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Rural School as a Centre of Physical Activity of a Child at Early School Age

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ABSTRACT

A rural school can play a key role as a centre of physical activity, supporting students in developing positive attitudes towards their own bodies and healthy lifestyles in line with the holistic pedagogy approach. The purpose of the present article is to analyse the physical activity of students attending grades 1–3 in a rural environment, and the ways in which the school promotes physical activity amongst them. As many as 135 students in grades 1–3 from rural schools participated in the analysis. Also, the article features interviews with 8 early childhood education teachers. The results show that students prefer a variety of physical activities, undertaken both during physical education classes and additional outside activities. They enjoy riding a bike, riding a scooter as well as playing with siblings and friends. Teachers promote physical activity through participation in national and local programmes and organization of sports activities and events. The rural school, owing to the proximity of nature and large green areas, has the potential to become a centre of physical activity for children. Organizing physical activities, integrating physical activity with education, and working closely with the local community are key to promoting healthy and active lifestyles among students. Supporting activities that promote movement and outdoor activities is essential for children so that they can benefit from a wide array of physical activities throughout their lives.

KEYWORDS: early childhood student, rural school, physical activity

Introduction

The rural environment is a specific geographic area characterized by a lower population density compared to urban areas and the prevalence of green spaces, farmland and

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nature. In such regions, people live in smaller communities, which fosters connecting with nature. Traditional forms of economy, such as agriculture and animal husbandry, form an important part of social and economic life in the rural environment. People living in villages are often closely tied to nature and the cycles of seasons, which has an impact on their lifestyle and culture. The dynamic development of our civilization also affects this environment. The high level of agricultural mechanization contributes, on the one hand, to a more comfortable, easy life, while on the other hand, it also has its drawbacks, that is noise, a hectic lifestyle and the elimination of physical exertion from the lives of individuals (Strzyżewski, 2013). In the light of the above, a rural school can play a key role as a centre of physical activity of a child, offering a range of unique opportunities. When can it happen? Only if the objectives set will focus on the formation of positive attitudes towards one's own body and sharing particular knowledge, skills and attitudes, so that the current student, and the future graduate and adult citizen will willingly take care of their own body, physical fitness and health throughout life, and will have resources necessary to achieve it. This task will only be successful if it is done in compliance with the assumptions of holistic pedagogy, where integral and balanced human development is thought of with the participation of educators and based on self-education (Śliwowski, 2020). "The rural environment is still a place where a specific type of social relations (neighbours and relatives, and based on long-term residence) and some specific features of culture are observed, for instance, the importance of traditions, including oral tradition, the exposed role of older people seen as authority figures, conservative tendencies" (Matyjas, 2019, p. 328). Hence, the school and the teacher are invariably highly regarded and respected there. Physical activity is indispensable in the lives of young people (Rokicki, 2023). It is an integral part of health. Supporting activities that promote physical activity taking into account the developmental and educational needs of children is complementary to preventive activities (Wolny & Wojtasik, 2023). Taking up different kinds of physical activity promotes good health according to the principle saying that there are no students who are incapable of moving, there are only students with varied psychomotor abilities and interests. Every student has the potential to be good at the form of physical activity of their choice, and the role of school is to support them in this process. Any activity that promotes movement and outdoor activities among children regardless of the season should undoubtedly be supported.

Analysis of the research

The purpose of this article is to present the physical activity of primary school students (grades 1–3) in a rural environment and to analyse how schools promote physical activ-

ity. In the course of the analysis, I will attempt to answer the following questions: how rural schools promote physical activity among early childhood students, what forms of physical activity are preferred by students in grades 1–3. Quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in the research. As many as 135 students in grades 1–3 (45 from each year group) participated in the survey. Additionally, eight early childhood education teachers employed in rural schools were interviewed. Participants asked that their names as well as the names of their facilities remain anonymous. The research was conducted in April and May 2024.

The period of early childhood education is the so-called golden age of motor skills. It is the time when children are very agile, fast, and generally enjoy sports. “Compulsory PE lessons do not meet the movement needs of the younger child. Therefore, it seeks to take up physical activity outside of school, when they come back home” (Krawczyński, 2019). When analysing the data presented in Chart 1, it can be inferred that almost all students regardless of age participate in physical activity classes organized by the school, i.e. PE lessons. All outdoor activities such as riding a bike, riding a scooter, playing with siblings and friends, are also highly popular. Participation in additional activities organized by the municipality was the least popular. The reason may be a limited offer of sports activities, the economic level of the family or problems with dropping the children off and picking them up.

