An investigation into the sport needs and preferences of youth aged 13-18 years in a semi-rural community

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Abstract

Well designed, integrated, and efficiently delivered school and community sport and recreation programmes can provide a wide range of benefits including the ability to assist in the development of productive and engaged citizens, provide social cohesion, produce economic benefits, enhance a region’s identity and build a healthier community. In recognition of these benefits, secondary schools have a well-established tradition of providing opportunities for students to engage in social and competitive sporting pursuits. However, recent nation-wide surveys have identified a decline in student participation in sport, and indeed, in physical activity behaviour overall. To date, little research has been undertaken to probe this phenomenon; the survey reported in this paper offers a possible starting point for understanding the specific needs and preferences of students in order to enhance the delivery sport programmes within the school and the community. A survey of 1495 students from two semi-rural secondary schools found while 84% of the sample reported they wanted to play sport, only 60% currently did so. This paper describes patterns of current sport engagement, motivators and barriers to participation in sport, and sporting preferences. Several recommendations for schools, sports programme providers and future researchers in this field are made.

Keywords: sport engagement; secondary schools; semi-rural communities; students’ sport preferences

Background & Literature Review

Sport and Recreation programmes have the potential to contribute to a wide array of community and individual outcomes. Organised sport enhances social cohesion (Warner & Dixon, 2011), and regional identity (Spaaij, 2010). An individual’s physical (World Health Organisation, 2000), psychological (Kirkcaldy, Shephard, & Siefen, 2002), and social well being (Smith, 1999), and academic performance (Fox, Barr-Anderson, Neumark-Sztainer, &
Wall, 2010) have all been shown to be positively affected through youth involvement in sport. Most commentators concur there is little doubt that regular engagement in physical activity and sport enhances the quality of life of young people through greater opportunity for social interaction and improvements in self-esteem (Kolt, et al., 2006).

Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) is the Crown Entity responsible for sport and physical recreation in New Zealand and hence is charged with providing leadership in research and the development and implementation of policies that recognise the importance of sport and physical recreation to New Zealand. Sport Bay of Plenty, Western Bay of Plenty District Council, Community Boards of Katikati and Te Puke, Te Puke High School and Katikati College are strategic partners in the Active Communities project ‘Connect Sport’. This three year project is tasked with increasing participation by developing capability in sport and having a better connected community. Both secondary schools signalled a desire to increase the level of participation in their respective schools while having better links to their community. A need to support informed decision making and/or interventions to increase sport and physical activity was identified and an approach was made to the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic as a local tertiary education provider, to support the research process. The specific question was: ‘What are the sport preferences of 13-18 year olds in semi-rural communities?’

New Zealand Secondary School Sport Council’s (NZSSSC) annual data has for some time reported a negative trend in secondary school participation in sport (Carnachan, 2010). Te Puke High School and Katikati College are co-educational state secondary schools situated in the Western Bay District Council region. Both schools presented at or below both the Bay of Plenty and the national trends from NZSSSC data regarding the downward trend in sport participation for youth. Further analysis showed that it is predominantly female students participating less in sport in both schools (Carnachan, 2010).
According to NZSSSC’s 2010 data, rugby was the leading secondary school age sport in New Zealand for boys at 29,203 players, which was over 10,000 more participants than soccer (football) as second choice. Netball was the leading participation sport for females at school, at 26,846. Nine of the top 10 participation sports for students are team sports. Athletics is the only individual pursuit sport to be listed in the top 10 sports (Carnachan, 2010).

For adolescents, sex, age, ethnicity and socioeconomic status level are major personal determinants of physical activity behaviour. Numerous international studies have demonstrated that boys are more physically active than girls (Booth, Bauman, Owen, & Gore, 1997; Booth, Okely, Chey, Bauman, & Macaskill, 2002 & Gordon, Hullena, Harker, McKenzie, & Meyer, 2008).

Hill (2009) reports the following barriers to sport participation: lack of self ability; increasing costs; lack of time; and coaching – ineffective coaching techniques. Hill goes on to recommend that sport opportunities should include a healthy balance between fun and competition.

Gordon et al. (2008) found that an increased range of opportunities, and greater opportunities to be involved with friends, were two major factors for increased involvement in sport by students moving from intermediate to high school. Interestingly, the report also suggested that increasing academic requirements, the need for paid employment, a developing social life and discouragement from friends impact negatively on adolescent involvement in sport and physical activity.

