Research Project Proposal Form

BA – In Early Years Education

Name: Christiane Schulte  Class group: Year 4

Working Title:

Aim of the research project:
To investigate whether children undertake sufficient daily physical activity to maintain their health and wellbeing.

Objectives:

Proposed method:
It is proposed that quantitative methods are employed to investigate the objectives of this research project. A questionnaire was designed to identify a) the early years practitioner’s view of the benefits and the barriers to implementing physical activity in the preschool setting and b) to identify the early years practitioner’s recommendations to improving the physical programme in the preschool setting.
An Investigation into the benefits of, and the barriers to, physical activity in the preschool setting

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Abstract

While it is widely accepted that physical inactivity in early years can lead to obesity and health issues both in childhood and later life, there is little research to support the further development of policies and procedures for additional teacher-lead and free play physical activity within early years’ settings.

This research project aims to share childcare practitioners’ experiences and views of the benefits and barriers of physical activities in early years’ settings, and to provide recommendations to improve existing programmes.

Quantitative research methods were selected for the implementation of this study and distributed to childcare practitioners to collect data about existing physical activities offered in early years care.

The results of the study showed that most practitioners are aware of the developmental benefits of physical activities. However, a lack of training and resources were identified as major barriers to implementing child centred physical activities.

The results of the study show the development and implementation of policies and procedures for the implementation of physical activities in early years settings is needed to ensure children are given the very best opportunities for health and well-being from an early age.
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Childhood is a naturally active time for children of all developmental stages and ages. Babies develop fundamental movement skills during the first weeks of their life that leads to lifelong skills such as walking, running and climbing, while building the basis for a healthy and active lifestyle (Kendra Cherry, 2016). During this early stage, physical activity has multiple benefits for a child’s health, wellbeing and cognitive development (Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development, 2011). In contrast, inactive and sedentary behaviour can lead to chronic disease and therefore it is essential children are encouraged to take part in physical activities and exercise (WHO, 2002). Childcare professionals and paediatricians recommend a minimum of sixty minutes physical activity per day for children between zero and six years of age (CDC, 2015).

This study provides deeper insight into the importance and benefits of physical activity for preschool children and highlights its role in preventing childhood obesity and mental health issues.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore early years practitioners’ views of the benefits of and the barriers to implementing physical activity in the preschool setting; and

2. To identify early years practitioners’ recommendations for improving the physical activity programme in the preschool setting.
Chapter Two: Literature Review
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on children’s physical activity in childcare settings. It considers the guidelines for children’s physical activity and issues regarding holistic child development.

Physical activity is important to children, especially to preschool children, as it enhances children’s health and well-being while influencing their future exercise behavior. The National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland (Get Ireland Active, 2014) are based on evidence from the Department of Health and Children (The National Health Promotion Strategy, 2000) within Ireland’s Health Service Executive and recommend all children between two and 18 years should be active at a moderate to vigorous level for at least sixty minutes per day. They state children need to learn skills necessary for confident engagement with physical activities.

2.2. Research regarding guidelines for children’s physical activity in childcare settings.

According to Hesketh et al (2015) an international comparison of countries considering guidelines for physical activities for children under five recommended 180 minutes of light, moderate and vigorous physical activity per day. A cross-sectional childcare-based observational study was used for the methodology. An Actiheart monitor was fitted to each of the participating 275 children under five years to collect data about their physical activity during the day. Comparisons between the amount of physical activity in childcare settings and at home were made. Findings indicated children engaged in more active play at preschool.

LaRowe et al (2016) advocates improving the quality of physical activity in the early years by increasing the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity in free play to an additional sixty minutes of teacher-led activity. Findings indicated teacher-led programmes influence the quality and level of children’s activity and helps
prevent obesity in children. The study sought the involvement of 20 ECE programs in the USA (equivalent to the Irish the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme), experts and state-wide ECE partners to develop an activity guide. Observation of teacher-led activity and measurements of children’s activity levels via accelerometer captured the required data over twelve months.

2.3 Physical activity and the impact on childhood health

Obesity is a growing epidemic in Ireland. Childhood obesity can lead to health problems including cardiovascular disease, Type 2 Diabetes and mental health issues. Evans et al (2010) observed the extent of childhood obesity among six year old Irish national school pupils. Data was collected from children attending senior infant classes during the standard school health check between 2005 and 2008. Height and weight was recorded by public health nurses and an information database created. Findings highlighted the link between a sedentary lifestyle, the consumption of high energy food and overweight children. Policies proposing preventive measures for obesity were recommended.