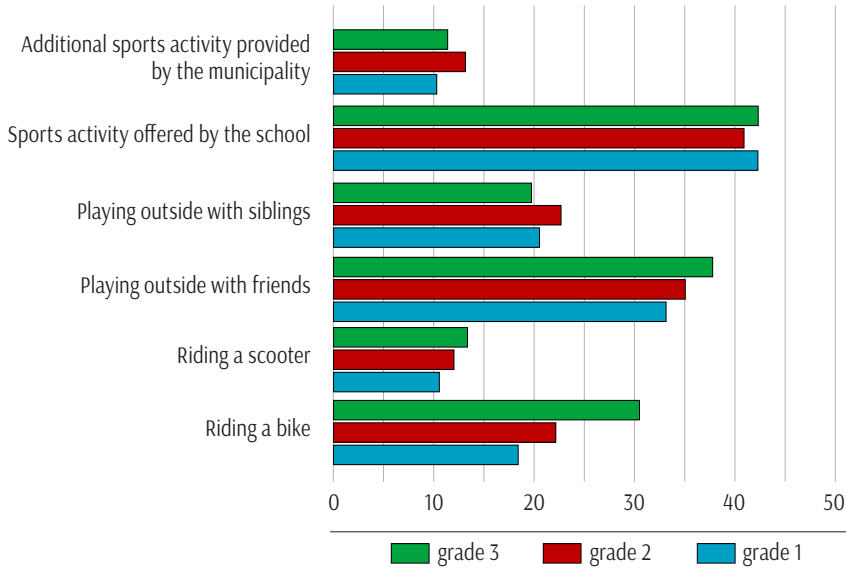


Chart 1. Types of physical activity undertaken by students during the day

Source: own research

The children could comment on their level of physical fitness. The vast majority of respondents regardless of age consider their level of physical fitness to be either very good or good. In the opinions of third-grade students, an upward trend is observed. This may be due to the fact that older children often have higher self-esteem and self-confidence, which may in turn affect their subjective assessment of their physical fitness. They may feel more competent and confident as regards their skills compared to younger students. Moreover, the natural process of growing up and becoming an adolescent positively impacts their strength, coordination and endurance. In addition, third graders are more experienced in participating in physical education classes and taking part in sports competitions.

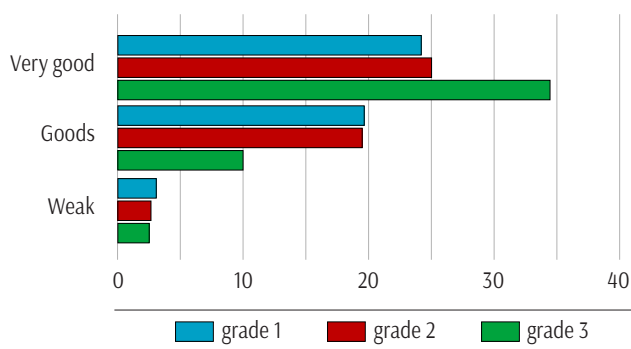


Chart 2. Level of physical fitness according to children themselves

Source: own research

It is the nature of a child to be interested in all sorts of activities. An important element for maintaining the need for movement and physical activity will be the role models provided by school and family (Petersem et al., 2020). Below are the results of responses provided in the survey: Who encourages you to take up physical activity most often? Parents were indicated by 63 students, teachers by 54 students, and friends by 18 students. The higher number of students indicating parents (63 students) and teachers (54 students) as facilitators of physical activity compared to friends (18 students) may result from the strong influence of the family on the child's daily life, and the direct role of teachers in arranging and promoting physical activity at school. Parents can actively encourage their children to participate in a variety of physical activities by enrolling them in sports classes, spending time together outdoors, or organizing family outings. Teachers, on the other hand, have a direct impact on students' daily physical activity by organizing PE lessons, running sports classes and team games. What is more, they frequently organize school sports competitions, tournaments or sports days which

motivate students to participate and compete. Teachers inspire students by being committed and passionate about sports.

Responses to the question on how rural schools promote physical activity are provided in interviews with the teachers.

