What About the Girls? Case study of change in a rural school

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract
Change within schools is a constant. Managing the introduction of change to the secondary school sport and physical education settings has been at the centre of a large-scale intervention and research project conducted throughout NSW, Australia during 2008-2010. School-specific changes were designed to investigate and redress the decline of moderate to vigorous physical activity for adolescent girls as they progress from Year 8 to Year 10. Each intervention school in the project (n=12) designed their own modifications to their sport and school environments. These modifications were in response to the data collected during the formative phase of the research, which included canvassing the views of: the Year 8 girls and boys; physical education teachers; sport teachers; executive teachers; and principals. Modifications such as: girls only groupings; more variety of choice, priority selection of sport for year Year 8 girls, shorter duration of weeks for specific sports; and, equipment relevant to female sanctioned activities, were developed, trialled and evaluated. These processes were developed and enacted with the guidance from ‘critical friends’. Pre-service teacher education expertise was a key feature of the critical friends. Three of the twelve schools included in the major research project supported by the Department of Education and Community were located in rural and regional contexts. The process of introducing change related to girls’ participation in sporting activities in one of these rural schools is the focus of this presentation. Adopting the Anderson and Cawsey (2009) model of change in schools, the unique features of a rural school will be described in terms of the processes they used to introduce, implement and sustain evidence-based change. One case study will be presented and reported using the hybrid model of change from the perspective of the critical friend assigned to the rural school. The case study will include a profile of the school’s demographics, identification of key players and change agents, as well as examples of student voice and action. This presentation will conclude with reflections on the processes involved in supporting rural and regional schools to enact gender-based change.

Introduction
Inactivity has been linked to a range of lifestyle conditions such as hypertension, type II diabetes and cardiovascular disease (WHO, 2009). Physical activity and engagement in sport have been consistently reported to decline as the general population ages (Telama et al., 2005). However, a lack of physical activity is one of the most modifiable risk factors related to the morbidity and mortality health outcomes of individuals (Brown et al., 2007; Warburton et al. 2006). In particular, the age of adolescents has been identified as a life stage marked by decreasing levels of physical activity at a greater rate than adjacent age groups (Trost et al., 2004; Booth et al., 1997). However, for adolescent girls, the decline in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) has been greater than their male peers specifically in New South Wales, Australia (Hardy, Okely & Booth, 2008). The primary aim of this study was to arrest the decline in MVPA for adolescent girls. As a part of this intervention...
aim, the effectiveness of an 18-month school-based intervention approach individually designed to arrest the decline in MVPA during school sport and lunchtime activities, for girls as they progress from Year 8 to Year 10 (14 to 16 years of age) is of interest. It has been recommended that this age group accumulate 60 minutes of MVPA per day and this was the target for the study. In many cases changing aspects around the organisation and approach to physical education was considered to target adolescent girls (Flintoff, 2008). The project also considered the influence of the school ethos, links with the local community (Sneider & Cooper 2011), and whether the intervention would be sustainable beyond the project time-frame. An arrest in the decline in MVPA for the intervention school – as compared to the matched control schools was the aim of the project.

**Intervention School in a Rural Context**

The process of implementing change in one school located in a rural and regional area in New South Wales is profiled as part of a larger scale government school action research project involving 12 volunteer schools. The rationale for including a school in rural contexts was to that the rural community can often provide for a more open and transparent view of the students, their families, the community, the school and as Casey et al. (2009) indicated, the adolescent girls may be more resistant to being active in public contexts given rural communities are more connected and, as such, visibility is high for girls in their communities. This provides an additional facet to the challenge of finding options for adolescent girls as it may be that there are rural-specific barriers, or alternatively a greater intensity of barriers common to all contexts, for adolescent girls to be more active. For example, when adolescent girls attempt new activities they are reporting high levels of exposure due to the small and close-knit communities within rural contexts (Casey et al., 2009; Eime et al., 2010) and they are less inclined to try new activities if their bodies are on show at school sport, and community sport and lunch time activities. This rural milieu could be contributed to by the climate of the school as a reflection of its location and surroundings.

An application of a hybrid change/leadership model of the multiple process of enacting change (Anderson & Cawsey, 2009) is useful for mapping the degree to
which the schools are adopting and accommodating change in their schools. In
particular, one rural school is profiled. This school shared a common set of social and
cultural features and concomitant challenges to the implementation of gender-based
change as other schools in the project (Kenway & Willis, 1997).