An Irish study by Early Childhood Ireland (2012) also investigated the levels of physical activity among preschool children in Ireland. The study found a physical activity had a positive effect including the development of strong bones, reduction of cardiovascular disease, and the improvement of psychological, social health and cognitive functioning. Multiple factors influenced the level of activity in young children, including demographic, social/cultural, psychological and environmental factors (National Academies Press, 2004).

Early Childhood Ireland (2012) asked Policy makers to consider the benefits of physical movement and play and incorporate structured physical activity sessions into national early year’s programmes. Practical suggestions for practitioners and parents include a practice guide to improve their own approach to physical play and education.
2.3.1 Social benefits of physical activities for children attending a preschool setting

The 2012 “Get Active” publication by the Department of Education and Skills described children as being happy to get involved in physical activities as individuals, in pairs or small groups. Learning outcomes subsequently manifest in emotional well-being, as children develop confidence in their abilities and personal success which leads to stronger self-esteem. Further benefits such as teamwork and team spirit, cooperation and turn taking skills are discussed in outcome four and five of this study.

The Sport and Development Organisation (2017) outlines three areas regarding the social and emotional development of children and youth: 1) inclusion and community building; 2) character building and delinquency and 3) community safety. The article describes the positive influence of sporting activities on peer relationships and social inclusion among young people and poses that positive moral behaviour is acquired through social interaction, which impacts deviant behaviour among children and youth.

2.3.2 Cognitive benefits of physical activities for children attending a preschool setting

Mashburn (2008) highlighted the link between the quality of social and physical environments and children’s cognitive development. Mashburn’s research is supported by the German research study of Felfe et al (2011) which analyses the effect of participation in sporting clubs on children’s skills development. The results indicate a positive effect on both cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Interestingly, the Georgia Early Childhood longitudinal study (2008) of 540 preschool children with a variety of full day preschool experience found that while the association between academic success and quality of the physical environment could not be established, physical environment does counteract the negative association between income and academic development.
2.3.3 The well-being benefits of physical activities for children attending a preschool setting

Cotter’s 2014 All-Island Policy on behalf of the Centre for Effective Services (CES) confirmed the positive effect physical and sporting activities have on children’s well-being. Stress reduction and the development of problem solving skills have an impact on children’s mental health and reduce depression and other mental health issues.

The EU Work Plan for Sport 2014-2017 recognises the impact of sport and physical activities on children’s health and recommends physical activity be encouraged from very early childhood with the aim of improving neuromotor capacities and healthy behaviours.

2.4. Physical activity levels in preschools

Despite the recommendations of both national and international research, Pate et al (2008) notes a lack of evidence regarding children’s physical activity at preschool. Their study highlights the level of children’s physical activities through an observation measurement system applied to 493 preschool children. A minimum of 630 minute observation intervals were recorded for each child with the results indicating that most children engaged only briefly in any physical activity, while sedentary activity appeared to consume 80% of children’s daily activities. This is a clear indication that preschool children are more likely to be inactive during their preschool. These results contradict Hesketh et al’s findings, 2015, which confirmed that children engaged in more active play during their time at preschool. This indicates potential differences in preschool curriculums and pedagogical approaches.

Children’s overall participation in physical activities are reported to be low and poorly in Ireland. The Health Behaviours in School Children report (NUI Galway, 2006) revealed over half of primary school children did not achieve the recommended level of physical activity. Research conducted by the Irish government in 2014 supports these findings. The Report Card on Physical Activity in Children highlights data from participating countries that impacts children’s physical activities such as watching television, sport participation, active transportation and PE participation. The report card gives Ireland a D minus overall and shows between 12-43% of children living in
Ireland are not getting enough physical exercise. In this study only one in eight children met the target of sixty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day.

2.5 Barriers to implementing physical activity in the preschool setting

2.5.1 Geographical environmental barriers
According to Tuncer et al (2015) the behaviour of children is linked to the design of their environment. An earlier study by Henry Bernard on school architecture in 1858 explains the importance of physical areas in educational settings. Tuncer et al’s (2015) study investigated:

- the level of quality of the surroundings of a building located within the setting
- the level of quality of the exterior features of the building
- the level of quality of the external security and
- the level of quality of the outdoor playground.

The study (2011/12) involved twelve preschools in Tokat Central County (USA) and aimed to assess their quality. The study found the environment and layout of a classroom has a strong impact on children’s behaviour. Space for physical activity in nursery classes were found to be unsatisfactory.

