

Executive Summary

Physical activity (PA) is good for the body and mind. It not only promotes the development of body muscles, but also helps relieve mental stress. Physical Education (PE) is one of the eight key learning areas and five basic learning experiences in the secondary school curriculum. According to the guidelines issued by the Curriculum Development Council, PE aims to teach students various sports and sports knowledge, help them build an active and healthy lifestyle, and cultivate good morals.

However, according to the “Healthy Exercise for All Campaign – Physical Fitness Test for the Community” final summary report, only 8.4% of 2,517 students in Hong Kong (aged 13 to 19) could meet the level of PA in 2011-2012 as recommended by the WHO¹. The percentage of which lagged far below other regions. A study by the Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong in 2015, noted that there was no significant improvement of cardiopulmonary fitness among Hong Kong students over the past few years. In this aspect, students in Hong Kong were less fit than their peers in Europe.

In addition, a survey released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2014² observed that Hong Kong secondary school students have an average of only 90 minutes of PE classes a week, which is notably less than in either European and American countries or neighbouring regions.

In terms of the level of PA, cardiorespiratory fitness, and physical education hours in secondary schools, young people in Hong Kong have not only failed to meet globally-recognised standards, but they are also far below regional standards. This has raised concerns about whether PE classes in secondary schools are currently effective in cultivating students' interest in sports and establishing good sports habits.

¹ World Health Organization. (2010). Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health.

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2014). World-wide Survey of School Physical Education – Final Report 2013, 113.

This study aims to review PE classes among secondary school students in Hong Kong and their perceptions of PE. Through understanding their practices in PA, as well as the tendency to develop professional PA careers, recommendations will be put forward in an attempt to address the issues concerned.

Major Findings

- 1. More than 80% of the 520 secondary school respondents from a telephone-poll survey liked PE classes of whom, close to half said that it could help them relax. More than 30% of the total respondents found the number of PE classes was not sufficient.**

More than 80% (81.6%) of the 520 secondary school student respondents in the territory-wide, telephone-poll survey said that they liked PE classes in school (accounting for 425 respondents of the total). Many referred to having an interest in PA (62.6%); providing themselves relaxation (47.1%); and having classmates accompany them (35.5%).

In addition, around one-third (31.3%) of the total number of respondents said that the current number of PE classes per week/ cycle was insufficient. Respondents in parallel-group interviews pointed out that the insufficient number or hours of PE classes left them without a deep-enough understanding of, or failed to increase their interest in, the various types of PA.

- 2. The main reasons cited by the respondents in the survey who disliked PE classes included: dislike of sports, lack of interest in the activities, inability to cope with physical fitness, and doing PA was troublesome. The lack of more diverse sports options also affected the students' evaluation of the PE classes.**

95 of the 520 survey respondents said that they disliked PE classes. The major reasons were: not interested in taking PA (71.6%), not interested in the sports covered in the classes (29.4%), physically not fit enough (23.2%), and doing PA was troublesome (23.2%).

The students participating in the focus-group interviews also expressed that they were not interested in the sports taught in PE classes, and mostly only taught traditional sports such as basketball, football and badminton, which lacked diversity. As a result, their interest in PE classes was greatly reduced.

- 3. More than 35% of respondents shared the view that the learning environment of the city discouraged students from taking PE classes. Respondents in parallel-group interviews mentioned that there was a lack of emphasis in schools when it came to encouraging students to engage in PA.**

When asked if they agreed with the notion that the learning environment of the city discouraged students from taking PE lessons, more than 35% (36.7%) rated it 6-10 (On a scale of 0-10; 0=largely disagree; 10=totally agree). The percentage was higher than those thinking otherwise (29.5% rated it 0-4).

Some students who participated in focus-group interviews pointed out that the school did not pay enough attention to PE. Most of the attention was paid to academic performance. They also said that very often the school changed the PE classes to lectures or assisted students to make up lessons. They also said that schools emphasised students' sports performance levels. In addition, school lacked sports resources or had either inadequate or damaged sports venues/ facilities. All these affected students' desire to exercise. Some respondents hoped that schools could reduce physical fitness tests or could try not to emphasise the students' sports level too much, so as to strengthen the culture of engaging in PA among students.

