

'The world is a happier place': Celebration in a whole-of-school physical activity initiative

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Abstract

Understanding factors that influence children's participation in sport and physical activity is critical to designing more appealing youth opportunities and programmes. Whole-of-school initiatives offer one way to promote children's physical activity, but little is understood about how celebration within these initiatives influences children's physical activity behaviours. Through this study we aimed to answer the question: what are participants' experiences of physical activity-related celebration within a whole-of-school physical activity initiative? Answering this question helped us to explore the relationship between celebration and school-based physical activity participation. This study was situated within Irish primary schools ($N = 14$) who were working towards the award of an 'Active School Flag'. Data for analysis included each school's Active School Flag application ($N = 14$), individual interviews with Active School Flag coordinator teachers ($N = 14$) and focus groups ($N = 13$) with children ($N = 62$). An inductive approach to analysis using open, axial and selective coding was employed. Celebration was an important part of the Active School Flag process, and the messages children associated with celebration were influential in shaping their understanding of what was important in relation to their physical activity participation. Acknowledgement of the merits of competitive sport beyond the focus on winning led to more inclusive physical activity approaches. Messages indicating that effort and participation were valued alongside excellence and winning were an important source for children to consider when making judgements about physical activity participation. Findings indicate the merit of including physical activity-related celebration within whole-of-school physical activity initiatives.

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Introduction

Schools are key sites for increasing children's physical activity (World Health Organization (WHO), 2018). One approach taken internationally to promote school-based physical activity is through whole-of-school physical activity initiatives that promote physical activity opportunities for children to be active before, during and after school (e.g. McMullen et al., 2015; Naylor and McKay, 2009). This type of multi-component approach, as opposed to a singular focus on one component (e.g. physical education), has been reported as a promising strategy when promoting physical activity participation amongst children (Kriemler et al., 2011).

Whole-of-school initiatives aim to position physical activity as a priority within schools by providing new and increased opportunities for children to be active throughout the school day (Bowles et al., 2019; Ní Chróinín et al., 2012). Carson et al. (2014) provide a useful conceptual framework that represents the systems that interact to influence children's school-based physical activity behaviours. The child is at the centre of the model, followed by the individual programme components (micro-level), the school context (meso-level), physical activity leadership (exo-level) and finally the school culture related to physical activity (macro-level). Focusing on the experience of children at the epicentre of the model can help make sense of how individual activity behaviours may be influenced by the school environment, leadership and context within a whole-of-school approach.

Research investigating children's commitment to and involvement in physical activity reveals a tangled web of personal and social factors that influence participation levels, quality of experiences and, in some cases, drop-out (Allen, 2003). The socio-cultural messages children receive about what is valued and how success is defined within a given sport context influence children's feelings of competence, and hence their motivation and participation (Somerset and Hoare, 2018). Children evaluate their competence in comparison to their own previous performances and in comparison with others. Building on competence motivation theory (Harter, 1981), a variety of sources to make judgements about competence are outlined below, including social sources, outcome sources and self-referenced sources (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010).

Social support is the first and most influential source of judgement children have about their competence in sport (Duncan et al., 2005; Stuntz and Weiss, 2010). Parents, peers, teachers and coaches are all important sources of social validation about physical activity participation for children (Beets et al., 2006, 2010; Smoll et al., 1993). Validation can enhance social status, recognition and approval from others and can be an important motivator for participation (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010). The second source of judgement about competence is from outcome sources, such as the finish place in competition and external rewards (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010). Emphasis placed on results and competitive activity can be a barrier to young children's participation in sport and physical activity (Allender et al., 2006; Somerset and Hoare, 2018). When children receive the message that talent and winning is valued, those who perceive themselves as less talented may be less likely to continue participation in a given physical activity (Sagar et al., 2007). The third source of judgement about competence is from self-referenced sources including emotions and

feelings about past performances. Self-referencing draws on a wide variety of social and outcome sources to make judgements about effort, improvement and achievement of goals. Such self-referencing usually begins around age 16 and is usually less influential in younger children (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010).

Inferences children make from these three sources as they relate to physical activity matter to feelings of competence and motivation, choices about continued participation, effort and persistence (Bailey et al., 2013; Somerset and Hoare, 2018), or whether they drop out of sport (Crane and Temple, 2015). Ames (1992) proposed recognition through reward and incentives as a tool teachers can use to promote feelings of competence and to motivate children. Celebration is one such form of recognition. A better understanding of how celebration influences children's physical activity dispositions and participation can therefore contribute to designing more appealing youth physical activity opportunities in school settings.