2.5.2 Cultural Barriers
Cultural barriers are not created or influenced by children’s values or beliefs (Everybody Active, 2017). Parents or carers transmit cultural differences to children and directly influence social outcomes for the child. The Canadian paper Everybody Active (2017) ‘Why don’t people participate’ outlined multiple reasons and barriers that prevented people participating in physical activities. The main cultural barriers, according to the study, are ethnical background and low income. The National Physical Plan (2013) Get Ireland Active acknowledges the need to require some cultural shifts to remove the barriers some people face in becoming active.
2.5.3. Teacher Training Barriers

The Irish Sport Council funded the 2010 Children’s Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study. This study found post primary physical education must be taught by a specialist while primary schools only require a general teacher with additional knowledge in physical education. No research was available on requirements for preschool teachers. This alone identifies a gap in physical education training for preschool teachers.

2.6 Improving Strategies for Early Years Settings

Evidence of the importance and benefits of physical activities in early years settings is widespread and there are many guidance documents and suggestions at a national and international level that describe the responsibilities of an early years setting. The White Paper on Sport (2007) recognises the vital role physical education and extra-curricular sport activities play in children’s education and health. The European Commission adapt the recommendation of the World Health Organisation that special attention must be given to the educational sector. At the EU level, the first EU Work Plan for Sport (2011- 2014) highlighted the need for further action by policy makers (EU Work Plan for Sport, Expert Group on Health - Enhancing Physical Activity, 2011).

“Get Ireland Active” (2012) provides an action plan to reverse the trend towards inactivity and offers immediate and long-term solutions. An action plan for carers and parents encourages the adult to become a role model for the child and to offer a variety of physical play activities.

Hanafin (2016) describes the purpose of prevention and early intervention when working with children. The promotion of healthy food and a knowledge of leading structured physical activities, linked with the availability of sufficient outdoor and indoor play space are key factors that influence learning outcomes for children. Hanafin suggests the importance of additional training and technical assistance for childcare practitioners to ensure childhood needs for physical activity are met.


2.7 Conclusion

Physical environments and practitioner knowledge create the foundations for child appropriate physical activity programs for the promotion of health and happiness in children.

However, there is a gap between the knowledge required to deliver quality, structured physical exercise in early years’ settings and the existing policies and procedures.

This study explores the gap through an investigation of childcare practitioner’s views of the benefits of, and barriers to, physical activity in the preschool setting.

The justification for this study is the author’s personal interest and passion for physical activities linked with the holistic development of children. The long-term aim is to carry out a national research study to investigate the link between physical exercise and academic success.
Chapter Three: Methodology
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the method considered to be the most efficient to collect required data to meet the study’s objectives. It outlines how the data was collected and discusses ethical considerations.

3.2. Research Method

The two main approaches to gather data for research studies can be divided in quantitative and qualitative categories. The purpose of quantitative research is to measure and quantify pre-structured data (Mukherji & Albon 2010), while qualitative research defines experiences, with an emphasis on sense and exploring the nature of an issue (Mukherji & Albon 2010).

Wyse (2011) provides further explanation for the differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research primarily allows for the exploration of reasons, options and motivations and uncovers trends in thoughts and opinions by collecting data from focus groups (focus discussions), individual interviews and observations. Quantitative research transforms data into usable statistics and is more structured than qualitative data, collecting information from various forms of surveys.

The aim of this research study is 1) to investigate early year’s practitioners’ views and experiences of the benefits of, and the barriers to, implementing physical activity in preschool settings and 2) to identify recommendations for the improvement of physical programmes in preschool settings. Quantitative research methods were employed to allow a structured set of questions which can be presented in graphical and narrative form (Mukherji & Albon 2010).

The questionnaire was designed to collect data in accordance with the study’s objectives. Questions one to three gathered valuable demographic data about the respondents. Questions four to twelve support objective one, while questions
thirteen to fifteen satisfy objective two. Open and closed questions were used to collected useful data (Mukherji & Alborn 2010).

3.3. Participants

Participants were all childcare practitioners, currently working in the early years, with the aim of identifying their personal views and opinions about physical activity in preschool settings as well as the limitations and barriers for physical activity within the setting. In total 25 childcare practitioners were provided with the questionnaire while 20 completed and returned the questionnaire.

3.4. Process and Procedure

A pilot questionnaire was presented to a small group of childcare practitioners (presented in the appendix) to identify areas of improvement or difficulties with the questions. Changes were made to questions 9 to 12 to allow multiple choice responses and to question 13 to reduce the question to one applicable answer. The final draft was approved by the supervisor of AIT by email and deemed ready for data collection purposes.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All participants were made aware that all data is treated confidentially and that the respondent’s anonymity is ensured. The participants were informed they may withdraw from the questionnaire process at any time and that the information they provided would be destroyed upon the study’s completion.