BACKGROUND
In terms of the overall Girls in Sport project, there were 24 schools involved (Okely et
al., 2011). Twelve were intervention and twelve were matched control schools.
Matching was based on school size, sport structure and other related socio-economic
and demographic factors. Funding was made available for each intervention school to
resource the processes and equipment needed to enact a school-specific intervention
and action plan. A ‘critical friend’, an academic from a local university, who was also
a named as a collaborating investigator on the project, was assigned to each
intervention school. Their role was to support and provide guidance to the school-
based teachers who led the project. This support included: regular discussions on the
progress and process of the school-based changes; providing professional
development for staff in the intervention schools if requested; and, leading the data
collection processes. This was an iterative process with meetings at all of the whole
project discretion, regular phone calls (fortnightly), visits to the schools and assistance
provided as requested in a collaborative and supporting spirit.

The critical friends came to the project with research expertise as pre-service teacher
education academics specialising in physical education. Critical friends appreciated
the nuances and developed sensitivity to the milieu of each school and, in the process
of supporting schools, opportunities arose for new professional relationships to be
established with the teachers. Within the Girls in Sport project, there were multiple
levels of accountability for the schools, ie. to the NSW Department of Education and
Communities (DEC) regarding progress, planning and financial expenditure, and to
the critical friends, the research team and to each of the other intervention schools.

Individual school-based intervention plans were developed to promote physical
activity among adolescent girls. Teachers at the schools who took on the role of
‘project champion’ worked with the both critical friends and the NSW DEC project
leader to formulate an action plan based on the data from the school that would provide a way for the school to individually respond to the formative data and address the challenge of arresting the decline in MVPA for the target group. Specifically, the schools were provided with pre-intervention opportunities to understand the bigger issues inherent in the project; brainstorm ideas for possible changes in their school to address concerns; and gain feedback from critical friends and health and gender intervention experts. Overall, school project champions and staff members were advised to consider their intervention strategies as part of an iterative process and ‘to expect that their first ideas may not get it right’ and to remain data driven and evaluative in their action research cycles and processes.

One of the areas that schools were encouraged to consider modification was school sport. Government secondary schools in NSW are required to provide students with a minimum of two hours of physical activity allocated to sport and/or physical education each week. According to decisions made at each school and resources available within the school and the community, sport time can be structured as traditional, integrated, or scattered.

When sport is delivered in the ‘traditional’ format it is offered to a range of student age groups, based on a particular sport or physical activity. Traditional sport is often ‘supervised’ by non-PDHPE teachers and PDHPE specialists and therefore results in teachers with diverse levels of sporting confidence and experience which translates into varied experiences for students.

Traditional sport structure usually incorporates a vertical streaming of students by sport choice with, in many contexts the older students (Year 10) given priority for sport choices. Then, as sport groups fill, younger students have less choice to participate in what may be the most ‘popular’ sport options. Traditional sport format includes at least an 80 minute session on one half-day of the week.

Integrated sport structure involves discrete year groups engaging in similar sporting activities as found in physical education classes and involves PDHPE trained teachers assigned to these sport choices. At least 80 minutes of sport is delivered. For many
students this has greater quality or consistency of teaching, however, the school requires a critical number of teachers and facilities to accommodate this approach.

Scattered sport occurs when different year groups are allocated a sport “period” of 80-120 minutes. Teachers from different faculties are usually required to deliver the sport program. There are provisions for a variety of sport models to be delivered to different age groups within the same school.

These sport structures were found in all of the intervention schools and were therefore a targeted area for change to address the concerns gleaned from the formative data of the girls, boys, teachers and executives concerning adolescent girls’ engagement in physical activity.

Literature addressing issues of gender and physical education has suggested a ‘politics of equality’, which accounts for the difference in students’ involvement based on gender as flowing from a politics of teachers working under the assumption that the current practice of physical education (PE) is equally as acceptable for girls as it is for boys. This leads to an assumption that all that needs to be done to improve participation rates is to make the provision of sport choices a bit more ‘girl-friendly’. Walby (2000, cited in Flintoff, 2008: 395) argues that rather than a “politics of equality or difference, we should adopt a politics of transformation”. This approach poses the following questions: What kind of physical education and school sport do we want for all young people, girls as well as boys? How should gender equity permeate and impact on all our practice in PE, so that all girls and boys have a quality experience? In relation to this paper, Walby’s (2000) position also prompts consideration of what is the most appropriate way to view the gendered and culturated issues that surround the Girls in Sport project?

