

# Young Heroes- A South African case study of a physical activity intervention

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## **Introduction**

The Young Heroes Programme was piloted as a joint initiative between Mr Price, Sportstec and 5 schools in the greater Durban area in 2005. The original 6 month pilot was then extended to a further 4 schools over the following 6 months. The aim of the project was to help learners become physically active and to play sport.

The motivation for the focus on physical activity came from involvement in the Charter of Physical Activity, Sport, Play and Well-Being for all Children and Youth in South Africa (2005), which was based on research of the South African youth. The Charter was initiated by Karen Heath (nee Sharwood) who was at the UCT/MRC (University of Cape Town/Medical Research Council) Research Unit for Exercise Science and Sports Medicine at the time. It was found from preliminary research that there was a lack of physical activity in South African government primary schools; with the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (2002) suggesting that more than a third of South African school children did not participate in sufficient physical activity to have a positive health benefit, and only 54.3% of learners had physical education (or an equivalent) in school.

Through the process of engagement with schools, the education department, the health department and relevant subject experts the intervention strategy of Young Heroes has gained the support of key role players in South Africa and now progressed to over 50 schools, working with over 45 000 learners and 1200 educators.

## **Overview**

Physical inactivity has become a major public health problem, contributing to the chronic, non-communicable disease epidemic. Physical activity is necessary to maintain good emotional and physical health as well as to prevent disease. Individual behaviours which feature recommended levels of physical activity, especially if practised from childhood, can improve self-esteem and reduce the risk of obesity. Obesity is closely associated with diabetes and certain types of cancer, anxiety, stress, high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol, which contribute to heart disease and stroke (Sallis, 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000; Scully *et al*, 1998). With a decline in physical activity as the backdrop, the rationale for focusing on school going learners was in order to establish healthy behaviours aimed at sustaining positive behaviour for life.

Interviews with educators and schools suggested that the decision to remove specialist Physical Education educators from schools and integrate Physical Development and Movement into the Life Orientation Curriculum was a major contributory factor in the

decline in physical activity in South African schools (Naicker, 2008). While the decision made theoretical sense in terms of achieving stated Learning Outcomes; it did not factor in a lack of expertise in subsequent educators, a lack of equipment and learning materials, and growing class numbers making it difficult to control learners outside of the classroom. This led to the interest of the Red Cap Foundation and Sportstec to wanting to be part of the solution in empowering educators and encouraging learners to be active.

## **Materials & Methods**

### ***Participants***

The participants are South African government primary schools, which are selected in conjunction with the Department of Education. So far, schools in townships, urban and peri-urban settings have been chosen, all of which have stated a lack of resources and expertise as factors effecting education delivery; see attached appendix for full school list. The majority of learners at the schools are black Africans and the educators, while still mainly black Africans, have had a more multi-racial background. The remnant of Apartheid's separate education is that educators have generally remained in the schools that they were allocated to before integration; therefore there are schools with mainly "Indian" teachers, "Coloured", or "Black African" teachers. Many learners travel from townships to more urban areas to attend schools, which seemingly have better resources, hence learners are not always from the area surrounding the schools. This has led to another contributory factor working against the promotion of physical activity; many learners depend on public transport to commute to and from school which does not allow them to remain at school after contact time to participate in extra-mural physical activity/sport. The dependence on public transport has also resulted in difficulty in attending weekend activity and sport events.

### ***Procedure***

Before the project can be implemented, consent and approval is necessary from the Department of Education and the relevant school management. The schools are allowed to decline to participate in the project, as commitment and dedication to the outcomes is vital to the long term success of the project and if they feel that they either do not have the organizational will or do not need the intervention, they are allowed to choose not to participate.

The project format includes transfer of theory skills to educators, resources in the form of manuals and lesson plans, the supply of the necessary equipment, and the practical transfer of skills to educators.

#### **Theory skills:**

There is an opportunity for certain educators at the school to be empowered through relevant training courses. 6 educators, who have passion for sport and wish to increase their abilities, are identified by the school to attend courses. One educator will go through a THETA (Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Training and Education Authority) accredited Skills Programme in Coaching Science comprising of 3 unit standards. The unit standards that are facilitated come from the National Certificate in Coaching Science, which is

registered on the National Qualification's Framework of South Africa. Each of the other 5 educators will choose a sport (cricket, soccer or netball) and go through a basic coaching workshop.

Manuals and Lesson Plans:

- The Coaching Science Course comes with a resource manual compiled by the Exercise Teachers Academy (THETA accreditation: 613/P/000007/2004).
- Each of the sport specific workshops include a manual which includes Basic Concepts (Laws, Rules and/or Regulations), Umpiring/Refereeing, Skills of the Sport, Preparing a Coaching Plan, Game Plans and Tactical Plans.
- A set of lesson plans with activities which achieve Learning Outcome 4 (Physical Development and Movement) of Life Orientation Curriculum for each grade, from grade R to grade 7, is given to the school as a referral resource.

Equipment:

The equipment necessary to conduct the lessons and sessions as part of the Young Heroes programme is provided for the schools, with the Red Cap Foundation also providing a system whereby the schools can procure replacement equipment at a considerably reduced price through Mr Price Sport.