3.6. Data Analysis

The responses were analysed in graphic and narrative form. The graphics were generated by Microsoft Excel to illustrate the results in a variety of charts.
Chapter Four: Results
Chapter Four: Results

4.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a report and analysis of collected data. Findings are presented in graphic and narrative format and are related to the study's objectives.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Background Information

All participants were females working currently in a childcare setting. The most prevalent age group was 30+ (55%), followed by 21-25 (25%), 26-30 (15%) and 16-20 (5%).

4.2.1.1. Childcare Qualifications of Participants

Figure 1 illustrates participants’ childcare qualifications. The highest childcare qualification attained by participants was Level 7 (40%), followed by Level 5 (25%), Level 6 (20%) and other qualifications (15%).

Figure 1: Childcare Qualifications of Participants
4.2.1.2. Frequency of physical activities per week

The question captured the number of physical activities each week planned and implemented by childcare professionals working in childcare settings. The results, illustrated in Figure 2, show that 50% of participants engage children in physical activities 2-4 times a day (full time care) and 50% at least once a day. No participant confirmed whether physical activities are only offered once a week or less.

4.2.2. Exploring the early year’s practitioner’s view of the benefits and the barriers to implement physical activity in the preschool setting

The benefits of physical activities for the development of children attending a preschool setting.

4.2.2.1. Health benefits of physical activities for children attending a childcare setting.

This question offered multiple choice responses to participants including an option with personal (other than listed) views. All answers were grouped as outlined in Figure 3 below. The result showed the vast percentage of participants agreed with the listed health benefits of physical activity. 100% of participants agreed physical activity benefited the development of a healthy musculoskeletal system (bones, muscles and joints); 100% of participants agreed with the benefit of a healthy cardiovascular system (i.e. heart and lungs); 100% agreed with the benefit of neuromuscular awareness (i.e. coordination and movement control) and 90% agreed physical activities maintain a healthy body weight. 10% of participants added personal statements to the option “Others”. Responses included the additional benefit of developing the ability to take directions and follow instructions during a structured physical activity, and that physical activity is essential to children’s growth and learning especially between two and three years of age, as this age group is classified as “very active”. There was no disagreement with any of the listed statements.
4.2.2.2. Social benefits of physical activities for children attending a preschool setting.

Figure 4 presents responses to statements about the positive effect of physical activities on children’s social development. Findings show 75% of all participants believe physical activities support children to become healthy members of society; 85% believe physical activities enhance emotional well-being; 85% agreed physical activities increase children’s self-esteem; while only 60% believe physical activities have an impact on the development of empathy skills. 30% added personal opinions under the "Others" section. Participants added that physical activities support team work, team spirit, cooperation and turn taking skills, and that active learning takes place in communication, positive interpersonal skills and pure enjoyment for the children. Figure 4 shows the percentage of participants that agree with the listed benefits of physical activities for children (PA stands for physical activities).
4.2.2.3. Cognitive benefits of physical activities for children attending a preschool setting.

Figure 5 identifies participants’ opinions regarding the effect of physical activities on children’s cognitive development. 90% believe physical activities develop better concentration skills; 80% agree physical activities mature faster reaction times; 70% thought children learn to focus through physical activities; while only 60% link physical activities with better accuracy. Only 5% added an opinion, listed as “memory skills”. There was no disagreement with the questionnaire’s statements.
4.2.2.4. The benefits of physical activities on well-being for children attending a preschool setting.

All participants agreed with the listed statements. 100% agreed physical activities create fun, prevent childhood obesity and reduce the risk of depression and the effects of stress. No participant disagreed with any of the listed statements. 25% of participants added in the "Other" section that physical activities support freedom of self-expression; promote positive mental health; has a positive effect on the well-being of the teacher; and supports the development of fine and gross motor skills.

4.2.2.5. Barriers to implementing physical activity in the preschool setting.

Geographical environmental barriers.

