

Young Women's Views and Experiences of Sport

Young women's engagement in sport (Lisette Burrows and Jaleh McCormack, University of Otago, 2011)

TOPIC

Playing sport is an important part of growing up in New Zealand. Almost all young New Zealanders participate in some form of sport and recreation. We know a lot from surveys about what and how much sport young people play. We know less about why young people participate in sport and what they value about taking part.

To provide some answers to these questions, Sport NZ funded a study of young women's engagement with sport, with a focus on 15 to 17 year olds. The study, by the University of Otago, aimed to further understand young women's views and experiences of sport, and the factors that influence these.

KEY FINDINGS

This study provides rich insights into the factors that shape young women's engagement with sport. It highlights opportunities to encourage their participation in sport, particularly in schools.

In summary:

- The opportunity to be social and have fun with friends is the most important reason for sports participation.
- The way a school values, organises and resources sport, and encourages and supports students, are important influences on young women's experiences of sport.

- Better understanding of what young women value and want from their engagement with school sport could create opportunities that encourage young women to stay engaged or re-engage with sport. Examples include: offering social sport, recognising that 'sport' includes active recreation (including dance), and offering single-sex Physical Education (PE) classes.

THE STUDY

The study involved interviews with young women and staff from four secondary schools in the Wellington area. See [About the study \(page 4\)](#) for the research approach and [About the schools \(page 4\)](#) for school profiles.

WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW?

Previous research on why young people participate in sport shows that they view sport mainly as a vehicle for fun, enjoyment and socialising. They also see sport as a way to get fit and healthy, develop skills, establish identity and balance the demands of academic work.



WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THIS STUDY?

Young women view sport as a physical, competitive activity that is a fun thing to do with friends. Activities such as dance, kapa haka and going to the gym are generally not seen as sport because they do not involve games that are focused on winning. Young women are aware that competitive sport is the kind most valued in their schools.

Competitive sport can be a 'turn-off'

What young women think counts as 'sport' influences their desire (or not) to participate, and whether they see themselves as 'able' in sporting contexts. For some young women:

- competitive sport is a 'turn-off'; making them anxious about their ability and reluctant to take part
- sport trials can be a 'trial'; even if they are active, some young women do not feel confident taking part in selection processes for top teams.

Young women's reasons for participating in sport include

- opportunity to socialise, to be with and make friends; this is the main reason young women participate in sport
- opportunity to excel
- thrill of winning and being recognised
- health benefits
- balance for academic activities
- development of social/team skills
- opportunity to give back to the school
- opportunity to interact with family and community.
- Unlike overseas research, young women in this study did not identify body shape and weight management as key reasons for participating in sport.

Social sport provides a non-competitive option

Many young women want to play sport but not necessarily competitively. Social sport provides an opportunity to play games with friends, have fun and be valued for taking part, without the rules, routines and pressures of competitive sport.

If a school provides limited social sport opportunities, young women who prefer the fun aspect of sport may opt to:

- drop out of sport and take up physical activities with friends
- participate in sport outside of school.

Views and experiences of sport change over the school years

How young women experience sport and their desire to play sport change as they progress through school.

- **Primary school sport** is all about fun. There is no emphasis on ability, students can play any game they like and boys and girls play together.
- **Secondary school sport** is quite different. Ability is important. Competition is integral. Choices have to be made about which sport to play. Compulsory PE becomes the main way in which young women experience sport and many dread PE classes in their junior years. In their senior years, school sport can be an important part of identity for those in top teams, or a relic of childhood for those who opt to not participate.

Family views on sport are more significant than ethnic background

Ethnic background is not necessarily a major factor in young women's sport participation. What is more significant is the way in which families understand and prioritise sport in their daughters' lives, and whether or not young women are able to negotiate their continued participation in sport, given their family context.

Schools are a major influence on young women's experiences of sport

Schools influence young women's involvement in, and experiences of, sport by the ways they:

- *value sport*; young women are aware of the priority schools give to sport and this influences the way they view sport
- *organise and resource sport*; resourcing of sports varies substantially between schools (eg. availability of sports equipment, uniforms, staff support and parental involvement), impacting on sporting opportunities available.
- *encourage and support participation*; such as compulsory PE, girls-only PE classes, provision of social sport and expecting all students to participate in sport.

'Non-participant' lacks meaning

- The category of 'non-participant' in sport is relatively meaningless. Few young women in this study were not engaged in some kind of sport or physical activity. Many who thought of themselves as 'non-sporty', or were seen by others as 'non-participants', were very active, often in community settings.
- There is a cohort of young women who are simply not interested in sport. They do not see themselves as 'non-participants' because sport is not something they draw on to understand their place in the world.
- Some young women judge those who do not engage in school sport negatively, referring to them as 'lazy girls' or 'girls with attitude problems'.
- However, most accept their peers' decisions not to take part, recognising they engage and prioritise other activities/aspects of their lives.

Non-sport participants, not non-participants

There will always be a group of young women who choose not to play sport, regardless of how it is valued and delivered in schools. This group:

- do not see themselves as 'non-participants' because sport is not something they draw on to create their identities
- feel constrained in their ability to participate because they do not wish to play sport.

Dance counts!

Dancers tend to be categorised as non-participants in sport with many struggling to have their physical and sporting ability recognised.