- 4. As a whole, the level of PA among students was obviously insufficient. More than half of respondents did not take part in any sports-related activity, training, or any interest-class after school.**

The results of the survey showed that, on average, students performed high-intensity exercise about 2.2 times a week. It was also noted that, on average, respondents engaged in 30 minutes of moderate-or-vigorous-intensity PA. More than half (50.5%) of respondents did not take part in

any sports-related activity, training, or interest-class after school.

Based on the standard mentioned in the Healthy Exercise for All Campaign – Physical Fitness Test for the Community final summary report³, the majority of the respondents' level of PA did not fall under the category of Active Level⁴, reflecting an insufficient amount of PA per respondent within a typical week.

5. Lack of time, dislike of sports, and studying are the main reasons why students surveyed do not participate in extracurricular sports activities.

263 respondents in the survey said that they did not participate in extracurricular sports activities. The lack of time was the most commonly-mentioned reason (49.4%). This was followed by: they did not like sports (25.1%), and needed every minute to study (19.3%).

Participants in focus-group interviews added that the time for homework and reading took up most of their after-school free time. Faced with heavy academic pressure, it is difficult for them to allocate time for extracurricular activities, or have the desire to do sports. In addition, because parents and teachers pay more attention to academic performance, students tend to spend more time focusing on their studies.

6. Respondents surveyed had a relatively low awareness of sports-related occupations; lack of interest, worry about making a living, lack of confidence in the sports industry, and lack of support from teachers and parents make the respondents not consider exploring the sports industry.

The survey listed out various occupations and invited the respondents to tell in which of them they thought were related to the sports industry. The most commonly-mentioned items included athletes (92.5%), coaches (68.9%), PE class teachers (55.7%) and sports referees (37.4%).

³ Community Sports Committee of the Sports Commission. (2012). Healthy Exercise for All Campaign – Physical Fitness Test for the Community Final Summary Report. https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/healthy/physical_fitness_test/common/physical_fitness_test/download/SummaryReport_en.pdf

⁴ “Active” referred to those who accumulated at least 60 minutes moderate-or-above intensity PA every day in a week in which any three days involved with vigorous intensity PA

Respondents generally had a perception that it was difficult for professional athletes in Hong Kong to maintain a living (rated as a difficulty level of 6.09; based on a scale of 0-10, 10=very difficult). Eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents would not consider taking any occupation related to the sports industry for their career development. The major reasons included the lack of interest (47.1%), worry about making a living (32.8%), and lack of confidence in this industry (32.1%).

Some respondents in parallel-group interviews pointed out that the lack of support from parents and teachers was a major reason for their non-desire to explore career development in the sports industry.

Major Discussion

Summarising the findings of the telephone-poll survey, parallel-group interviews, and exclusive interviews with experts and academics, the research concluded six key points for discussion.

- 1. The physical or mental health of secondary school students in Hong Kong deserves our attention. Effective PE is believed to be helpful for students to build a healthy life.**

Hong Kong students generally face heavy homework and exam pressure, which affects their physical and mental health. The situation is worrying. In fact, many studies have pointed out that in addition to enhancing physical fitness, more exercise can also relieve tension and stress through the release of endorphins from the body and the brain, bringing a sense of relaxation and pleasure. Students facing the pressure of learning, would benefit their whole life if they participated in sports. PE classes in schools can play a positive guiding role by helping young people establish an active and healthy lifestyle so that their physical and mental well-being could be developed in a balanced way.