This question identifies geographical barriers for the implementation of physical activities in a preschool setting. Participants rated four options, with 1 representing a large barrier and 4 no barrier at all. The availability of sufficient indoor space was rated by 45% of participants as a large barrier; by 25% as a barrier; 20% as a small barrier and only 10% as no barrier at all. Restricted outdoor play areas that do not provide enough space for running was rated by 45% of participants as a large barrier; 10% rated it as a barrier; 20% as a small barrier while 25% didn’t feel it was a barrier at all. Weather conditions (too wet, too warm etc.) proved to be a large barrier for 35% of respondents; another 15% felt it was a barrier; 15% thought it was only a small barrier, while 35% did not rate weather conditions as a barrier at all. The lack of alternative locations for physical activity were rated as a large barrier by 30% of participants while 35% felt it was a barrier; 15% a small barrier and 20% no barrier at all.

4.2.2.6. Cultural Barriers

Participants’ opinions of cultural barriers to physical activities in the preschool setting showed 55% strongly agreed that parental attitudes and values have a great influence on physical activities; 20% agree; 10% don’t think it’s relevant and 15% do not agree at all.
The questionnaire posed that parental involvement and support can act as a barrier to the level of children’s physical activity. 25% of respondents strongly agree with this statement; 40% agree; 25% are not sure while 15 % do not agree that parental involvement and support could be a barrier for children.

It was also posed that stereotypes (e.g. sport is only for boys) affect the involvement of children in physical activities. 45% of all respondents strongly agree with this statement, while only 15% agree. 25% don’t think stereotypes are relevant and 15% strongly disagree and are of the opinion that stereotypes have no influence at all.

Finally, it was posed that perceptions of race restrictions (e.g. only Irish children can play hurling) are a barrier for children to engage in sports. Only 10% of all respondents strongly agree with this statement. Another 10% agree and a further 10% think it is not relevant to physical involvement in sports at all. In contrast 70% of all respondents strongly disagree with this statement.

4.2.2.7 Teacher Training Barriers

The respondents were asked to identify whether training proved to be a barrier for teachers to implement physical activities in preschool settings. Multiple answers were possible from this set of questions. 65% felt that inadequate training is a barrier to physical activities in preschool settings. Another 65% identified resources as a barrier while 55% felt staff ratio blocked the implementation of physical activities. Teachers’ lack of interest in physical activities were identified by 60% as another barrier while only 20% felt that personal ability would have an influence on the implementation of a physical programme in a preschool setting. 5% added under "Other" they don’t feel there is any teacher training barrier and that they find it very easy to motivate children to take part in physical activities as children naturally need to engage in movement.

4.2.2.8 Additional barriers to physical activity in the preschool setting

20% of all respondents feel that geographical barriers influence physical activities in preschool settings. No-one agreed that cultural influences affected physical
activities. 5% added social barriers and 65% added time as the biggest barrier to the implementation of physical activities in a preschool setting. 10% consider administrative duties a barrier while no-one felt that childhood obesity was a barrier to physical activities in preschool settings.

4.2.3 Early years' practitioner's recommendations for improving the physical activity programme in the preschool setting.

4.2.3.1 Differences in pedagogical approaches.

Figure 6 compares the different statements with the pedagogical approach of the respondents. No respondents agreed with the statements that sporting activities are not suitable for preschool settings or that only light physical activities should be offered to preschool children. 40% were of the opinion that children need to be encouraged to engage in physical activities and 60% felt that physical exercise needed to be offered at least once a day.
4.2.3.2 Physical activities should be an inherent part of the daily curriculum.

95% of all respondents strongly agreed with the above statement and 5% agreed. 0% responded that they were neutral or in disagreement with the statement.

4.2.3.3 Recommendations to improve the physical activity programme in early years’ settings.

60% of all respondents made a personal recommendation to improve the physical programme within a preschool setting. Key recommendations were for more outdoor space, availability of appropriate outdoor clothing, more planning time, bigger indoor spaces and more staff training. 40% of respondents did not complete this question.

4.2. Additional Comments

Only 15% of all respondents made additional comments that included making training and resources compulsory for all childcare practitioners and parent’s motivation to involve their child in physical activities.

4.2.4 Conclusion

In response to objective one, it is clear from the results of the survey that most respondents rate physical activities for children in a preschool setting as very important for their health and mental development. Despite this, most respondents identified numerous barriers to physical activities in early year’s settings. Fulfilling objective two, the survey collected recommendations for the improvement of physical programmes in preschools which are discussed in detail in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five: Discussion
Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the significance of the study’s findings. The outcomes will be analysed in relation to the relevance of the research objectives and will relate the findings to other relevant research studies as summarised in the literature review.

5.2. General Information

All respondents hold relevant childcare qualifications with 40% holding a Level 7 qualification followed by the next largest group of respondents (25%) holding a Level 5 qualification. It is not clear if the differences between the level of qualifications have a direct influence on the physical activity programme offered by the practitioner. Further research in this area is recommended.

