How can physical activity improve school well-being?
– A qualitative process evaluation

Authors
Holt, A-D., Smedegaard, S., Lund-Cramer, P., Skovgaard, T., Christiansen, L. B.
Department of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark
Corresponding author: Anne-Didde Holt - adholt@health.sdu.dk

Background & Purpose:
In spite of the growing evidence of school physical activity’s (PA) positive effect on both physical and mental health, there is still a considerable amount of children for whom PA at school is linked to negative experiences and not to something that contributes to their well-being and joy of movement.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been proven to be an effective framework in regard to gain psychological growth and well-being in life, as it strives to support the human’s three basic needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into students’ experiences, when testing a PA-school-intervention grounded in SDT (Move for Well-being in School), using a qualitative process evaluation approach.

Move for Well-being in Schools is a multicomponent school-based physical activity intervention targeting school-aged children and youth from 4th to 6th grade (age 10-13 in the Danish school system). The intervention comprises three areas of PA in the school context: PE-lessons, In-Class-Activities and Recess.

Methods:
For the qualitative process-evaluation two out of 12 intervention-schools were selected as in-depth cases, in which one 4th grade and one 6th grade class were selected to be followed closely. During the course of seven months (November 2015 – May 2016) 28 days of participant observations combined with 10 semi-structured focus-group-interviews with in all 37 students were carried out. Data were analyzed according to the deductive content analysis, where autonomy, competence and relatedness formed the categorization matrix.

Key Results

Conclusion:
PA at school is often linked to competitive and performance pressure, which can be a stress factor for a number of students. Teachers should therefore strive to redirect focus from competition orientation to more broad-based task orientation. Among these, one ambition should be to strengthen the social climate in the classroom. An inclusive environment contributes to students’ better understanding of each other which is a prerequisite for students’ possibility to act autonomous and feel competent.