Constraints on participation in sport are numerous and complex

Constraints faced by young women include:

- *The competitive nature of sport in secondary school* does not offer what many young women are looking for, such as an opportunity to play sport with friends in a non-competitive environment and to have fun without necessarily needing to improve skills or have talent.
- *Concern about sporting ability* and risk of embarrassment leaves many young women anxious about participating in sport at secondary school. Starting a new sport can seem impossible because students who started that sport earlier are much more able.
- *Co-ed PE classes* can make young women anxious about how boys will respond to their sporting abilities and bodies. Boys' behaviour and their domination of co-ed PE classes can undermine young women's confidence to participate.
- *The influence of friends* can be an enabler and a barrier. For some, the opportunity to have fun with friends is a motivator, while others drop out of sport because their friends do.
- *The influence of family* can be a strong, positive influence but families can also discourage sport because of other priorities (eg. studies, religious and cultural activities, paid or household work). Some families are supportive of sport but prefer out-of-school sport at times that fit around family needs and priorities.
- *Lack of time* is a key constraint; many young women drop out of sport because they prioritise other activities or they have other commitments.
- *Costs associated with sport* (eg. registration fees, uniforms, equipment and transport) are a significant barrier.

How constraints affect young women's participation in sport is not straightforward. Some are able to overcome particular constraints; others are not. There is no simple way of removing constraints because young women experience and respond to constraints differently, depending on their individual situations.

About the study

The study used qualitative research. This type of research provides an in-depth understanding of behaviours and why people think and behave in particular ways. Commonly used qualitative research methods are interviews, group discussions, observation and analysis of documents and other materials.

A qualitative approach built a picture of the range and interplay of factors that influence young women's desire and capacity to engage in sport. Researchers interviewed 71 female students and 16 staff from four secondary schools in an urban region:

- Two girls' schools (both decile 10) and two co-ed schools (deciles 5 and 9).
- Between 14 and 21 female students in Years 12 and 13 from each school (including students who did and did not participate in school sport).
- Four staff from each school, including PE teachers, sports coordinators and Principals.

Schools' sports programmes/policies were also reviewed.

Limitations

As this is a qualitative study, with a small and purposefully selected sample of schools, young women and teachers, the findings provide rich insights into the experiences of those who took part but cannot be generalised to all young women and secondary schools. However, many of the findings are consistent with those from other New Zealand and international research.

Citation

Burrows, L. and McCormack, J. 2011. Young women's engagement in sport. Dunedin: University of Otago.

The full report can be downloaded from the Sport and Recreation Knowledge Library:

<http://www.srknowledge.org.nz/research-completed/young-womens-engagement-in-sport/>

Related reading

Allender, S., Cowburn G. and Foster, C. 2006. Understanding participation in sport and physical activity among children and adults: A review of qualitative studies. *Health Education Research* 21(6): 826–835.

Burrows, L. and McCormack, J. 2011. School culture meets sport: A case study in New Zealand. *European Physical Education Review* 000(00): 1–12.

O'Flynn, G. and Lee, J. 2010. Committed young men and well-balanced young women: Private schooling, physical activity and the classed self. In: Wright, J. and Macdonald, D. (eds) *Young People, Physical Activity and the Everyday*. New York: Routledge, 59–74.

Wright, J. and Burrows, L. 2006. Re-conceiving ability in physical education. *Sport, Education and Society* 11(2): 275–292.

Wright, J., O'Flynn, G., and Macdonald, D. 2006. Being fit and looking healthy: Young women's and men's constructions of health and fitness. *Sex Roles* 54(9–10): 707–716.

Wright, J. and O'Flynn, G. 2007. Social class, femininity and school sport. In: McLeod, J. and Allard, A. (eds) *Learning from the Margins: Young Women, Risk and Education*. London: Routledge, 82–94.

About the schools

(note: these are not the actual names of the schools, as these are confidential)

ROWBURY (all-girls, decile 10, fee-paying)

Sport is highly valued at Rowbury. This is evident in the significant teaching and physical resource committed to sport, the requirement that all students take PE at all year levels and the expectation that all students play at least one school sport. Rowbury provides a comprehensive social and competitive sport programme. Sport is seen as providing a healthy balance to students' academic activities, as well as a way for students to demonstrate their commitment to the school.

LEYTON (co-ed, decile 9)

Sport, along with other cultural activities, is valued at Leyton for its potential to provide young people with a positive school experience. Students are encouraged to play sport but not required to. Leyton's sports programme focuses on traditional, competitive sporting codes and relies on senior students, family and ex-students to coach, umpire and manage sports teams.

KAHIKATEA (co-ed, decile 5)

Sport is valued at Kahikatea but no more so than other cultural activities. The sport programme is wholly focused on competitive sport. With the exception of the first-fifteen rugby team, there is limited resource available to support school teams; the school relies on fund-raising and community-based coaching support. Many students at Kahikatea opt for community-based sport instead of school sport.

MIDDLETON (all-girls, decile 10)

Sport is highly valued at Middleton. The school provides a comprehensive and well-supported competitive and social sport programme. Students are encouraged to play sport but not required to – the emphasis is on participating in at least one school-based activity, whether it be cultural or sporting. In the senior years, Middleton offers an academic PE class and a less academic, skill-based PE class