Physical development and physical exercise have a direct impact on the health and well-being of children and adults. In light of this early years policy makers must recognise recommendations made by national and international studies to implement a minimum daily level of physical activities for young children. It is important children learn these lifelong skills in the preschool and school environments to ensure that physical activity becomes part of their everyday life.

5.3. Objective 1: to explore the early years practitioner’s view of the benefits of, and the barriers to, implementing physical activity in the preschool setting.

The results of question four show that 50% of all respondents involve children at least once a day in physical activities. The other 50% state they aim to engage children at least 2-4 times during the day in physical play. This outcome shows that most childcare practitioners are aware of the importance of implementing physical activities in their daily schedule. Hesketh et al (2015) discusses guidelines from several countries regarding physical activities for children under five. This study
recognises the increased number of children in childcare and the importance of a physical activity programme in early year’s settings.

LaRowe et al (2016) recommend sixty minutes daily of physical free play and an additional sixty minutes of teacher led physical activities to have a positive influence on children’s health and wellbeing.

Data collected in questions five to eight considers opinions of the influences on children’s health and well-being. Numerous health benefits were listed and 100% of respondents agreed that physical activities influence the development of a healthy musculoskeletal tissue, the development of a healthy cardiovascular system, and the development of a neuromuscular awareness like coordination and movement control. Evans (2010) linked negative health outcomes like child obesity and cardiovascular disease with a sedentary lifestyle and the consumption of high energy food. An Early Childhood paper (2012) reinforces the Evans study stating that physical activities in the early years have a positive effect on children’s health and well-being. The study suggests policy makers incorporate structured physical activity lessons into early years’ programs.

The majority of respondents agreed with the need for, and positive influence of, physical activities in early years settings. Questions nine to twelve investigate early years’ practitioners’ barriers to implementing physical activities in their timetables. 45% of respondents felt that the availability of sufficient indoor and outdoor area are large barriers to the implementation of physical activities. Pate et al (2008) observed the lack of physical activities in pre-school services and noted that 80% of children’s daily activities in preschool are sedentary activities. Their findings were reinforced by the Irish government’s Report Card on Physical Activities (2014) that confirmed children living in Ireland are not getting enough physical exercise. 65% of all respondents held teaching training responsible while an additional 65% highlighted the lack of resources in early years settings. Another 60% agreed lack of teacher interest was responsible for the poor implementation of physical programs in preschool schedules. Tuncer et al (2015) outlined the link between the behaviour of children with the design of their environment. While the social, cognitive and well-being aspects of physical activity in the early years are well documented, lack of
teacher interest in physical programs alone poses a significant threat to any strategies designed to combat the growing epidemic of obesity in children.

5.4. Objective 2: to identify the early years practitioner’s recommendations for the improvement of physical activity programmes in preschool settings.

Questions thirteen to sixteen gathered data about the personal pedagogical approach and recommendations of respondents to improve children’s physical activity level. 60% recommended making more space available. Additional staff training and resources were recommended by 40% of respondents. These results are confirmed by the study ‘Get Ireland Active’ (2016) which provides an action plan to reverse the trend towards inactivity. Hanafin (2016) adds the knowledge of leading structured physical activities and further technical assistance are needed to ensure that children’s needs are met. Environmental, cultural and educational barriers clearly exist and resources must be committed to initiatives that support teachers to enhance their knowledge in this area if any real difference is to be made to early years programs and ultimately, childhood health.

5.5 Evaluation of Data Collection Method

The data for this study was collected by a questionnaire. This method was an effective tool for gathering information, views and opinions of childcare practitioners. The questions were developed in accordance with the study’s two objectives which were satisfied by the findings. The results provide a good indication of practitioner awareness of the benefits of, and barriers to, implementing physical activities in early years’ settings. It appears realistic to advise that collected data may be generalised to a wider group of childcare settings, however the new trend to introduce more natural, larger outdoor play areas and the establishment of outdoor settings may have an impact on the findings in the future.

The questionnaire was a cost-effective tool for the collection of data. The respondents could complete it in a few minutes, which made it easy and less time consuming to reply. This was reflected in the number of respondents that completed the questionnaire. 20 questionnaires were completed and considered for this research study.
A limitation of the study is gender bias. Only female practitioners participated in the study. However, the majority of childcare practitioners appear to be of female gender and therefore the collected data is relevant to early years’ settings. Another limitation is that only practitioners in established childcare settings participated in the study. Newly designed and purpose-built settings may feature the growing trend for more outdoor space in their planning.

