Pupil Responses to Physically Literate Adult Role Models

Introduction

The World Health Organization reports that globally, 31% of adults aged 15 and over did not meet the WHO recommendations for physical activity. Previous research indicates that physical educators choose a career in physical education because of a love of or enjoyment of physical activity and the desire to share physical activity with children. Physical educators want to be influential in the lives of young people and to be a physically active role model (O’Bryant, O’Sullivan & Raudenby, 2000). Senne et al. (2006) found that pupils were more active when the teachers provided a role model for fitness.

Knowing the power of a physically literate adult role model in promoting healthy active behavior for pupils may provide an incentive for physical educators to demonstrate their physical literacy and especially the love of physical activity. SHAPE America’s Philosophical Position on Physical Activity & Fitness for Physical Activity Professionals (2009) suggests that “participating in regular physical activity at a level sufficient to promote health-related physical fitness is an important behavior for professionals in all fields of physical activity at all levels”. With this background and motivation in mind the question arises, “Do pupils consider their physical education teachers a physically literate adult role model?” In this study we see the effects of a physically active adult role model intervention on pupils’ recognition of physically literate adult role models of healthy activity.

A role model is “a person who someone admires and whose behavior they try to copy”. (Cambridge Dictionaries online)

The effectiveness of role models in producing a change in human behaviors has been demonstrated using the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1997) in recent literature. The Social Cognitive Theory suggests that human behaviors change through observation of the actions and consequences of others’ behaviors and therefore, within SCT, there is a strong need for a credible role model of the behavior targeted for change (Glanz, 2002). Spencer (1998) also reminds us that the earliest ways we experience socialization is through mimicking our role models. Gilmer (1996) showed that for 250 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade pupils the most commonly reported favorite nonfamily role model was a teacher (22.9%). The behavior of the teacher has a greater impact than the verbal lessons taught. The SCT has successfully been used to promote healthy lifestyles, including daily physical activity, in various studies (Hallam, 1998; NASPE, 2002; Perry, 1993, 1998, 2000, Ransdell, 2003; Toobert, 2002; Wilson, 2002).

Methods

One hundred four eighth and ninth grade pupils from three different junior high schools representing two different school districts with varied SES status in a southwestern state of the United States were asked to identify physically literate adult role models. Each pupil was given the opportunity to list the titles, not names, of three different people they considered as role models of physical literacy. The role model survey was given three times to pupils by a university physical education pre-service teacher. The survey was given by the pre-service teacher before the pre-service teacher began teaching in a practicum experience (baseline), after two or four weeks of Active Teaching and after two or four weeks of Spectator Teaching.

Data was analyzed by counting the identified role model titles and indicating the top five identified role models. Data is represented by the percent of pupils indicating each role model.

Spectator first teacher: “I really want people to like me and I really got the feeling the pupils didn’t respect me enough as a teacher when the other teachers would participate with them and there I was just walking around and not participating with them or showing them how to do a skill I had someone else do it. It’s the first impression thing. I didn’t leave a good first impression. I really enjoyed the survey because I noticed a difference once I started to participate with them compared to when I was being lazy.”

Conclusion

Active physical educators are recognized by their pupils as role models of physical literacy and can encourage their pupils to become physically literate when they move competently and confidently along-side their pupils. Compared to the time other adults are in contact with pupils, teachers’ influence is limited and yet are considered by their pupils as an active role model of physical literacy. Physical educators who are not currently active with their pupils may become an active role model in the classroom.

Geri Conlin, PhD.
Weber State University, Ogden, Utah, USA

Results

SES status was measured by noting the percent of pupils on free or reduced lunch (Spectator First Teachers’ school, 28% & 24%; Active First Teacher’s school, 50%).

Spectator First Teachers: In the baseline survey, 3.9% of the pupils identified PE teachers as active role models. At the conclusion of Spectator Teaching, the number of pupils identifying PE teachers as role models of physical literacy increased to 6.3%. At the conclusion of Active Teaching, there was an increase in identifying the teacher as an active role model to 7.8% of the pupils.

Active First Teacher: In the baseline survey, 23.9% of the pupils identified PE teachers as active role models. At the conclusion of Active Teaching, pupils’ identification of PE teachers as role models increased to 41.16%. The conclusion of Spectator Teaching showed a return to baseline of 28.57% of pupils identifying the teacher as an active role model.

In addition to the physical education teacher, the other identified role models included parents, other family (siblings and extended family), coaches, and friends. For the Spectator First Teachers, on average, the pupils identified parents, 51.21%, family, 49.72%, coaches, 18.54%, and friends, 25.36%, as role models. For the Active First Teacher, on average, parents, 86.44%, family, 71.19%, coaches, 16.89%, and friends, 15.25%, were identified as role models of physical literacy.