Wills’ (2006) ‘Stay and Play’ research study also generated key insights and recommendations to address the trend of teenagers dropping out of sport, noting the role of ‘social currency’. Social currency incorporates the interpersonal activity that exists before, during and after sporting activity. Sport plays a key role in socialising. The report
also highlighted the importance of well organised activities supported by good coaching at all levels. The key distracters were homework, NCEA, and part time employment. Kolt et al. (2006) reported that 42% of young people aged 13-18 years did not have enough time to be physically active due to school, homework and study. The key de-motivators identified by the ‘Stay and Play’ study were too much emphasis on competition, the level of commitment required and the amount of unsporting conduct, while key motivators were friends, success and fun (Wills, 2006). These observations link to the seminal work of Siedentop (Grant, Sharp & Siedentop, 1992), who as early as the 1980s was advocating a Sport Education Model which focuses on 'persisting groups' to foster team affiliation and promote the affective and social interactive elements identified as important by the students when engaging in physical activity. A second key factor, says Siedentop, is that the students themselves must be allowed to be “legitimate peripheral participants” with roles that as well as player, include coach, referee, equipment officer, journalist, statistician – among others (Kirk, 2006, p. 259).

In a review of best practice physical activity interventions for New Zealand youth, Kolt et al. (2006) have recommended “That sport and physical activity opportunities be informed by youth and meet the changing needs of youth” (p. 194). Yet despite the studies mentioned which have drawn largely on national figures or specific programmes, there remains lack of in-depth understanding of current physical activity behaviour and needs of New Zealanders aged 13-18 years. The current survey is an attempt to fill this gap in the research, in the context of two coeducational semi-rural schools in the Western Bay of Plenty.

Project Methodology

Case study research

Given the rationale for undertaking the research, that is, to investigate the national trend of declining involvement in sport by secondary school-aged students through examining this
population group’s preferences, motivators and barriers to participation in sport in a specific context, a case study framework was selected as the most appropriate methodology. One of the early proponents of case study research was Robert K. Yin (1989) who defines the case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 23). Cousin (2005) says simply that case study research “aims to explore and depict a setting with a view to advancing understanding” (p. 427). In this example, a situational case study allowed the presentation, examination and interpretation of the specific experiences of students within two defined education communities. The collation of all respondents’ viewpoints therefore provides a starting point for understanding and reinterpreting what constitutes engagement in sport for youth in semi-rural schools. While a limitation of case study research is that it is necessarily sited in a fixed context, it is hoped that the size of our sample means that many of the findings will be broadly generalizable beyond the immediate cases to other semi-rural schooling communities.

**Setting, participants and ethical considerations**

This research project was a collaborative approach between Sport Bay of Plenty and the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, two partners in the Active Communities project ‘Connect Sport’. Once the research project was mooted as a way forward for the Connect Sport group to gain necessary understandings in order to promote physical exercise within the community, two local schools which were already members of Connect Sport and which had the targeted profile of a semi-rural environment indicated their support for the project. Te Puke High School and Katikati College are both located in outlying areas of the Western Bay of Plenty, in communities where the surrounding land use is predominantly horticultural or agricultural.
Letters were sent home with students advising of the project and inviting any questions. Parents/caregivers were told that participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and that students could choose not to be involved if that was their, or their family’s wish. On an agreed date, surveys were given to Form Class teachers to administer in their form time at the start of the school day to all students present at that time. Form Class teachers were provided with a set of instructions and script, which was read to the participants prior to the administration of the survey. All surveys were returned to the staff room at the completion of form time in sealed envelopes and stored in a central container for the school. A total of 1495 surveys were returned from the two schools.

**The survey - implementation, collation and analysis**

The survey was created using Survey Monkey, a provider of web based survey solutions which can also be printed and distributed manually. The survey was peer reviewed within Sport Bay of Plenty’s sport team and two pilot studies were undertaken with approximately 40 students from year 10 classes (14 – 15 year olds) in local secondary schools, which were not the same as the two schools targeted for the study, but rather were chosen for ease of access by the researchers. The pilot study results were assessed to confirm clarity of questions and ease of interpretation of responses, but were not included in the findings reported here, as they did not represent the two selected semi-rural secondary schools.

