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**Implementation of an active school project in a rural environment
in Wallonia. A collaborative study**

The need for interventions aiming to increase youth physical activity is evidenced by health authorities (OMS, 2006). The educational system is clearly considered as a key setting in physical activity promotion (Pate et al., 2006). The concept of the “active school” has been proposed in order to underline the multidimensional aspect of any project aiming to contribute effectively to the promotion of an active lifestyle within schools and some specific models have been proposed (Cale, 1997; Ophea, 2006). At least six dimensions seem to be systematically considered in the literature: school policy, physical education, active transportation, extra-curricular sport, living environment and classroom emphasis on physical activity. In an attempt to address the current emphasis on physical activity, some schools have embarked on working this area but many seem to lack strong direction and strategy, despite the resources that have been produced by numerous agencies or associations.

This paper is concerned with a study that followed the efforts of one small elementary school located in a rural area of Wallonia which aimed to implement the principles of the active school concept. The aim of the paper is to describe the process and underline the problems encountered by those involved in the project during the first year of implementation.

Researchers were contacted by the school principal and one teacher identified as the coordinator in order to provide some support to the project. This consulting role comprised two main aspects: (1) guiding the process and (2) evaluating the impact. Taking a collaborative approach, practitioners were the central agents in the process determining their own needs, according to the information gathered by the researchers.

Data were collected during the whole school year through questionnaires (pupils, parents), interviews (staff members, community stakeholders) or focus group (pupils). Moreover, several activities organised by the staff members or external partners were observed. Finally, several documents were analysed (such as pupils’ work, newspaper texts).

The main adaptation the school made was to the organization of sport during one afternoon per week (in addition to the 2 weekly 50 minute PE lessons). In addition, other initiatives were organised including: physical activities proposed by classroom teachers, changes to the organisation of recess, and involvement of community members within the active life of the school. Despite some problems, levels of physical activity clearly increased during the year. The problems encountered were of 2 types: organizational (availability of finances to hire sports facilities, efficient transportation of pupils, availability of sports equipment for PE lessons and recess); and relational (concurrence between the studied school and another, involvement of the PE teacher, low level of parental involvement, poor external communication, variability of teachers interest towards the project). However, most of the problems were resolved by the coordinator via increasing the activities offered by the school and lobbying public authorities. Unfortunately, her enthusiasm was not necessarily shared or

transferred to all teachers and some were not as motivated, due sometimes to a lack of autonomy. On the other hand, pupils and parents outlined positive changes, as confirmed by the questionnaire analyses. Moreover, during the final meeting with the parents, all comments supported the continuation of the project in the future.

References

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