

Focus on numeracy and literacy helps fuel child obesity

December 12 2014, by Dr Barrie Gordon

Professor Boyd Swinburn's recent article in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* clearly identifying that New Zealand children are continuing to get more obese is no great surprise.

Swinburn quite correctly identifies the need for the government to prioritise obesity as a major health concern—this would be an important first step in addressing the problem. Aligned with this is the need to actually to do something practical by implementing evidence based initiatives with children.

Quality education has always been one means of addressing health related issues and the experiences of students as they move through their schooling should help equip them to make rational, educated judgements throughout their lives.

Recent research in Australia offers a vision of the potential for quality physical education to help address many of the issues related to childhood obesity.

This project followed 400 primary school students who received two 45 minute quality physical education lessons twice a week for four years. This group of students was then compared to another group of similar students who had received some, but much less, physical education from their general classroom teacher over the same four year period.

A number of interesting outcomes were reported. In health related terms

the project found that students who did not have regular quality physical education "entered secondary school at age 12 with a 30 per cent greater chance of having undesirably elevated blood LDL cholesterol and a 30 per cent greater chance of possessing an undesirable blood glucose control". These results give the students who participated in quality physical education a positive start towards avoiding obesity as they move into and through adolescence.

For those who worry that time spent in physical education may impact negatively on academic progress, the results supported what physical educationalists have long believed—which is that quality physical education is not an either/or proposition. Rather, quality physical education supports the development of healthier more well balanced kids who do better academically.

In the Australia project, "numeracy scores improved by an average of 11 points, writing by 10 and reading by a somewhat less convincing six points" over those recorded for students who did not participate in the programme. In other words the students who participated in the quality physical education programmes did better in numeracy and literacy than those who didn't. Healthier kids who do better academically is a win-win situation.

In New Zealand the focus on literacy and numeracy has reduced opportunities for [students](#) in other learning areas, such as physical education. It has led to a devaluing of some important learning areas throughout the education system and limited the opportunities for children to be well educated in the broader curriculum. Perversely, focusing on numeracy and literacy may actually lead to less learning. This is a classic lose-lose situation for everyone involved.

Three suggestions for any government that wishes to tackle child obesity would be: to invest substantially in improving the teaching and learning

of physical education (not externally provided sports); to restore the primary advisors in health and [physical education](#) who were removed in 2008 to allow for a concentration on numeracy and literacy; and to follow the lead of many other countries and reverse the decision to remove limitations on the supply of fat and sugar laden unhealthy food in school canteens.

These moves would go at least some way to protecting our young people from the considerable health risks and the reduced quality of life that obesity brings.

Provided by Victoria University

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