



Rekha Badsiwal

All policy documents on education invariably mention the indispensable role of health and physical education. National Curriculum Framework 2005 advocates that “a basic understanding of the health concerns is necessary, but the more important dimension is that of experience and development of health, skills and physical well- being through practical engagement with play, exercise, sports and practices of personal and community hygiene”. The outlook on sports has now widened to include and emphasise its integration with other subject content in order to promote understanding of health, hygiene and physical education<sup>1</sup>. This ambition can be attained only by well-coordinated efforts of the education policy, adequate infrastructure provided by administrators and teachers, good facilities and opportunities. The position paper also notes that health and physical education has been reduced to ‘games and sports period’ in its implementation in schools. This essay attempts to discuss the purpose, provisions and practices with respect to ‘games and sports’ period in schools. It utilises the information gathered through informal interaction with children, parents, teachers, physical education teachers and principals on the issue.

### Purpose

All schools have games and sports as a part of their school curriculum and it is reflected in their school time-table. All the stakeholders agreed that it is necessary to devote time to games and sports in school in order to promote physical fitness among children. The administrators added that it is essential for over all development of children as it releases children from hesitation, fear and stress and helps them become more social as they learn to interact with

strangers. Two school principals added that ideally “Sports should get the same time as other subjects, perhaps even a little more” as it is very important for the personality development of the child which affects the learning in all other subject areas. They said that children learn discipline, rules and regulation and punctuality through play.

A more prominent reason which topped everyone’s list was that it brings freshness to the mind of child which becomes dull due to continuous subject study in the school. Children emphasised that without sports period school will become very dull and boring. All the parents emphasised that it is an act of recreation for children and there should be games and sports periods in the school in between subject periods so that students can concentrate on studies with an active mind. Two of the parents also pointed out that having sports activities encourages students to regularly attend the schools and they start enjoying school.

### Provisions for Sports in Schools: Time and Facilities

With “all-round development of the child” being the catch line of schools to attract parents, a lot of emphasis is being placed on providing good sports facilities in the form of infrastructure as well as in the form of human resources for guidance, especially by the private schools. Schools with sophisticated sports facilities cater to the elite and upper middle class strata of the society. In the private schools which cater to the middle class these facilities are made available on demand. Majority of private schools have provisions for paid clubs and houses wherein children can opt (if the parents can afford) to pursue their interests apart from the general games and sports period. Children attending the government schools have to remain content with the provision of a games and sports period alone as the equipment are generally kept away from children except on special occasions such as “Sports Day”.

Most of the private schools are equipped with the required play material for different sports events

but specialised courts and grounds are available only in few schools. In most of the schools these are prepared only when required, as during the Intra and Inter-school Tournaments. Children said that they carry their personal equipment like badminton and tennis racket, or cricket bat to the school on the days of sports classes. They also added that those who forget may be issued equipment from the school during the sports period. As children carry their own play material to school and specialised courts are unavailable at school or at home, factors like friends' group automatically acquire more importance while choosing the favourite play place.

Majority of students (9/15) stated that they like playing at home more than in school. The reasons mentioned were availability of friends with whom they enjoy playing and flexibility of time of play. One of the girls mentioned that since her class has been reshuffled with other sections and her friend circle is unavailable she now likes to play at home with her few friends. Children who enjoyed playing in school than at home (3/15) clearly stated that they like playing in school as they have friends there and the others (3/15) preferred playing at school because it had better play facilities.

Most of the schools have provision for 2-4 periods per week depending on the school policy and grade. The number of periods officially allocated to games and sports decreases as children move to higher grades. The focus shifts from games such as dog and the bone and koklachi-paakiji in primary classes to organised sports like basketball, cricket and badminton as children reach middle schools and higher grades. The shift is an indicator of increase in children's physical and cognitive capabilities along with social and moral development.

The play time of children along with the number of periods as mentioned above gets reduced with increase in age. It is partly due to the load of studies and partly because of one's interests which are influenced by social factors. In school, the sports period is often used as an extra period for other subjects. The frequency of this sort of utilisation increases in the last term of

the academic year. The covert message received by children is that games and sports are insignificant and incomparable to academics. At home, parents also ensure that their ward gets help at home in the form of tuitions. Consequently no time is left for sports activities. This practice contradicts with the opinion expressed by parents on the purpose and importance of games and sports in schools.

