

# Teachers' Physical Activity: A Necessity for Stability of Schools' Culture During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

*The recent COVID-19 outbreak has caused confusion and uncertainty to many educational organizations worldwide, forcing school leaders to weave through many school priorities. As schools take on online teaching, teachers were compelled to sit on their chairs, interacting with students using the screens for more than four hours every day. This has resulted in a decrease in physical activity, affecting their health and quality of teaching. Unfortunately, the dichotomy is as teachers care for their students' physical and mental health, teachers' physical well-being is not a priority in most schools' culture during this pandemic.*

*This paper aims to address this gap in teacher's lack of Physical Activity, which is necessary to help stabilize the school culture during this pandemic. It will highlight school leaders' critical role in promoting physical well-being as part of the school culture. Moreover, it will discuss the benefits of teachers staying active, and it will also present possible ways to foster a culture geared toward teachers' involvement in physical activities.*

**Keywords:** School Culture, Online Education, Physical Activity, Mental Health, COVID-19 Pandemic

## 1. Introduction

The world was enveloped in chaos and uncertainty when the coronavirus pandemic started last December 8, 2019, that began in Hubei province, China (WHO, 2020b). It caused significant public health emergencies (Park, 2020) and forced governments to impose shutdowns that seriously affected the economy and severely disrupted education (Jan, 2020). The COVID-19 is highly contagious, and as of February 16, 2021, it has spread globally to 219 countries infecting 108.2 million and killing about 2.3 million people (WHO, 2021).

Since the global health outbreak started, education leaders have continuously struggled with critical issues on health and safety measures, economic and labor concerns, technostucture, and pedagogies upgrades (Messano et al., 2020). At the same time, school leaders aimed to balance the school culture, promoting positivity and students and staff's well-being (Confeld, 2016).

With the worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have shifted their education platform to online distance learning to curb the virus's spread and observe safety health protocols. China is the first one to use online education (Cai & Wang, 2020). The Chinese government launched the "Schools Out, But Class On," a large-scale campaign to use online education to mitigate and reduce the pandemic's effect on students' learning loss, mental health, and physical well-being. The initiative had a profound impact not only in China but served as an inspiration for other countries to follow (Zhou et al., 2020).

With the given situation, school leaders and teachers continued supporting students and parents with their mental and physical needs; however, less focus was given to teachers on their physical wellness. They continue to wrestle with all the demands of online teaching (McClintok, 2021).

This concept paper aims to address the gap in teacher's lack of Physical Activity, which is necessary to help stabilize the school culture during this pandemic. Despite the scarcity of information about this topic, this paper will highlight school leaders' critical role in promoting physical well-being as part of the school culture. Moreover, it will discuss the benefits of teachers staying active, which can help with mental health concerns, prevent the possible development of acute and chronic diseases, and boost the immune system. Furthermore, it will also present possible ways to foster a culture geared toward teachers' involvement in physical activities.

## **2. Literature Reviews**

### **2.1 School Culture**

The education communities around the world are currently in the midst of something extraordinary and unconventional. They have dealt with challenging choices on whether to open the school this year, what educational platform to adopt, what training is needed by teachers, what resources to procure, how to go about teaching considering the health and safety protocols, and what instructional and assessment strategies to give students to optimize the quality of learning (Malkus et al., 2020).

Trinidad (2021) study agreed that schools' focus is often on technostucture, students, and pedagogies. Moreover, the author argued that other fundamental issues like teachers' mental and physical health are set aside due to competing values in the school culture as decided and prioritized by the school leaders to address the current crisis.

School culture is defined as a set of human activities that deals with thinking, doing, and making. (Tharp, 2009 as cited by Confeld, 2016). Moreover, it involves adaptation, integration, sharing, and

learning. These processes are vital for organization leaders to understand to shift, upgrade or provide the appropriate changes in the schools' vision, mission, and norms to meet challenges or capture the best experiences in any crises (Confeld, 2016). School organization leaders need to develop a stable and robust school culture that will generate positivity to balance emotions and be attuned to teachers' needs (Barry et al., 2017; Buskila & Chen-Levi, 2021).

Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) stated that leaders should recognize what it has, what it needs, and then start shaping the school culture. It is also critical to involve the team, describe the required changes, and provide the capability to change. Additionally, an effective school leader's strength is understanding his employees' needs (Rath & Conchie, 2008 as cited by Confeld, 2016).

As school organizations adapt and change during this pandemic, school leaders, teachers, and other staff should all promote and contribute to the stabilization of school culture that is not limited to a top-down directive but approved by consensus. Furthermore, given the virus's potential effect on one's well-being, health has become of paramount importance in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 (Trinidad, 2021).

## **2.2 Online Teaching Harmful Effects**

The COVID-19 outbreak has complicated teachers' facilitation of learning as the government declared school closures and students stayed at home. These restrictions hampered physical activities to manage the virus's spread (Rutkowska et al., 2021). On the contrary, educators hurriedly reinvented learning delivery and shifted to online teaching (Heffernan & Wilkinson, 2020). Teachers who are used to work on their feet are now facing the computers all day (Fleming, 2020), ushering in a sedentary lifestyle (McClintok, 2021). This new technology-driven instruction has brought unwarranted stressors and greater demands on their physical health (Trinidad, 2021).

Although teachers remarkably found engaging ways to teach online as they cope with the unprecedented stress (Klapproth et al., 2020), this resulted in a continuous high-stress level which is harmful to health (Messano et al., 2020) and diminishes productivity and performance efficiency (Niessen et al., 2017).

In the study conducted by Klapproth et al. (2020), the authors enumerated the stressors that affected 380 teachers who taught online, which resulted in teachers experiencing medium to high-stress levels during this pandemic. The stressors that heightened the teachers' stress levels were low ICT competence, lack of adequate devices and resources, internet connectivity problems, increased workload, and lack of school support, exacerbated by personal matters. The study also validated that those who taught online for more than 4 hours significantly experienced higher stress levels.

Without a doubt, staying home and excessively sitting all day are enormous challenges for teachers who are used to working in school and moving around. Although it is safe to work from home or work socially distant apart from colleagues in the school, regrettably, it has drastically reduced the amount of

physical activity (Chen et al., 2020). Some teachers are now experiencing health problems associated with sedentary behaviors in conducting online teachings such as tennis elbow condition, eye strains, body ailments, and other health diseases (Fleming, 2020). The decrease in physical activity can increase the risk of chronic health issues (Chen et al., 2020), such as obesity, hypertension, and heart diseases (Wu et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a study showed that limiting physical activity for 14 days negatively impacted health, affecting the quality of life. The results of decreasing the amount of physical activity are increased body fat, reduced heart capacity and lung capacity, atrophy in the lower limb muscles and loss of lean muscle mass, adverse changes in the metabolism of insulin and glucose, and other chronic diseases (Bowden Davies et al., 2019, as cited by Rutkowska et al., 2021).

### ***2.3 Required Physical Activity***

Dr. Powell once said, "some activity is better than none, and more is better than less" (Powell et al., 2011). Due to the lockdown, quarantine and isolation became the norm for all households and establishments that resulted in having most of the population not performing the minimum physical activities needed for better health (Katzmarzyk et al., 2019).

Based on the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020a) guidelines, adults should perform at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate exercises or do 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous training within a week. They also advised doing strength training, aerobic physical activities, or combining these to reap the health benefits. WHO argued doing away with a sedentary lifestyle and replacing this with increased physical activity.

Mohamed & Alawna (2020) affirmed that since the coronavirus targets the immune and respiratory systems, performing regular moderate aerobic exercises will improve and strengthen these functions and help ward off chances of being infected.

### ***2.4 Benefits of Physical Activity***

Many studies correlate the profound benefits of doing regular physical activities with better health. It benefits the body and the mind, for it addresses mental health conditions by lowering depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and dementia (WHO, 2020c). There is also a correlation between the frequency of exercise and personal health disposition. A study shows that increased physical activity frequency resulted in a better mood, espousing positive mental health (Brand et al., 2020).

