 2 Had a positive impact on relationships
- 3 Enhanced professional competencies
- 4 Became challenging when systemic barriers impacted access

Reference

Eftoda, Seleste. (2020). Understanding Perspectives of Teachers who Engage in Regular Physical Activity and Implications on Teacher Wellbeing [Doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary]. <https://hdl.handle.net/1880/117164>

“Those are some long days and sometimes I can't even get in a 20-minute walk because you are on lunch supervision and then you go right to parent teacher interview and then by the time you get home you got to deal with your own kids.” --- Participant

Implications

- Teachers may benefit from adding physical activity into their daily routine
- School divisions and governments may consider ways in which teacher engagement in physical activity can be supported
- Student engagement may be enhanced through active role modelling of physical activity
- Promotion of physical activity may highlight the benefits for mental health rather than weight loss

“Where you are putting those demands on your body, [physical activity] is a huge release for that emotional side of things and it just helps me... to come from a perspective of calm and kind of get that out of the body instead of keep it in.” --- Participant

A summary infographic can be found here:

https://mcdowellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FINAL_Seleste-Eftoda-11-17-in-Infographic-002.pdf

Implications

1. Teachers may benefit from adding physical activity into their daily routines.

Physical activity provides an opportunity to connect with others as well as time for solitude. Improved emotional regulation, presence, flexibility, energy, mobility, and sleep were seen as beneficial outcomes of physical activity. Participants also expressed that they gained time for mindful self-reflection, which led to an improvement in their teaching practices. Engaging in physical activity also gave participants hope for a healthy future and led to improvement in both one's personal and professional life.

2. Engaging in physical activity may contribute to improved relationships with students.

Participants shared that engaging in physical activity resulted in increased patience, positivity, and presence. Healing the self through physical activity allowed these teachers to invest in relationships with their students. School divisions and governments may consider ways in which teacher engagement in physical activity can be supported.

3. School divisions and governments may consider how to reduce barriers to physical activity.

Lack of time and stress posed as barriers to access physical activity. Interestingly, despite these barriers, these teachers continued to engage in physical activity. Continuing to engage in physical activity resulted in decreased stress and increased energy. However, not all teachers will be able to overcome these barriers and exploring ways to increase access may prove beneficial.

4. Encouraging engagement in physical activity at a young age may enhance lifelong participation.

Nearly all participants stated that they engaged in physical activity from a very young age or for a long time and that the act of role modelling physical activity to their students was important to them. Increasing student engagement in physical activity may be enhanced through role-modelling thereby combating the negative implications resulting from inactivity.

5. Physical activity may be promoted for its impact on mental health rather than weight loss.

Participants cited stress management and the mental benefits of engaging in physical activity as their motivating factors. These findings suggest that the promotion of engagement in physical activity may highlight physical activity as stress management and as a method to improve mental health (Eftoda, 2023).

Where you are putting those demands on your body [physical activity] it's a huge release for that emotional side of things and it just helps me... to come from a perspective of calm and kind of get that out of the body instead of keep it in.

– Participant

Recommendations

The following recommendations are for teachers, leaders, families, communities, and government and are based on the findings, analysis, and conclusions of this study.

1. **Exploring ways to increase teacher engagement in physical activity.** This may be done through teachers seeking opportunities to engage both inside and outside of the workday. Leadership models may benefit from ensuring that they communicate and endorse the value of self-care thereby providing teachers with the liberty to engage in physical activity. Workloads should not be so much so that teachers do not have time to engage in physical activity. Preparation time should be increased to 20 percent so that teachers have time to prepare during the workday, thereby ensuring time outside of the workday to engage or alternatively allowing time within the workday to engage. This recommendation will require that governments increase funding to schools so that preparation time can be increased without increasing classroom sizes. Additionally, this may require administration to be creative in how to provide preparation time to teachers within the workday. Alternatively, the workload could be decreased by 20 percent.
2. The researchers' interpretations and findings suggest that **necessary counselling for teachers be embedded into their workday.** Time may pose a barrier to counselling access. However, due to the high levels of stress that teachers experience and the residual emotional effects from vicarious trauma, counselling during the workday may be the ethical approach to support teachers.
3. **Teacher well-being is impacted by the well-being of the community and their students.** Therefore, governments may consider how they might increase social support such as counselling, family support workers, and programming that work to assist families in getting the support they need.
4. **The benefits of physical activity results in improvement for both body and mind.** Media, governments, communities, and schools may consider how they might promote engagement in physical activity. Engagement in physical activity can start at any age but engagement in youth may increase the likelihood of healthy habits extending into adulthood. There is a social responsibility to promote healthy lifestyle choices including physical activity. Physical activity can be promoted as a method to increase social-emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical well-being.

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2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8
Phone: 306-373-1660
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762
Fax: 306-374-1122
Email: mcdowell@stf.sk.ca

www.mcdowellfoundation.ca