

## Chapter 6

# Using Sport and Play to Achieve Educational Objectives

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**A**cknowledging the work of the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP IWG), the Commonwealth Secretariat, UN Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNOSDP and many other partners globally, this chapter builds on this work and uses the experience of Right To Play and its government partners to further articulate how state and non-state actors can use sport and play to reach their educational objectives.

Several evaluations have shown that when well designed, sport and play programmes in school can improve academic attitudes, behaviours and overall success (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010; Ratey 2008; Bailey et al. 2009; Stead and Neville 2010). This paper does not reiterate this evidence in depth, but rather shares Right To Play's experience working with governments and formal education institutions to highlight key components of how sport- and play-based programmes have contributed to achieving educational objectives. The paper provides guidance on how these stakeholders can begin to use what is already known to strengthen education systems.

The work Right To Play and local partners undertake with ministries of education to enhance the quality of education through policy formulation, curriculum development and teacher training is specifically highlighted.

The paper concludes with a set of comprehensive recommendations for the Commonwealth Advisory Body on Sport's (CABOS) consideration, which are designed to support stakeholders interested in advancing sport and play for education. The recommendations highlight potential action and strategy in the following areas:

- i. Setting the stage
- ii. Design, development and delivery
- iii. Monitoring and evaluation

In considering these issues, CABOS is encouraged to build upon and reinforce existing recommendations made by sport and play stakeholders, notably: SDP IWG 2008; ACSM, Nike and ICSSPE 2012; and Kay and Dudfield 2013).

## 6.1 Introduction

As the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals nears, global discussions on education increasingly focus on the gains and challenges of the last decade. As noted in UNESCO's most recent EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2012), while the advancements in primary school enrolment rates are significant, other EFA goals surrounding quality education and early childhood care and education have experienced little comparative growth. Although many children are accessing education in rates higher than ever before, their ability to advance and complete a full cycle of primary education is not well supported in many contexts. Out of the 650 million children enrolled in primary school, 120 million fail to reach Grade 4. These numbers are even lower for secondary enrolment. As a result of underinvestment in education, teachers often enter training programmes with limited subject-specific knowledge. As such, teaching programmes often focus on further developing this knowledge, rather than focusing on pedagogy or effective teaching techniques. It is well supported that inequality in access, poor quality education, limited number and capacity of teachers, and resulting low retention rates have emerged as some of the most serious issues facing education today.

As we move towards a Post-2015 Framework, stakeholders must consider the various reforms and investments needed to effectively address these educational challenges. It is well established that sport and play have innately enjoyable and participatory qualities that, when tapped into effectively, have the power to enhance educational outcomes. In order to achieve these positive outcomes, programmes must be well designed, implemented and evaluated to ensure that the best aspects of sport and play are used (Bailey et al. 2009; Stead and Neville 2010;

Crabbe 2009). Although the ability of sport and play to impact and address these challenges cannot be ascribed to all programmes and is broadly under-evaluated, growing research over the last decade highlights the positive contribution sport and play can make to the healthy cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children and youth (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff 2008; Ratey 2008; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010; Bailey 2006; Trudeau and Shephard 2008).

## 6.2 Purpose of this chapter

Acknowledging the work of the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP IWG), the Commonwealth Secretariat, UNESCO, UNOSDP and many other partners globally, this chapter aims to build on this work and use the experience of Right To Play and its government partners to further articulate how state and non-state actors can use sport and play to reach their educational objectives. Several evaluations have shown that when well designed, sport and play programmes in school can improve academic attitudes, behaviours and overall success (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010; Ratey 2008; Bailey et al. 2009; Stead and Neville 2010).

This brief paper will not reiterate the evidence in depth, but rather will share Right To Play's experience working with governments and formal education institutions to highlight key components of how these programmes have addressed the challenges. It will also aim to provide guidance on how the stakeholders can begin to use what is already known to strengthen their education systems. Recognising that there is limited available research in this area, particularly from low-income countries, Right To Play will reflect primarily on the evidence and case studies available and personal experience to identify lessons learned and good practises. Right To Play acknowledges the importance and role of sport and play in the delivery of informal education; however, this approach will not be addressed in this chapter.