Following minor amendments indicated in the piloting process, the final survey comprised 20 questions which were grouped into five sections: firstly information about the student; secondly information about the student’s sport participation including barriers; thirdly information about the best times for the student to play and practice sport; fourthly reasons for playing sport, both within school and within the community, and their intentions post secondary school; and finally a section exploring current and desired sports of choice. The reason for including this final section was not intended to indicate in any way, to either students or schools, that identified choices would or should be made available. Instead it was hoped that by opening the survey to students’ contributions of an idealised sporting
menu, new options could eventually be mooted and debated. The concept therefore was to capture student voice rather than to address the practicalities of how identified alternatives could be introduced. The survey used a range of question types including yes / no, tick the box, likert scale, and opportunities for the student to provide qualitative responses to open ended questions.

Once the completed surveys were collected by the researchers, data was inputted into the Survey Monkey tool which enabled a range of descriptive statistics to generated and analyzed using the system's software. Responses regarding current sports engagement and sport preferences, perceptions of barriers, and motivators were compared across gender and age.

**Results**

The results are presented in three sections: 1) current sport involvement, 2) motivators and barriers, and 3) alternative preferences.

**Part 1: Current sport involvement**

Fifty-eight percent of the sample reported participating in sport. Slightly more respondents in Te Puke (60%) reported being involved in sport than was the case in Katikati (57%). However, when the students were asked whether they wanted to play sport, 84% of the sample said yes, meaning that there is a gap of 26% who want to play sport but are unable to find an option which is accessible or of interest. The levels of participation of both males and females declined as students progressed through year groups. The only exception to this trend was that Year 13 girls showed a 2% growth in participation from Year 12.

Boys identified the traditional team sports of rugby (33%) and football (28%) as their major sport. Basketball (16%), volleyball (16%), and cricket (15%) were identified in the second tier with the remaining sports in the top 10 all individual sports: surfing, golf, moto-cross,
swimming and golf all recorded scores of 12 and 13%. Netball (41%) has a dominant share of female participation over other sports, with swimming ranked second (27%). Other team sports to register in the top 10 were volleyball (22%), football (22%), basketball (15%) and hockey(12%). Four of the top 10 sports for females have an individual participation option: tennis (15%), athletics (11%), badminton (11%) and cycling (9%), although none of these were in the top 10 for males.

The largest representation of sport involvement is with competitive school teams (44%). A significant portion of respondents indicated that they were involved in social school teams (32%) and club teams (21%). A quarter of the sample reported being involved in competitive club teams (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Youth settings for sport (n=1495)](image)

**Part II: Motivators and barriers to participation in sport**

Overall 84% of the sample reported that they wanted to play sport (Figure 2). Year 9 students of both genders displayed the highest interest in participating in sport (89%). There was a notable (8%) decline from year 10 boys wanting to play sport to year 11 boys wanting to play sport. The two groups with the lowest desire to be involved in sport (78%) were year 11 girls and year 12 boys.
Fun (56%) was the leading motivator for youth to participate in sport, and keeping fit (41%) was the second highest motivator for youth sampled (Figure 3). Meeting new friends has the least impact on motivation to participate for male youth surveyed. Interestingly year 10 males identified winning (42%) and keeping fit (51%) as the primary motivators for their participation; both of these results were noticeably greater than for any other cohort.

All females surveyed selected fun as their highest ranked motivation for participation in sport. Keeping fit ranked as the second highest motivator for female youth; winning was the least motivating factor.
A large range of factors were identified as a major barrier for youth participating in sport. Not enough time in the week was reported by year 13 females (21.8%). Interestingly, 20.5% of year 13 females compared to 6.2% of year 13 males reported homework as a barrier to sport participation. Transport (11%) was the primary issue for year 9 boys and employment became a barrier for both males and females from year 11 onwards.

**Part III: Preferences for participating in sport**

Saturday was the most preferred day to play sport at 56.7% with Sunday the least preferred day (23.9%). Over half the students reported a preference for practicing sport on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and immediately after school (61.9%) was the most preferred time slot.

Snowboarding (27.8%) and volleyball (25.7%) are overall first and second choices that youth wanted to play but did not currently play, for all youth surveyed. For females, volleyball (33%) was the first choice of sport to play that they did not currently play. Seven of the top 10 sports selected by female youth as sports that they wanted to play but currently did not play were individual pursuits (Figure 4).

![Figure 4: Top 10 sports overall that youth want to play but currently do not play (n=1495)](image-url)
Conclusion and Recommendations

Youth have clearly signalled through their contribution to the data of this survey that they have a desire to be involved in some form of sport (84%). Given the benefits of sport attested to in the literature, all stakeholders have a responsibility to be solution focussed in facilitating and supporting youth’s engagement in sport.