- 2. Schools, teachers, and parents generally put more emphasis on academic performance and sports level. It is difficult for students to increase their interest in sports.**

Hong Kong's education reform aims at "life-long learning" and "all round development" and incorporates PE into different stages of learning. This is with the hope to give students the opportunity and time to get involved with, and increase their interest in sports activities. However, this research has found that many Hong Kong secondary school students take up most of their after-school time to deal with homework and textbooks. As such they are unable to both study and actively participate in sports. In addition, many schools are worried that students' excessive enthusiasm for sports may affect their academic performance. In addition, parents in Hong Kong value their children's academic achievement more than sports performance. In this learning environment full of exams, students feel pressured and restrained, and it is difficult to increase their interest in sports. It is worthy to discuss how to establish more conducive environmental conditions that would enable students to be more willing to exercise. It is also crucial to get students, teachers and parents to understand, through participation, the importance of sports to the overall development of students.

3. Although interviewed students affirm the value of doing exercise, their level of exercise is insufficient. PE is one of the important platforms for students to understand the benefits of sports. However, the current lack of PE classes affects students' enthusiasm in sports.

Although the interviewed students certainly uphold the value of doing exercise, the level of PA that they took part in is insufficient. Studies have shown that the overall number of exercises or hours of exercise for students in Hong Kong has not reached the standard. In view of the students' lack of spontaneous and active daily exercise habits, PE has become a very important channel for cultivating their interest in sports. However, at present, the average amount of time for PE in Hong Kong's secondary schools is about 90 minutes per week, which is lower than that of many economically developed or neighbouring Asian regions. Insufficient time participating in physical education reduces students' exercise, and fails to establish healthy life-long exercise habits and lifestyles.

4. Some schools tend to teach traditional ball sports in PE classes based on considerations such as resources or teaching priority; the programs are not diversified and it is more difficult to motivate students.

The results of the study show that some of the students surveyed who do not like PE classes have no interest in the sports items covered in the classes. In addition, interviewees from the focus-group, and experts reported that the school PE classes tend to teach traditional ball sports; the corresponding lack of diversity of sports made lessons dull and lost any interest in learning other sports. How to encourage the teaching of different sports in schools (either in PE lessons or in after-school classes), or let students try different types of sport to explore their interests and potential, should be discussed and reviewed.

5. Problems such as lack of sports venues and facilities not only reduce students' desire to do sports, but also affect their opportunities to experience different sports activities.

This study has found that the lack of resources and sports venues in schools affects students' opportunities to participate in sports directly. It also creates obstacles for enriching PE teaching programmes and expanding the range of extracurricular sports activities. Not every school can build a wide range of sports venues, purchase high-quality equipment, and/or hire professional coaches. Using examples from overseas, to ensure that schools have sufficient resources to set up various sports classes, promoting cooperation between the government, schools and sports organisations, as well as of sharing and making good use of existing sports resources (so students can have more opportunities to participate), is worthy of further discussion.

6. As a whole, secondary school students are not well aware of the occupations related to sports industry. This might hinder their career planning and development.

The interviewed secondary school students in this study had low awareness of sports-related occupations and lacked confidence in the Hong Kong sports industry. Most of the interviewed students indicated that they would not consider sports-related occupations for

their future career development. Inadequate and incomplete knowledge of an industry would greatly impact students' preferences about entering that industry, as well as planning their career development. From the perspective of vocational education or career planning, schools could help students deepen their understanding of sports-related industries and outlets, and encourage students to explore opportunities related to sport.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings and discussion above, this study proposes the following recommendations:

1. **Increase the PE class hours of secondary schools from the current average of 90 minutes to 100-120 minutes, which is close to the level of other regions. This could help allow students to have sufficient time to engage with sports.**
2. **Make good use of school resources, organise diverse and time-flexible sports-related extracurricular activities in an attempt to assist students to develop a sports interest.**
3. **Promote cooperation between the government, schools, and sports organisations to share sports facilities and resources, so that students could actively participate in sports or conduct training in safe and properly-equipped venues.**
4. **Schools should organise a sports week to promote and publicise sports development, involve parents and teachers, etc., to establish an atmosphere of engaging in sports.**
5. **Appoint well-known athletes as sports ambassadors to share their experiences with students. This could also help deepen students' understanding of the development of sports and related industries.**
6. **Develop awareness of the importance of exercise for physical and mental health from an early age, so as to strengthen students' own motivation to cultivate good exercise habits.**