Teacher 1: "At the school where I teach, of course, I run PE lessons three times a week as provided for in the core curriculum. In addition, our school participates in nationwide programmes promoting physical activity, which often include a healthy diet component. The programmes are: Nutrition Education for Juniors (Junior Edu-żywanie), School Adventures of the Power Gang (Szkolne Przygody Gangu Mocniaków), Fit School Programme (Program Fit School) and Keep Fit (Trzymaj formę). Recently, we have joined the Active School programme. Moreover, there is a judo section at our school. The children like the coach very much and are eager to attend these classes. In general, they like to move. Usually, all of them exercise in PE classes. Non-participants in my PE classes are not an issue. Every year we participate in sports competitions organized by the municipality, that is Municipality Olympics and cross-country running."

Teacher 2: "I run my PE classes according to the weekly timetable. My students like them very much, in particular when the weather is nice and we can exercise on the school's sports field. In addition, I am in charge of activities resulting from the implementation of the Nutrition Education for Juniors, School Adventures of the Power Gang or Fit School programmes. Also, I teach classes under the Athletics for Everyone programme. We take part in the Municipality Olympics. Our school offers ballroom dancing classes for children as well."

Teacher 3: "Students in grades 1–3 attend PE classes on a regular basis. They like them very much. They learn various sports disciplines, movement techniques and principles of a healthy lifestyle. The lessons are varied and interesting. We have a lot of sports equipment. I organize races or obstacle course racings. Our school also participates in programmes promoting physical activity among students, such as: Nutrition Education for Juniors, School Adventures of the Power Gang, Fit School Programme. The programmes promote a healthy diet among children, and help choose appropriate nutrients for the daily diet. They are very popular among children. In particular, the Fit School Programme, which is a helpful relief during class time, stimulates the cardiorespiratory system and musculoskeletal organs that in turn increase further students' engagement. Also, we hold a sports day and take part in the Municipality Olympics."

Teacher 4: "In our school, children really enjoy physical education classes. They have a need for moving. That's why I try to make sure that the classes are tailored to their needs and interests. They enjoy team games, especially '5 passes', striking and fielding games, and relay races. We go to the swimming pool once a week, the school offers additional ballroom dancing classes, the PE teacher runs classes as part of the school sports club for early childhood education students once a week. We implement the following programmes: Fit School, Keep Fit. We always field a team for the Municipality Olympics."

Teacher 5: "In my opinion, our school promotes physical activity a lot. In addition to PE classes, I organise field games for the students, which they really enjoy. When we celebrate Autumn Festival, Spring Day, Water Day, International Earth Day, Empty Classroom Day, Week with a Book, I always incorporate some kind of physical activity tasks in the schedule. This provides an attractive way to consolidate the content covered during the lessons. In addition, we participate in the following programmes: Keep Fit, Fit School, Nutrition Education for Juniors. I prepare students for the Municipality Olympics and cross-country running. With a fellow PE teacher, we organise orienteering. Children need to be encouraged to take up physical activity. There is no gym at our school, but we have great surroundings to take advantage of, i.e. the forest and meadows. In addition, a bike rally is held every year. In my opinion, that's a lot."

Teacher 6: "The school is definitely an institution that promotes physical activity. As part of the PE classes, children play games, run, jump, throw, and learn that physical activity equals good health. I implement the following programmes focused around physical activity: School Adventures of the Power Gang, Fit School. I have applied for the Active School programme. In the winter, we go to the swimming pool as part of the municipality campaign called "I can swim". It is also possible to join football classes held at school, but they are extra charged. These classes are taught by third-party instructors. Once a year, we participate in sports competitions for grades 1–3. It is the so-called Small Olympics."

Teacher 7: "The school highly encourages children to be physically active. PE classes are held on a regular basis. In addition, our school actively participates in various projects promoting healthy lifestyles and physical activity, including Chrumas Challenges (Wyzwania Chrumasa), Keep Fit, the National Centre for Nutrition Education (Narodowe Centrum Edukacji Żywnościowej), Little Champion (Mały mistrz). Owing to such projects, students have the opportunity to participate in a variety of initiatives that not only integrate the school community, but also shape their awareness of the importance of physical activity for their health and well-being. Children participate in sports competitions organized at our school, for instance to celebrate Children's Day, and in sports competitions organized by the municipality. Ballroom dancing classes are held at the school too. My female students participate in dance tournaments, then the whole class congratulates them on their success, we look at the photos and enjoy their passion together with them. Family Days are also held, with physical activity games being part of such events."

Teacher 8: "The children like PE classes. They are disappointed if, for some objective reason, a PE class is cancelled. In addition, we arrange meetings with athletes from the local community. At our school, we also implement programmes for primary school students focusing on physical activity. These programmes include: Keep Fit, Fit School, Chrumas Challenges. We participate in sports competitions, that is the Municipality Olympics. Children in grade 3 and older compete in a community ballroom dance competition, we go to swimming classes. In addition, I implement an innovative idea, namely I organize games for children during the long break."