Practical transfer of skills:

A Sportstec facilitator is placed at the school for 8 weeks to conduct physical activity lessons that fit into the Life Orientation requirements of the Revised National Curriculum. All the relevant educators in the schools are prepared for lessons by attending workshops that are conducted fourth-nightly, with the facilitator demonstrating and equipping the educators to conduct the lesson. The educators then get the opportunity to learn from the facilitator as he/she conducts the lessons with each class, hence ensuring the practical transfer of skills.

### **Statistics**

The 2 major centers that have benefited from the Young Heroes programme have been Durban and Johannesburg, with future roll-out planned for other centers. 53 schools have been completed thus far, with 48 503 learners and 1321 educators benefiting from the programme.

**Results:** The reports from the schools, relevant government departments, funders, and Corporate Social Research have been extremely supportive and positive. Initial research was conducted, as per the specifications of the UCT/MRC Research Unit of Exercise Science and Sports Medicine, and indicated an overall improvement in the learners' physical health. The project has gained the approval of the following key expert individuals and institutions: Professor Tim Noakes (UCT/MRC), Department of Health and Education, Dr Claire Nicholson (Head of Human Movement Studies, University of the Witwatersrand ), the Youth Fitness Charter, and UNICEF.

## **Discussion**

The engagement with schools as a result of the Young Heroes programme has reaffirmed the statistical research with regards to the lack of physical activity in South African primary schools. The intervention has proven to be successful in promoting physical activity and sustaining health promoting behaviour in the short to medium term, however the long term success of such an intervention still needs to be empirically assessed. The long term organizational benefits would also need to be contrasted with the long term individual benefits. Due to changing educators and the movement of learners out of the school after the initial intervention, a drop-out effect of some degree should be expected.

Inadvertent positive outcomes have been a reported improvement in both behaviour patterns of disruptive learners and a decrease in absenteeism, especially on days when physical activity is conducted. Many educators have expressed gratitude for the acknowledgement of their importance in promoting the well-being of the learners. This has led to a motivation for current research related to the mitigating factors of social support and acknowledgment in educator job satisfaction in the South African context. Sportstec facilitators have also utilized the experience gained on the Young Heroes programme to go forth and maximize their own potential, some of whom are currently working for the Department of Sports and Recreation in South Africa, and heading up other sports projects.

## **Conclusion**

The Young Heroes Programme is but one of many interventions that can make a tangible difference in the lives of the South African youth. It is an intervention that has broken down barriers and proved that, with enough commitment, success in difficult circumstances is attainable. One of the most important symbols of the intervention is the acknowledgement of value in both the educators and the learners. It is noted that organizational social support, of which acknowledgement is an important component, has shown positive correlation to job satisfaction in Europe (Hvam, 2004). Job satisfaction, in turn, has shown significant positive correlation to job commitment and performance (Shin & Reyes, 1995). Hence, suggesting that interventions of this nature can have a significant positive effect on the performance of educators and as a result the quality of education for our learners.

## **Recommendations**

The Young Heroes programme has illustrated how the partnership between private sector, government and civil society can function successfully in alleviating problems in a developing nation. Commitment to a common goal is the paramount objective which can then be utilized to foster working relationships and negotiate through conflicting opinions. Hence the definition of the project objectives is vital in procuring support and moving forward.

***Policy, Politics and Socio-economic factors*** (acknowledgment of the environment in which one works)

It is extremely important for anyone working in development to engage with the policy

decisions of the government and adhere, as far as possible, to the prescribed mandate as defined in policy. Failure to do so, can easily result in conflict between the existing structure and those who wish to have a positive effect within the structure, effectively negating the actions of development. The identification of the custodians of the policy is important as they will need to be engaged with, and their support can prove vital in a project's success.

An understanding of the political climate of the area in which work is to be conducted is important as it may inform what can and cannot be done. This, together with the socio-economic status of the participants, forms an essential base from which to understand and engage with the participants. The usage of language and the vernacular of the participants has also proved useful in creating a positive perception of the project and in acknowledging participants' intrinsic value.

### ***Schools as organizations/Diversity***

It must be acknowledged that each school is an individual organization that functions within the education system. The need for establishment of a set methodology for the successful implementation of a programme has to be weighed up against the need of individual schools. If diversity is not acknowledged, then the project can be perceived as being too "top-down" and prescriptive, which can lead to resistance.

In addition, the entry point to the school is important in terms of how a project is perceived. A community intervention project will often be received more eagerly than a project that is introduced by hierarchy. An example is that the Young Heroes has introduced by a government department official, the project has, sometimes, been misconceived as a hierarchy assessment of the school's commitment and functioning. Communication of one's purpose, objective and affiliation is important and medium for open communication is important.

### ***Educators and Facilitators as individuals***

Just as each school is unique, it must be acknowledged that each educator and each facilitator is unique and should be acknowledged as having specific value to the objectives of the project, otherwise apathy can become evident. Gestures of acknowledgement have proved inspirational to the individuals involved in the project.

### ***Funding***

The consistency of funding is a major determinant of the nature of a project and its roll-out. Funding and funders' specific ways of operating will always impact on how a project is implemented. It is, however, important not to allow the funding stream to manipulate or negatively influence the stated objectives of the project. The development objective of a project should always hold paramount importance. The motivation for funding is often different to the development motivation. Tax benefits, social marketing and personal vindication can all motivate funding in addition to a true commitment to development.

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