The final question is central to this paper which presents the critical friends’ reflections of how one rural school involved in the Girls in Sport project grappled with improving the opportunities provided for adolescent girls to increase their level of physical activity, or more accurately, to arrest the decline in physical activity. As Fullan (1993: 12) notes, “we need a dual approach working simultaneously on
individual and institutional development”.

The school will be evaluated across six criteria based on the degree to which they moved from their initial position to one of sustained change. The six criteria applied to each school’s intervention program focus on the extent to which:

- issues management moved to ideas management;
- activity and structure moved to strategy and processes to values;
- making change in practice moved to making change with people;
- initiating (outside – in), to sustaining (inside-out);
- imposed (regulated) to embedded (educated); and,
- the project outcomes were transcended to become valued student learning outcomes?

(Adapted from Anderson & Cawsey, 2009: 119-120)

This model was presented to the Girls in Sport Colloquium, which took place three-quarters of the way through the project. There is no one place where all of these factors of the model have been published (to the knowledge of the authors) however, this model does provide a cogent approach to the issues surrounding intervention-based change and the multiple processes and issues relevant to sustainable change. Presenting this as a case study (Yin, 2003) allows for the factors of change to be applied to one of the intervention schools.

Green High School: A Case Study

Green School is located in a regional centre, an area of the state considered to be rural and at least 500 km from the metropolitan and coastal populations. Green School had a population of 598 students with 16% of Indigenous background. Staff comprised fifty full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers with female to male ratio across the school of 60:40. Teaching staff profile included predominantly long-term staff complemented by a more recent addition of early career teachers. PDHPE staff comprised two females and five males.

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4 Pseudonym
Sport had a traditional structure – that is, all of the students from Years 7 to 10 were involved in sport at the same time on one afternoon a week - so a vertical streaming occurred. Students in Year 11 were provided with priority options. In practice, this meant that the Year 11 students got first choice of all sport offerings, followed by Year 10 and Year 7, Year 9 and finally Year 8. For students in the targeted group of Year 8, the most disengaged students had the last choice of sport which quite often meant that students are rarely able to gain the sport choice that they (and other students) would find most appealing. This system of allocating choices to students can be interpreted as designed to reward the older students (Year 11), encourage the younger students (Year 7), however, in practice it disadvantaged the age group that was approaching the stage where educators acknowledge high levels of disengagement, particularly for the girls.

For the teachers, sport allocations were made by the sports coordinator and this teacher attempted to match teachers to sport requests. This system of course cannot make all the people happy all of the time. A key request that came from the formative data was that the sport allocation be for a shorter cycle – ie., 5 weeks as opposed to 10 weeks. One of the most cogent arguments about the ineffectiveness of the former approach came from the staff who firstly reported a lack of choice, lack of their own skills to conduct their allocated sport and the interminable length of time they had to supervise their sport. Being allocated to an unfamiliar sport for up to ten weeks with the same group of students was unfavourable to say the least for the teachers and no doubt for the students as well.

Multiple groups in the school such as, teachers, PDHPE staff and the sports organiser – identified their frustration that the teachers who had the greatest depth of experience and skill in teaching sports were promoted to the executive committee. The executive committee members did not participate in the ‘taking of sport’ as the weekly executive meeting was scheduled at the same time as sport.

Professional development days for upskilling staff were not attended by executive. This was noted by the PDHPE staff, sports organiser and the main instigators of the project as indicative of the level of importance they felt the executive gave to this area
of learning in the school. It did not appear to the teachers on the project that the executives had the skills and did not take sport so why would they attend a professional development course which they clearly did not need. Students’ views were consistent with the teachers’ comments on the desirability of sport. Physical education was scheduled and taken by the trained PDHPE teachers on staff.

Main instigators: two female PDHPE teachers were motivated to make changes that would engage the reluctant adolescent girls and change the culture of physical education and sport in their school. The financial resources allocated to the project for equipment was an important motivator to nominate their school. Funding was available for time release for the teachers to work on the project and to resource the modifications. The two project champions had 20 years teaching experience between them. The Girls in Sport committee within the school took some time to be established as there was a non-PDHPE head teacher and a non specialised PE teacher appointed as sports organiser who were reluctant to enact any changes in the structure of sport. In addition, changes in staffing at the executive level of the school resulted in a lack of systematic support for the intervention.