While the respondents’ correct and honest answers cannot be guaranteed, it can be assumed that all respondents were giving truthful answers. All respondents completed the questionnaire in full, except questions 15 and 16. 60% answered question 15 and inserted their own recommendations. More investigation is required in the form of an open-ended question and it can be assumed that this is the reason for the difference in the reply rate.

Nevertheless, the quality of the findings is not reduced by the limitations and was useful for the evaluation of this study.
Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations
Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Recommendations

This study shows clearly the need for further research and the collection of additional data. Implications for practice are also essential to improve physical activities in childcare settings and to reduce existing barriers.

The findings of this study indicate the need for greater training of early years’ practitioners in the following areas:

• implementation of child-centred and age appropriate physical activity programmes;
• self-awareness training to understand the impact of one’s own attitudes and values;
• inclusion of physical activities into preschool regulations and policies; and
• recognition of the need for extra space for physical activities, especially in new settings.

This research paper is another step towards the implementation of a high quality childcare curriculum. Existing literature explains the importance of a minimum level of physical activities for preschool children however the results indicate the need for further study of physical activities amongst preschool children in Ireland. Given this study identifies the health and well-being benefits of physical activities for children, additional research is recommended regarding the positive impact or otherwise that physical activities have on academic success.

6.2. Conclusion

The results of this study show that overwhelmingly childcare practitioners hold considerable knowledge about the relationship between child development and
physical activities however the lack of training, resources and space available for
physical activities in preschools make it very difficult to implement a child-centred,
beneficial programme. If future curriculum can’t include physical activities in both
training and policies, there is a real risk that children might not receive the quality
care required to develop physically and psychological to their best potential.
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Appendix 1

Cover Letter

My Name is Christiane Schulte. I am a fourth-year student in BA (Hons) in Early Years Care and Education at Athlone Institute of Technology. I am distributing this questionnaire to 25 childcare practitioners, currently working in the childcare area for the purpose to complete my research study about physical activities in preschool settings.

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You do not have to complete the questionnaire if you do not want to participate and you can withdraw from the survey at any stage.

It should only take a few minutes to fill out the required questions.

Your response to the questions will remain anonymous and confidential. No Name or signature is required. All collected data will be only used for this research project and will be destroyed after the completion of this paper.

Please don’t hesitate to ask me any questions that may arise.

Thank you for your support and time,

Christiane Schulte
Pilot Questionnaire

An investigation into the benefits of and the barriers to physical activity in the preschool setting

Objectives

A) To explore the early year's practitioner's view of the benefits of and the barriers to implementing physical activity in the preschool setting

B) To identify the early year's practitioner's recommendations to improving the physical activity programme in the preschool setting
To explore the early year’s practitioner’s view of the benefits of and the barriers to physical activity in the preschool setting

Q 1: What age are you?
- 16-20 □
- 21-25 □
- 26-30 □
- 30+ □

Q 2: What gender are you?
- Male □
- Female □

Q 3 Please specify your childcare qualifications:
- Level 5 □
- Level 6 □
- Level 7 □
- Level 8 □
- Other □ please specify: ______________________

Q 4 Please state how often you offer physical activities to children in your care?
- once a day □
- 2-4 times during the day □
- less than once a week □
- Once a week □

Q.5 In your opinion what are the health benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting? (You can tick more than only one if applicable)

- □ The development of a healthy musculoskeletal tissues (bones, muscles and joints)
- □ The development of a healthy cardiovascular system (i.e. heart and lungs)
- □ The development of neuromuscular awareness (i.e. coordination and movement control)
- □ Maintaining of a healthy body weight
- □ None of above
- □ other, please state

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
Q.6 In your opinion what are the social benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting? (You can tick more than only one if applicable)

☐ to develop into a healthy member of society
☐ to enhance emotional well-being
☐ to develop empathy skills
☐ to increase self esteem
☐ none of above
☐ other, please state

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

Q.7 In your opinion what are the cognitive benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting? (You can tick more than only one if applicable)

☐ better concentration skills
☐ better accuracy
☐ more focus
☐ faster reaction times
☐ none of above
☐ other, please state

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
Q.8 In your opinion what are the wellbeing benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting? (You can tick more than only one if applicable)

☐ physical activities are creating fun
☐ physical activities prevent child obesity
☐ physical activities reducing the risk for depression and the effects of Stress
☐ none of above
☐ other, please state

___________________________________________________________________
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___________________________________________________________________
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Q.9 In your opinion what are the environmental barriers (e.g. space or layouts), if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting?

