

Physical Education and Sport for Social Development: Implications and Prospects in the COVID-19 Era

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Dear Editor,

Allow me to briefly share with the readers of the Journal of Preventive and Rehabilitative Medicine (JPRM) that the success of any society is generally linked to the well-being of each and every citizen. Although the term wellbeing is often considered subjective and is seemingly challenging to define, social development certainly constitutes a relevant part of what wellbeing is or ought to include. It is very difficult, if not impossible to talk about social development without having play, sport and games in the discourse.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic there have been stringent measures put in place to try to slow the spread of the virus. Social development from a physical education and sport perspective has been hampered by the measures put in place such as social and physical distancing, lockdowns and others. When these measures were first instituted, schools and overall social life, became commonplace to curtail the spread of the disease. The measures put in place have also disrupted many regular aspects of life, including sport and physical activity. Some sport and physical education activities were cancelled at some point or still so, to safeguard the health of athletes and others involved. Many sporting and physical education arenas that have suffered include; gyms, stadia, pools, dance and fitness studios, physiotherapy centres, parks and playgrounds. Many individuals have not been able to actively participate in their regular sporting or physical activities outside of their homes. This has implicated many to be physically

inactive, have longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns as well as unhealthy dietary practices, resulting in weight gain and loss of physical fitness.

It is common knowledge that physical activity has been recognized as a critical enabler of the third SDG which advocates for healthy lives and the promotion of well-being for all at all ages. This awareness of the role of exercise and sport in sustainable development has led to the fervent ratification of the Sport for Development movement by many governments worldwide [1].

There is enough evidence that speaks to how physical education lessons, extracurricular sport and exercises account for much of the appreciated socially interactive moments that school going children for example, look forward to everyday. These daily experiences cumulatively contribute to children's social development which could loosely be explained as the process of growth through interaction. The exciting physical education and sport moments have unfortunately been threatened and disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic along with its preventive health adherence measures with the most prominent being "masking up". Keeping a mask on as one plays or participates in sport can be a daunting task.

In schools, physical education offers benefits for both children and for educational systems in terms of physical well-being, lifestyle, affective, social, and cognitive development [2]. Coalter [3] captures important evidence regarding the role of physical activity sport and exercise in building and facilitating social and

community inclusion that promotes active citizenship. Coalter essentially links physical activity and sport to the notion of 'social capital'. More broadly, as young people mature, they increasingly rely on peers for information and feedback regarding physical and social competence; therefore, sport and physical activity, serve as a key site of child and youth development [4].

With high COVID 19 restrictions enforced in schools, especially in urban areas of Zambia, it would be instructive and informative to know how play, physical education and sport are being handled in schools across the country without taking away from what these activities foster both intentionally and inadvertently. The pandemic has without doubt, significantly reduced the critical moments of group physical activity and consequently hindered learning opportunities for children and young adults both in-and-out of school settings.

Beyond immediate physical health benefits, physical education and sport can be a vehicle for social well-being. Therefore, the return of sports and the re-opening of sports facilities could significantly restore the much needed societal bonds and the wellness of sports fans and athletes who have been exposed to risks of mental health due to isolation. There is need for research that will explore and examine the implications of the lowered time for outdoor play and physical interaction through sport and exercise on social development as we wait for a sustainable solution for the pandemic and its possible ripple effects. It is evidently unavoidable that the sport ecosystem, comprising of producers, broadcasters, fans, businesses, owners and players among others, find new and innovative solutions to mitigate the negative effects of COVID19 on the world of sport. This includes finding ways to engage with fans in order to ensure safe sport events in the future while maintaining the workforce, creating new operating models and venue strategies

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