The statements presented above confirm a huge contribution of the school and individual teachers in promoting physical activity and making the lessons more attractive.

Each school participates in various national and local programmes promoting physical activity and a healthy diet. Chrumas Challenges is a programme financed by the European Union and the national budget implemented by the National Support Centre for Agriculture. The challenges of the main character include a variety of games aimed at promoting healthy eating habits based on increasing fruits, vegetables and dairy products in the daily diet, and encouraging an active lifestyle. The purpose of the School Adventures of the Power Gang programme is to share knowledge with the students so that they will be able to prepare balanced meals according to the principles of healthy nutrition, and spend their free time in an active way. The Fit School programme is implemented as a result of cooperation between the Medicovert Foundation and the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice. The programme's main objective is to strengthen the children's health potential by increasing the level of physical activity and expanding the children's knowledge of the relationship between physical activity and good health, combined with forming an attitude of taking personal responsibility for one's own health. Also, the nationwide educational programme Keep Fit is worth mentioning. It was developed as a result of cooperation between the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate and the Polish Federation of Food Industry, and aims at developing healthy interests and habits among students. It is implemented as a two-tier project combining balanced nutrition and regular physical activity. The programme was awarded honorary patronage of the Minister of Health, Minister of Education and Science, Minister of Sports and Tourism, and Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Nutrition Education for Juniors programme originated as an initiative of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health to implement educational activities in the school environment that will involve students, teachers and parents. The main objective of the programme is to take care of children's health and their proper development. The Athletics for Everyone programme was developed out of the need to popularize athletics as the most versatile sport for children. In addition to regular exercise sessions, local sports events are held where participants have fun and may meet sports stars. The Little Champion programme implemented by the School Sports Association is designed for students in grades 1–3 as well as early childhood education and physical education teachers. The programme mainly aims at encouraging students to acquire new skills, including motor skills, by making physical education classes more attractive and offering opportunities to acquire sports skills. The Ministry of Sports and Tourism's largest-ever programme aimed at children is called Active School. It assumes optimal use of school and local government infrastructure to comprehensively support physical activity in students' leisure time. Each of the programmes described above is highly appreciated by students and teachers alike, because they focus on a variety of aspects of a healthy diet and physical activity, thus promoting all-round development of young people. They constitute

an important step towards improving the health of children in Poland, and have the potential to make lasting, positive changes in their lifestyles. They support not only physical activity, but also dietary and social education, which seems crucial for their proper development.

Teachers organize physical education classes on a regular basis according to the weekly timetable, adapting them to the current weather conditions and students' needs. A number of schools offer additional sports activities and sections that are very popular with students, such as judo, football, and ballroom dancing sections. School Sports Clubs and extra-curricular activities such as orienteering and field games are organized. Schools regularly participate in various sports competitions and organize events aimed at promoting physical activity. Students eagerly participate in events such as the Municipality Olympics and municipality cross-country running. There are also local festivals, sports days, and meetings with local athletes, which further motivates children to be active. Teachers are committed to integrating physical activity with other educational and social activities, i.e. they include physical activity tasks in the schedule of various events, such as Spring Day, Water Day, International Earth Day. Physical activity is also used as a relief during classes to increase students' engagement and focus.

Conclusion

A rural school can play a key role as the physical activity centre for a child, offering numerous unique opportunities that may not be available in urban schools. Access to large green areas provides opportunities for outdoor games, and various forms of athletics. The proximity of forests, meadows and other green areas fosters the organization of orienteering, hiking, bike rallies and cross-country running. The rural school often serves as the centre of the local community, making it possible to hold sports and recreational events for the entire community, such as picnics and family days with elements of physical activity.

Schools show a strong commitment to promoting physical activity through a variety of programmes, regular physical education classes, additional sports sections, and participation in sports competitions and events. Students are actively encouraged to move, and physical activity is integrated with other educational and social activities. Taking advantage of available resources and the natural environment further supports students' healthy and active lifestyles. The rural school has the potential to become a centre of physical activity for children, offering various forms of exercise, and integrating education with the local context and resources, as noted by Kazimierz Chmura et al. (2014). It is important that teachers and the local community work together to

make the most of the possibilities they have, promoting healthy and active lifestyles among the youngest children.

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