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Q10 In your opinion what are the cultural barriers, if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting

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___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
Q11 In your opinion what are the teacher training barriers, if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting

Adequate training ☐ Resources ☐ Staff ratio ☐
Other ☐ please state
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

To identify the early year's practitioner's recommendations to improving the physical activity programme in the preschool setting

Q12. Please tick the statement that applies the closest to your pedagogical approach (only one choice)

- Physical sport activities are not suitable for a preschool setting ☐
- Only light physical activities should be offered to preschool children ☐
- Children need to be encouraged to engage in physical activities ☐
- Physical exercise need to be offered for at least once a day ☐

Q.13 Do you agree, that physical activities should be an inherent part of the daily curriculum?

- Fully Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ disagree ☐ fully disagree ☐
Q.14 What recommendations, if any, could improve the physical activity programme in the early years setting.

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___________________________________________________________________

16 Any additional Comments?

___________________________________________________________________
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Final Questionnaire

An investigation into the benefits of and the barriers to physical activity in the preschool setting

Objectives

C) To explore the early year's practitioner's view of the benefits of and the barriers to implementing physical activity in the preschool setting
D) To identify the early year's practitioner's recommendations to improving the physical activity programme in the preschool setting
**Final Questionnaire on Physical Activity in a Preschool setting**

Please attempt to answer all the questions and tick the relevant boxes provided. All information provided by you will be treated confidential and remain entirely anonymous. You may withdraw from this process at any time.

**Q 1**: What age are you?
- 16-20 □
- 21-25 ☐
- 26-30 □
- 30+ □

**Q 2**: What gender are you?
- Male □
- Female ☐

**Q 3**: Please specify your childcare qualifications:
- Level 5 □
- Level 6 □
- Level 7 □
- Level 8 □
- Other □ please specify: ______________________

**Objective 1**: To explore the early year's practitioner view of the benefits of and the barriers to implementing physical activities in the preschool setting.

Please tick all the appropriate boxes.

**Q 4**: Please state how often you offer physical activities to children in your care?
- 2-4 times during the day □
- Once a day □
- Once a week □
- Less than once a week □

**Q 5**: In your opinion what are the health benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting? (You can tick more than only one if applicable)

- □ The development of a healthy musculoskeletal tissues (bones, muscles and joints)
- □ The development of a healthy cardiovascular system (i.e. heart and lungs)
- □ The development of neuromuscular awareness (i.e. coordination and movement control)
- □ Maintaining of a healthy body weight
- □ None of above
- □ other, please state

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
Q.6 In your opinion what are the social benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting?

☐ to develop into a healthy member of society
☐ to enhance emotional well-being
☐ to develop empathy skills
☐ to increase self esteem
☐ none of above
☐ other, please state

_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________

Q.7 In your opinion what are the cognitive benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting?

☐ better concentration skills  ☐ better accuracy
☐ more focus  ☐ faster reaction times
☐ none of above
☐ other, please state

_________________________________________________________________________________

Q.8 In your opinion what are the wellbeing benefits, if any, of physical activity in the preschool setting?

☐ physical activities are creating fun
☐ physical activates prevent child obesity
☐ physical activities reducing the risk for depression and the effects of Stress
☐ none of above
☐ other, please state

_________________________________________________________________________________
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Q.9 In your opinion what are the geographical environmental barriers, if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting?
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Q10: In your opinion what are the cultural barriers, if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting
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_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________

Q11 In your opinion what are the teacher training barriers, if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting

Adequate training ☐ Resources ☐ Staff ratio ☐ lack of interest ☐ own ability ☐

Other ☐ please state
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________

Q12: In your opinion are there any other barriers, if any, to physical activity in the preschool setting

Geographical ☐ Cultural ☐ Social ☐ Time ☐

Obesity ☐ Administration duties ☐

Please state:
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________
Objective 2: To identify the early year’s practitioner’s recommendations to improving the physical activity programme in the preschool setting

Q13: Please tick the statement that applies the closest to your pedagogical approach (only one choice)

- Physical sport activities are not suitable for a preschool setting
- Only light physical activities should be offered to preschool children
- Children need to be encouraged to engage in physical activities
- Physical exercise need to be offered for at least once a day

Q14: Do you agree, that physical activities should be an inherent part of the daily curriculum?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q15: What recommendations, if any, could improve the physical activity programme in the early years setting.

_________________________________________________________________________________
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Q16: Any additional Comments?

_________________________________________________________________________________
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Thank you for participation and the data provided.