## 6.3 Achieving education objectives through sport and play

### 6.3.1 *Increased engagement in learning, attendance and retention*

A number of studies have shown that education through sport and play allows children and youth to better enjoy and engage

with the learning process, while enhancing social connectedness between participants. This creates an environment more conducive to open communication and encourages a love of learning (McCune 1998; Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff 2008; Jeanes 2010; Kay 2009; Crabbe 2009; Colucci 2012).

Evaluations of Right To Play programmes have found that student participation and levels of concentration have increased as a result of participation in sport and play. In an evaluation from Thailand, it was found that students in participating schools were active class participants 77 per cent of the time as compared to students in non-participating schools where that figure was 48 per cent (Right To Play 2008). Some teachers from the evaluation attributed the increase in effective class participation to an enthusiasm about the games through which the students were being taught, as well as the active learning methodologies employed by teachers. Increased motivation to participate in and attend school consistently emerges as a strong outcome for students involved in Right To Play activities, and is associated with long-term outcomes such as increased enrolment and retention in school. This was seen in an external study in rural Azerbaijan, where school principals reported an increase in attendance from 15 to 20 per cent, as well as by teachers in the Thailand evaluation (Harry Cummings and Associates Inc. 2007; Right To Play 2008). In Liberia, findings have confirmed that integration of Right To Play's activities has increased school attendance and performance by giving children incentives to learn (Rothe 2011).

### *6.3.2 Increased academic achievement*

Additional evidence supports that well-designed sport and play programmes can contribute to improved academic performance of students (Bailey et al. 2009; Stead and Neville 2010). A literature review of studies examining the link between school-based physical education and play-based learning programmes and academic outcomes from 11 different countries found: positive associations between general physical activity and academic performance in 79 per cent of the studies; positive associations between classroom or physical play-based learning activities and academic performance in 89 per cent of the studies; and positive associations between extracurricular physical activity and academic performance in 100 per cent of the studies (US Department of Health and Human Services 2010). As highlighted

by additional research, incorporating sport and play in teaching methodologies can enhance cognitive functioning in a variety of ways, ranging from enhancing neurological development and cerebral growth, to optimising the mind-set to improve alertness, attention and motivation by providing a break in cognitive tasks (Ratey 2008; Pellegrini and Smith 1998; Bjorklund and Douglas Brown 1998; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010). Although there is insufficient evidence to determine the exact catalyst for the change in each individual activity, evaluations of Right To Play programmes have also demonstrated that participants have stronger academic achievement than non-participants, including stronger language and numeracy skills. In Ghana, Benin and Mali, survey participants scored 85 per cent, 83 per cent and 91 per cent respectively on cognitive, attitudinal and behaviour-related tests. This was compared to 62 per cent, 67 per cent and 82 per cent in the same areas for children who were not engaged in sport and play activities (Right To Play 2009).

#### 6.4 How are governments using sport and play to contribute to education objectives?

Recognising growing evidence in this area, some governments have made significant efforts to harness the potential of sport and play to reach their own educational objectives. Right To Play and local partners work with ministries of education to enhance the quality of education through teacher training and curriculum development. To ensure the effective integration of learning through sport and play into the curriculum, teachers are trained in the pedagogy of physical play – either through in-service or pre-service trainings. With coaching and support over time, teachers strengthen their capacity to apply these new approaches in their classrooms, either integrated into existing curricula or as complements to the existing school day structure. Some examples of this work include:

**Thailand:** In 2010, the Thai Royal Ministry of Education developed a new basic education curriculum that introduced life skills education. Right To Play, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario entered into a partnership with the ministry to integrate the use of sport and play for life skills development in the basic primary curriculum.