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The role of socialisation is clearly visible from the participation of girls and boys during lunch break and on holidays. Amongst children who spent time playing in the morning hours on holidays, majority were boys (5/8). Also more boys (6/9) were reported to make an effort to play during lunch as compared to girls (3/9). Even before children make sense of the world, the environment is conditioned by the gender expectations of the adults around them. Gender role socialisation is strengthened in home and school by encouraging and discouraging certain behaviour. So girls are expected to remain calm and composed and not to indulge in acts of aggression which affects their choice of play and also the frequency and time of play.

A look into the way of general games and sports period is conducted provides a window to understand more about the facilities, opportunities and encouragement for sports in schools.

### **Modes of Conducting Sports Period**

In most of the schools (16/25), students are allowed to choose and play the game which they like without any interference from the sports teacher. Students are free to form play groups on their own using any criteria they like. Students reported that they generally played with their friends which comprised of same sex peers. In some schools (6/25) the entire class plays together a particular game chosen by students. Here, the entire class plays as a group without any segregation on the

basis of sex. In both the cases, the sports teacher does not participate either as player or as supervisor.

In few schools (3/25) students are allowed to play on their own and some selected students are trained in a particular game by the sports teacher. One of the sports teachers of these three schools mentioned that their specialisation is only in a particular sport and hence they tried to train 'required' students in it to form a good team for the school. While training, the sports teacher engages in the process of close observation, and gives feedback to the trainee student.

These modes are not particular to any school. Occurrence of these modes is dependent on various factors like school policy on the activities in sports period if any, availability and orientation of the sports teacher and the specific time on the school calendar. So, there is a possibility that the same students/class may get to experience all these modes on different occasions in the same academic year.

There is "no" or very "limited" interaction between the students and the sports teacher when children are playing the sport of their own choice with their peer group which is the dominant mode of conducting games and sports classes. So, a majority of students do not have the opportunity to learn technicalities of the game, and to improve skills and performance under the guidance of the sports teacher. It is important to note here that for a majority of students in India school is the only place where they may learn and participate in organised sports activities.

### Beyond the Routine: Dramatisation of Routine

All the schools organised Intra-school Sports Tournaments and also participated in inter-school

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sports events. Teachers and principals emphasised that it is ensured by the school that every student of primary classes participates in at least one event. In middle school and secondary school level no such efforts are made. It was found that sports competitions are organised for interested and selected students. Students also shared that they like to participate and they do participate but most of the times they get eliminated in the preliminary rounds. This is bound to happen due to lack of understanding of the technique and skills of the game which requires guidance from an expert.

Children said that selection for participation in the inter-school tournament of students is done by the sports teacher on the basis of his/her observation of students during sports period or sports day. Sports teachers argued that since they have seen most of the students play throughout the year, selection does not pose any problem. It seems that a child's natural abilities and physical advantages like height gain utmost importance in the selection process in the absence of any efforts by the teacher to understand and know the potential and passion of students which need a process of continuous observation and feedback.

Students selected for participation in inter-school tournaments undergo special training sessions in the school. These are conducted either early in the morning or after school or during the zero period. Principals mentioned that for the inter-school training, expert coaches are hired as guests to help students improve their game. It is evident that only a handful of students who are considered useful and valuable for representing the school are trained or provided with opportunities for learning.

### Concluding remarks

It is evident that access to the sports facilities is dependent upon the school that children attend. This choice of school is affected by the socio-economic position of their parents. Schools catering to children of higher socio-economic strata seem to be more conscious and considerate of their policies on sports and health. In this scenario the 'masses' are left on

their own without any intervention from any social agency.

The mode of conducting games and sports periods and the process of selection of students seems to convey that sportspersons are born and not made, neglecting the role of training and development. It suggests

that schools are being led by the narrow vision of achievements at the inter-school level ignoring the interests and needs of the average student. Such practices also discourage children and parents to consider sports as a career choice.

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*Rekha Badsawal is a teacher educator, working as an Assistant Professor in Miranda House, University of Delhi since January 2009. She has also worked as a Primary School Teacher in a government school of Delhi which was helpful in understanding the life in a public school. She may be contacted at rekhabadsawal@gmail.com.*