Additionally, Fröberg, A. (2020) study confirmed that Physical Activity reduces depression, anxiety and improves an individual's overall general health condition. The authors concluded that being active could lower the risk of lingering diseases such as heart conditions, type 2 diabetes, and other health ailments. Conversely, a decrease in physical activity could eventually lead to acute and chronic health diseases (Hall et al., 2020).

Therefore, a sedentary lifestyle should not be encouraged; instead, any movement is better than doing nothing (Chen et al., 2020). A study revealed that increasing aerobic exercises also increase the body's defense against diseases and improves the immune system. Doing moderate physical activities in less than 60 minutes, such as walking, jogging, or running, can benefit the immune system, especially against respiratory infection (Fröberg, 2020). This means that the effects of exercises and being physically active can help counter the risk of contracting COVID-19 (Mohamed & Alawna, 2020).

### ***2.5 Sample Physical Activity During the Pandemic***

Chen et al. (2021) highlighted that exercises at home should be simple, safe, and easy to perform. They also emphasized to engaged in a combination of strength training, cardio, stretching, and balance exercises like Yoga and Pilates to maintain physical well-being. Furthermore, they proposed walking around the house or in the work area, climbing stairs, utilizing home or office materials and furniture to assist in doing lunges, squats, pushups, and weightlifting for a minimum of 30 minutes every day.

Besides, any home exercise or activities can be done, such as gardening, cleaning, or doing household chores, as long as movements are incorporated daily (Fröberg, 2020).

During this pandemic, there is a proliferation of internet sites, exercise videos, or workout mobile applications to help facilitate and motivate engaging in physical functioning (Chen et al., 2021). At present, there are a hundred of thousands of applications available across the world to assist in health and fitness matters. Anyone can install these applications or electronic platforms on different devices such as mobile phones, watches, and laptops. They serve as a fitness pal to record health data, provide exercise programs, track total steps, monitor heart rates, detect sleep patterns, log food consumption, calculate calories and even suggest nutritious food (Gordon et al., 2020).

## **3. Conclusion: Implications and Future Direction**

In sum, the pandemic has created extraordinary challenges to the school organizations, particularly to school leaders and teachers who are serving as front liners to help contain the spread of COVID-19 while addressing online teaching demands. Unfortunately, in meeting these challenges, teachers' well-being is placed in a precarious predicament as school leaders focused on their chosen top priorities. School organizations must understand that health should never be regarded as a second priority and prolonged inactivity poses dire consequences on teachers' mental and physical well-being, which affects their teaching performance. The dichotomy of being concerned with students' and parents' physical and psychological well-being while leaving behind teachers' health welfare needs to be addressed as resolved as revealed by the negative effects of a sedentary lifestyle or doing very little physical activity.

Therefore, school leaders must cultivate a culture that underpins the inclusion of regular physical activities in the teachers' daily routine, promoting positive mental health and boosting the immune system, thereby lessening the chances of having acute or chronic diseases. Overall, the benefits of exercising and

being active are a great deterrent against the highly contagious COVID-19.

### 3.1 Implications

This concept paper has several implications. First, it highlighted the vital role of school leaders in incorporating a wellness program geared towards teachers' Physical Activity. Second, it stressed the importance of movements and exercises, thereby including Physical Activity programs within the school hours would encourage teachers to value the culture of being physically active. Third, school organizations need to find ways to implement and monitor teachers' regular physical activities. It would be helpful if school organizations create fitness schedules incorporating it within the allotted working time and make it a routine. And fourth, school leaders can also create reward systems to motivate teachers to participate and pursue healthy choices. All these can be scheduled and implemented online.

### 3.2 Future Direction

The research suggests that:

1. Schools create an online Physical Activity program for their staff with an Assessment tool to monitor compliance.
2. Researchers undertake studies on the culture of schools offering online Physical Activity Programs for their staff.

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