PROFILE OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE
As indicated, the process of change is being applied to one rural school in the Girls in Sport project. The profile of change is gleaned from the Cawsey model provided to the colloquium of teachers and researchers in February 2010. As such, the criteria will now be applied to Green High School as a scaffold to view change from multiple criteria and across the time-series of the processes.

Issues Management: how much has this moved to Ideas management?
Green High School had a culture of privileging the male-sanctioned sports and the performances of the boys in competitive inter-school sports. The issue was raised by non-PDHPE teachers, project champions and the sports organiser. The accomplishments of the girls were marginalised when accolades and reporting at the whole school level assembly and newsletters were compared. A greater focus on the accomplishments of the girls was called for. In addition, female sanctioned activities and sports need to be considered as an intervention strategy. Issues remain that the
dominant culture of a ‘focus on the masculine’ – through celebration of success in sport for elite performances dominating school news and assembly agendas, positions of power in executive roles, to sports organiser from student to teaching matters – have kept issues from being managed into ideas.

Sport organisation was an issue for the girls, the teachers and the GIS committee members. The school executive proved to be resistant to suggested/proposed changes of more frequent turnover in sport offerings for both students and staff.

The few changes that have been made have been due to great personal effort of the two female project champions. Such changes they have enacted include: conducting ‘girls only’ gym activities at lunchtime; a remedial fundamental and sport specific skills session in sports afternoons; and, enacting teacher and student survey informed suggestions for sport choice and changes. The sustainability of the intervention strategies is dubious because they depended on two (female) project champions. The ideas imbedded in the project were not taken up in any overt way by other members of the PDHPE staff, who were all male and the committee had a strong female representation from head teachers, librarians, community liaison officers. No males accepted the invitation to contribute to the committee composition.

Activity and Structure – how has this moved to Strategy and Processes (then values). The activities the Year 8 girls requested were for more ‘female sanctioned’ activities in physical education and sport. They requested access to ‘girls-only’ locations, spaces and activities. Specifically, in every second school-term, the PDHPE teachers provided a Year 8 girls-only sport offering. This was a structure that had proven to assist the girls feel the project responded to their needs. The key is that student voice had been heard, and the ‘girls-only’ context had provided them with a greater sense of freedom to move without feeling self-conscious, without having the equipment and access to the play, dominated by some boys. Such activity (content) and structure (grouping by sex or ability) provides for an initial strategy that moves to the process of sustainability, which was one criteria that was always considered by the critical friends as they guided the project champions to measure the consideration of embedding change that would be an effective use of project resources.
Sport structure has been trialed to have more changes in the term so that the ten week sessions are replaced by two five week units of sport per term. Students and non PDHPE staff supervising sport were very positive about seeing this request become a real initiative. However, the successful two sports per term has been reversed, back to one ten week sport allocation as it was ‘too time consuming and difficult to organise’ according to the sports organiser. The Girls in Sport committee was unsuccessful in garnishing executive support to maintain this specific initiative, in spite of the response to the formative data and the positive effect it had for the teachers and students generally.

Making change in practice – has this moved to making change with people?

Having girls in Year 8 have their own grouping at sport time has been overwhelmingly popular. This was a consistent request by the Year 8 girls. Having a project that funds the changes has given power to the Girls in Sport committee. However, there is a backlash to the girls as the boys are now complaining that they ‘get nothing out of this’. The male teachers who have already provided new football uniforms to their boys’ teams have continued to covet the extra funds in the school for the Girls in Sport program. The practice of sustaining shorter sport duration (from 10 to 5 weeks) has been resisted by the sports organiser (and football coach) and deeply ingrained gendered practices are continuing. Making change with people is difficult when people are so resistant to change. The least powerful staff members are working without sustained tangible executive support – and often the only leverage comes from NSW DEC personnel (and to a lesser extent) the critical friends involved in the project as they are called upon to exert pressure on the executive to gain time release and basic building equipment to ‘unlock’ the potential of a new facility.