**Benin:** Following a national forum on education in 2007, the Republic of Benin’s Ministry of Education (MOE) undertook the

development of an early childhood education programme based on holistic development for children aged two and a half to five. During the curriculum development process, the MOE highlighted an absence of play-based learning – a widely recognised foundation of early childhood development – in the existing programme. To support these reforms in the curriculum, the MOE initiated a working group with Right To Play, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, the National Institute for Research and Training in Education, and the Department of Preschool Education.

**Rwanda:** For years Right To Play has worked with UNICEF, the Rwandan Ministry of Education (MOE), the Rwandan Education Board and local partners to ensure holistic child development through the implementation of sport and play programmes in school districts across Rwanda. Following the success of this approach, Right To Play’s Red Ball Child Play and Early Child Play modules were validated by the National Education Board. In 2011, the MOE decided to formally include these approaches into the National Physical Education Curriculum.

Although these examples are relatively too new to assess their full impact, a number of promising approaches and challenges can be extracted from each example and Right To Play’s experience more broadly for governments and other stakeholders with similar goals. The recommendations below have been informed by these case studies.

## 6.5 Methodology

In each example, governments and partners worked together to tailor existing Right To Play, play-based materials to specific cognitive, physical, emotional and social development outcomes in children and youth. An important component of using sport and play effectively for learning is related to stimulating children’s thinking around a learning outcome of the game they are about to play.

Right To Play’s methodology, entitled ‘Reflect-Connect-Apply’, is based on the work of educationalists such as Freire, Brown, Piaget, Bransford and others, all of whom cumulatively support the concept of an educational process that is active, relevant, reflective, collaborative and applied. The activities are designed for a range of different ages and development stages, and are focused on a variety of key learnings. This methodology has

emerged as a strong indicator of success in assessments of existing sport- and play-based school programmes. As such, it has been adapted by the governments in the above examples and integrated in formal curricula and training.

## 6.6 Recommendations

The following recommendations, designed to support stakeholders interested in advancing sport and play for education, build upon and reinforce existing recommendations made by sport and play stakeholders. They are not all encompassing, and readers are invited to consider additional recommendations of this nature, notably: SDP IWG 2008; ACSM, Nike and ICSSPE 2012; and Kay and Dudfield 2013 when considering reforms in this area.

### *Setting the stage*

- Conduct reviews of existing curricula to address specific gaps in learning and to tailor interventions to address these gaps.
- Engage a number of stakeholders, including education authorities, parents and teachers, education specialists and academia, to create a holistic approach to childhood development through sport and play.
- Consider environmental conditions that help ensure that sport- and play-based approaches are effective, including the provision of ongoing capacity building and refresher training for teachers (particularly in the areas of inclusion, gender equality and child protection), the provision of safe environments, and investments in infrastructure to create safe play spaces.
- Ensure understanding and support of parents and communities. In many contexts, transmission-based or didactic approaches to education are the norm, and sport- and play-based methods for learning are largely undervalued and unknown to many parents and adults working with children.
- Consult, inform and involve children, parents, parent-teacher associations, communities and educators at all levels to ensure buy in and support. Provide supporting information and research in local languages.

- Promote policies and practises which ensure equity in access, including equitable distribution of resources, engagement in decision-making, participation and leadership, and training with a specific focus on gender equality, inclusion and child protection.
- Provide all schools, including the centres for early childhood development, with infrastructure, sports facilities and equipment for active learning, including land titles where applicable.
- Ensure safe places for active learning and recreation in schools. Develop specific guidelines and policies which align with international standards in child safeguarding (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup>) for education institutions.
- Ensure adequate investments for education which promote learning through sport and play, including but not limited to resources for teacher training and ongoing mentorship and support, adaption and delivery of curriculum and training materials, infrastructure, and built-in pilot periods and phased implementation and scaling for reforms.

Evaluations of Right To Play programmes underscore the need for comprehensive and ongoing training for teachers. These evaluations suggest that teachers with training and support demonstrate a more collaborative teaching style. In Thailand, the trainees tested for their appropriate use of child-centred teaching scored 26 per cent higher than their counterparts (Right To Play 2008). Other studies have shown that teachers who received this training were also more likely (up to eight times in Thailand specifically) to use inclusive teaching practices than non-participating teachers (Right To Play 2009; Harry Cummings & Associates Inc. 2007; Berman 2008; Centre for Community Based Research 2008).