SPARC wants young New Zealanders (aged 0-18) to develop a love of sport and recreation that leads to lifelong participation (SPARC, 2009). Similarly, Sport Bay of Plenty has set a goal of 80% of school aged children participating in organised sport and recreation for at least three hours a week along with more young people staying in sport and recreation after secondary school (Sport Bay of Plenty, 2010).

The present study clearly identifies the motivators, the barriers and the sports of choice for young people in two semi rural schools; Te Puke High School and Katikati College. The conflicting demands for time is the biggest barrier to all involved: students, parents, teachers, and volunteers. Traditionally sport happens when there is an adult to take training or organise a competition. However youth who have developed the skills and knowledge to organise their own competitions can become empowered to take care of their own needs. In the process they become more able to contribute to their community, and find more opportunities to remain involved in sport after leaving school. The challenge for both schools and national bodies is to develop and support models which enable sport to happen for youth, by youth.

This research set out to answer the question ‘What are the sport preferences of 13-18 year olds in semi-rural communities?’ The findings suggest that youth will engage in sports that are facilitated at the right level with a positive focus on challenge, socialising and fun. The ability to ‘snack’ on a variety of sports, challenges and experiences is appealing to youth. Traditional models of sport offered at traditional times and places will need to become more customer-centric in their approach if they are to recruit and retain this consumer driven generation. A number of specific recommendations arise from the study, which it is hoped may offer a platform for providers to develop targeted programmes and strategies to turn around declining levels of participation in sport by youth, and support their physical,
psychological and social well being and academic performance. These recommendations are:

**Fun**

‘Fun’ warrants further investigation to gain a deeper and broader understanding of the concept in the context of sport or physical activity.

**Focus groups**

Significant numbers of the sample group surveyed wanted to play sports not currently on offer. Connecting youth with adult providers of sport from schools and clubs on a regular basis would enable sport providers to make informed joint decisions.

**Variety**

The term ‘snacktivity’ appears in the literature (for example, Wills, 2006) recommending provision of a variety of opportunities for youth throughout the year as a strategy to meet consumer expectations. The results reported here suggest that E who are currently not playing sport but wish to do so.

**Deliver sport according to youth preferences**

According to the findings, youth were quite clear about sport that they would like to play, but currently did not, for example, volleyball (both indoor and beach) for girls and dodge ball for boys. Both sports have the potential to offer social and competitive leagues making use of community facilities, and in doing so could capture that portion of the student population who wish to engage but are currently not engaged in sport. While sports like snowboarding might initially appear difficult to offer for semi-rural schools in a region three hours’ drive from a snow park venue, the obstacles are not necessarily insurmountable.
With strong student, parent and community support, a winter season programme may be possible. Focus groups, as mentioned above, with commercial providers/sponsors and local enthusiasts might offer one way forward for schools to consider meeting this demand.

**Empower youth**

Youth have reported a desire to carry out sport immediately after school. This can be an inconvenient time for teachers who are required to meet curriculum based obligations during this time and for adults who have work commitments. Developing and empowering youth using a model similar to Siedentop’s Sport Education Model (Grant et al., 1992) provides a potential strategy to address after school participation. The New Secondary School Stage Challenge is a positive example of youth (181 schools – 15 000 students) empowered to take care of themselves.

**Communication**

Currently youth are made aware of sport opportunities through school daily notices. A complementary strategy to ensure students are aware of the options available would be to make use of social networks such as Facebook and texting to support school websites and newsletters.

**Measure and evaluate**

Communities need to measure effective interventions. An ongoing qualitative and quantitative measurement of youth involvement in sport would show progress for all stakeholders and allow schools to recognise trends in preferences, motivators and barriers, and to adjust their provision accordingly.
Early interventions

Patterns for engagement in sport are established early in secondary school students.
Provision of four (term based) festival type events throughout the year specifically for year 9 could focus on fun participation as a gateway to future competitive and/or social opportunities in secondary schools.

In closing

The above recommendations arise from the responses of the 1495 secondary school students who participated in this research project and draw on related studies published in the literature. The data identifies that a significant number of youth who are motivated to participate are not currently having their needs met. As has been noted, it is important to ensure ongoing communication with all parties, so that schools, clubs and community sport providers are in touch with youth, and are listening to what they want rather than providing sport in traditional model format. Youth today are faced with a multitude of entertainment opportunities as well as out of school commitments. Sport offerings need to respond to this challenge with sport opportunities in a teenager friendly context so that this and future generations continue to enjoy the benefits of an active and connected life.
References


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