Initiating (outside – in) to Sustaining (inside - out)

Initiating new ways of constructing female sports, challenging the thinking and assumptions of the role of women – particularly in rural and regional spaces was highly resisted at Green High School. The inclusion of NSW DEC and critical friends represent change moving from outside-to-in providing a way for the (all female) Girls in Sport committee to transform the experience for Year 8 girls in the sport and
physical education learning within Green High School. How well these changes are sustained – moving from inside to out – is yet to be realised. There could be multiple scenarios to identify this ‘reality’. There is benefit of such change being initiated from the outside as this is one way to introduce change of such gendered stereotypical attitudes reflecting the community at large. The next criteria is highly aligned with this one.

**Imposed (regulated) to Embedded (educated)**

The response by Green High School to the Girls in Sport project appears to be shell-backed. The varied shifts in staffing at the school executive level resulted in a lack of consistent support for the project champions and a perception of disinterest in change occurring systematically within the school. Lack of communication from the executive was seen as a barrier to any embedding of the changes. Barriers to the project have been evidenced through lack of support for release time for the two project champions to work on planning and implementation phases of the project. Resistance to finishing a new facility – which would provide climate control, security of new equipment and a girls-only space, have been barriers to implementing girls-only activities during lunchtimes. Benefits from the Girls in Sport funding is welcomed into the school, which provides much needed relief from their overstretched finances.

Although conjecture, there is a sense of once the project is over, what will remain embedded in the school to continue the change? More staffing changes, infighting over funding expenditures, endorsement from the head teacher without consultation with the PDHPE staff and resistance to change in sport structure and lack of systematic support for the project and hence for the Year 8 girls are all elements of frustration and barriers to sustainable change in the culture of Green High School.

As such the most power to support the changes at the school level comes from what the two female PDHPE teachers can implement in their classes, what they can motivate students to lead and sustain. Their power base comes from what the outside regulators can influence in terms of accountability and the presence of a critical friend from the local regional university. The lack of facilities, the lack of will to fix the
facilities to provide teaching space for students within an inhospitable physical environment (over 40°C in some cases) remains as key barriers to implementing change. A gymnasium built, without access to power outlets meant that the air conditioning could not run, the music could not be played and the various equipment could not be secured as the facility was not able to be locked. Electricians, and locksmiths were requested but work appeared to be stalled at the school administration level. NSW DEC personnel and critical friend rallied to support the project champions in procuring such a critical element achieved in order for other parts of the intervention program to be implemented.

*Project outcomes - to valued student learning outcomes*

The project is still in progress and although the baseline data shows that the Year 8 girls are in the 75th percentile of average of MVPA – there is little other evidence at this point to show that the outcomes of change will be reflected in the girls’ student learning outcomes. This criteria shows how a project can move from the outside in and be focused on a particular target age group, in this case, the Year 8-10 girls. However, the degree to which the project translates into ‘valued student learning outcomes’ can only be answered in a much longer time-frame than is currently available. Will the teachers understand the needs of the adolescent girls? Will the boys understand their role in such a project? Will other ideas be valued in time and will teachers arrive at a more sophisticated, informed, holistic understanding of the multitude of factors that account for skilled movement and engagement in activity by all students by the end of Year 10 schooling?

**DISCUSSION**

From the exploration of one rural school with a strong male-focused culture of sporting accomplishments, the difficulty for project champions to garner support from the teaching community and the executive, bring the sports organiser on board and ultimately to provide for the adolescent girls is described. The Cawsey model provides a useful and authentic evaluation rubric which is multidimensional and time-series in nature. Ultimately, the degree to which change has been attempted, trialled, evaluated and adopted in this one school provides a snapshot of the challenges and facilitators to support, enact and sustain change for adolescent girls in a rural context.
This school being located in a rural and regional location, with strong conservative links to country and views of the gendered stereotypes, presents a unique undercurrent in the project outcomes for Green High. Perhaps what is helpful to understand is as Casey et al., (2009) found, enacting change in activity levels of adolescent girls was more vexed and challenging when interventions were located in rural settings, due to high visibility levels of girls across many contexts in small rural towns than for those girls in metropolitan schools where anonymity can be achieved from inside to outside of school settings. As Fullan (1993) indicates, “…it is not enough to be exposed to new ideas, we have to know where new ideas fit, and have to become skilled in them, not just like them” (p.16).

REFERENCES