#### *Design, development and delivery*

- Consider both the integration of sport- and physical play-based learning into existing curricula, and compulsory physical education periods when approaching holistic child development.
- Adapt existing curricula to achieve specific objectives through age-appropriate sport and play activities (i.e. life skills development).

- Adopt a sport- and play-based education methodology that is active, reflective, collaborative and applied.
- Ensure cultural relevance of sport and play activities. This may require significant research, scoping and time by pedagogical experts in country in order to identify and adapt traditional games and activities from different areas of the country.
- Ensure teachers and educational authorities are well trained in the pedagogy of physical play. In many contexts, formal teacher training does not integrate sport and physical play teaching methodology into the curriculum. As such, significant resources are necessary to train trainers and teachers on a national or even provincial scale.
- Ensure ongoing coaching for teachers to support the application of new knowledge and skills. Training in absence of ongoing support is not enough to ensure intended outcomes.
- Ensure that physical education programmes incorporate the use of sport- and play-based learning for holistic health (including sexual and reproductive health).
- Promote the development of disability sport in all educational settings, and ensure teacher training includes adaptive and inclusive play-based activities.
- Ensure all training for educators includes how to adapt activities and create inclusive experiences.
- Engage a number of stakeholders in the consultative process, including educational specialists in pedagogy of physical play and sport- and play-based learning practises, and multiple government ministries and levels of government with shared goals.
- Consider the number of trainers needed to adequately deliver training of teachers over the desired period.
- Build in pilot periods during which new curricula can be tested and adapted.
- Enforce requirements for quality physical education programmes in school timetables, and adopt guidelines for length and age-appropriate activities.

- Invest in opportunities for knowledge sharing and professional development in play-based learning and pedagogy for teachers.
- Use interscholastic sport events to promote educational and health messages.
- Provide opportunities for extracurricular sport and play programmes whenever possible, and build the provision of these programmes into the school culture and mandate.
- Build in incentives for schools and teachers which commit to and demonstrate action towards holistic child development through sport and play.

#### *Monitoring and evaluation*

- Ensure that strong structures and frameworks are in place to measure outcomes and conduct research to improve sport- and play-based education methodology.
- Take steps to monitor training of teachers, as well as teacher delivery and understanding of reforms.
- Engage universities, particularly education and social science faculties, in research and monitoring and evaluation.
- Support research and evaluation of existing practises, in particular those that support ongoing and in-depth research and evaluation, and seek to understand which specific components of sport and play programmes are the most effective in targeting education challenges.
- Ensure a cohesive approach to monitoring and evaluation, including clear roles and responsibilities, particularly during the initial planning phases.
- In Thailand, the Royal Thai Ministry of Education and partners designed the Thailand Life Skills Framework and provided capacity building for both teachers and the Education Service Area Office to prepare for monitoring and evaluation of the programme. An impact assessment of the pilot schools was planned for 2013.

In an effort to provide additional support towards research and monitoring and evaluation in Benin, the creation of an Early Childhood Research Center located at the National Institute for Training and Research in Education is currently being explored.

### About Right To Play

Right To Play is a global organisation that uses the transformative power of play to educate and empower children facing adversity. Through playing sports and games, Right To Play helps one million children weekly in more than 20 countries to build essential life skills and better futures, while driving lasting social change. Founded in 2000 by four-time Olympic gold medallist and social entrepreneur Johann Olav Koss, Right To Play is headquartered in Toronto, Canada, and has national offices in Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and regional offices in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Our programmes are facilitated by more than 600 international staff and 13,500 volunteer coaches.

For more information visit: [www.RightToPlay.com](http://www.RightToPlay.com)

### Note

- 1 See: [www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC\\_PRESS200910web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf) (accessed 19 November 2013).

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