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Empowering young Pasifika women through physical education

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The physical education classroom can be an empowering place for young Pasifika women. However, negative physical education experiences can also put girls off for life. Research by [Michelle Greene](#) at Massey University explores the idea of physical education (PE) as an empowering or disempowering process for Pacific Island young women, and the potential flow on effects this has both at school and in the community.

Pasifika women and physical education

Pasifika people enjoy a strong association with sport in New Zealand and contribute enormously to sporting successes at the professional level. However, despite these successes, Pacific women and girls are less likely to engage in organized sport comparative to other cultural groups. The PE classroom has the potential to capture young women's attention early and empower them to make positive health choices that can have a bearing on later life. Research by Michelle Greene found that a PE curriculum that incorporates physical activity with life skills, and a broad focus of health and wellbeing, resonates with Pasifika young women. Parental influence was also found to be a major contributing factor in the continuation of physical activity beyond the classroom.

Rationale for research

The NZ Ministries of Health and of Pacific Island Affairs have a particular focus on addressing poor health related outcomes for Pacific Island people, acknowledging that good health and exercise habits often commence in childhood. By understanding what is valued by Pacific Islanders with respect to physical activity, programmes and interventions would enable programmes to be better tailored to provide meaningful benefits for the health and wellbeing of Pasifika girls in the long term.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and secondary schools place a higher value on PE as an NCEA subject, and inform parents of the potential benefits for their daughters. Further research is recommended to investigate the reasons behind the marked decline in participation in sport by young women once they leave school, and the potential implications for personal fitness, health and wellbeing in later life. Such research could provide valuable information for Ministry of Health strategies.

"I don't think a lot of girls ... know how good [PE] is for your mind and the way you think, not just the physical benefits." (Interview: Melissa, Yr.10)

For more information go to the [PRPC website](#) or contact [Litea Meo-Sewabu](#).

Key Points:

- Physical education can be an empowering or disempowering process for young Pasifika women
- Research findings suggest a curriculum that incorporates both physical activity and life skills, and a broad understanding of health and wellbeing, seems to resonate with Pasifika young women
- Establishing effective partnerships with Pacific Island families and communities is required for physical education to be truly empowering.