A celebration is an event or occasion to mark, acknowledge or honour a significant occasion or event, and generally implies an enjoyable experience or a special event (Collins/Harper, 2018). Celebration is a significant component of play and sport (Siedentop, 1998) and it is said that 'sport provides our culture with an acceptable avenue for... celebration of human endeavor' (Laker, 2002: 8). The assumed positive value of sport celebration for children is evident in the medal ceremonies and awards associated with children's competitive sport (Kidman, 2005). Dependent on the context, celebration of physical activity may sometimes emphasise values related to winning, achievement, participation and effort (Coakley, 2015). The relative emphasis on these values within celebrations sends children clear messages about what is important when it comes to physical activity and can influence their future participation (Kidman, 2005).

Sport-related celebration can trigger positive personal emotions, such as satisfaction, effort and overcoming of obstacles in achievement of a goal, that can act to motivate future participation (Laker, 2002). Sending positive messages that are inclusive and broad-reaching may help to increase children's participation (Bailey et al., 2013). For example, researchers indicate that a focus on personal improvement, as opposed to winning, is important in helping children feel more confident about their ability in physical activity settings (Bailey et al., 2013; Stuntz and Weiss, 2010). The 'sport education' model (Siedentop, 1998) recognises the powerful potential of the celebratory aspect of sport participation to influence children's experiences. Research related to children's experiences within a 'sport education' season highlighted the value of celebration and festivity as a motivator and enjoyable element of physical activity participation (Kinchin et al., 2009). Not all children, however, associate celebration with positive emotions. For example, children who perceive failure related to their participation, or have negative experiences when winning is over-emphasised, can be discouraged from participation (Kidman, 2005).

Celebration related to children's physical activity participation may offer one avenue to influence children's sport and physical activity participation. However, a better understanding is needed of what children perceive to be valued within school-based physical activity initiatives (Bailey et al., 2013) and how physical activity celebration influences children's physical activity engagement in order to design meaningful and relevant physical activity experiences. For example, Beets et al. (2010) suggest that praise merits further investigation as an influence on children's physical activity participation. Furthermore, the role of celebration within whole-of-school initiatives has received little attention to date in the research literature. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore teachers' and children's experiences of physical activity-related celebration. The research question was: what are teachers' and children's experiences of physical activity-related celebration within a whole-of-school physical activity initiative?

Research methods

Context: the Active School Flag

This research was situated within primary schools in Ireland who were working towards achievement of an Active School Flag (ASF). The ASF is awarded to schools that strive to achieve a physically educated and physically active school community in an attempt to ‘get more schools, more active, more often’ (www.activeschoolflag.ie). The ASF is an example of an initiative that aims to promote increased physical activity participation in school settings (McMullen et al., 2015). Schools striving to achieve an ASF must achieve certain criteria aligned with physical education, physical activity and partnerships in addition to organising an Active School Week each year (Active School Flag, 2018). Schools begin with a self-evaluation process in which they identify areas in need of improvement associated with the established criteria – several of which are associated with celebration (see Active School Flag, 2018). Once this is complete and improvements have been made, an ASF coordinator (a representative leader from each school) then submits an application outlining the results of the self-evaluation in each area as well as actions they have taken to improve physical activity provision. Schools are ultimately awarded the ASF after a thorough evaluation and associated formal on-site inspection. More information on the ASF and the process of achieving the flag can be found at www.activeschoolflag.ie.

In this study, we were particularly interested in the section of the application process focused on ‘Working with pupils’ (formerly called ‘Pupil voice/celebrating achievement and skills’). This section includes a variety of questions related to celebrations of children’s achievements within sport/physical activity (Active School Flag, 2018; the complete questionnaire can be accessed at <http://activeschoolflag.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ASF-Primary-Booklet-U-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf>).

Participants. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee. Using a database of primary schools who had been awarded the ASF in the previous two years, schools were contacted by letter and invited to participate. Information sheets were shared with all schools and subsequently all teachers and parents of children who participated gave informed consent. Children also provided assent to participate. In total, 14 schools agreed to participate, including 14 ASF coordinators who were classroom teachers and 62 children aged 7–12 years. Table 1 includes details about the participants. Only one school (School K) had a disadvantaged designation.

Data collection. Data were collected from the schools’ ASF applications ($N = 14$), individual interviews with ASF coordinators who were classroom teachers and one focus group with children from each school. All interviews and focus groups took place on the school site during school hours, generally in the staff room or an unoccupied classroom, and were carried out by one member of the research team. Each school’s ASF application was reviewed to inform the design of the interview and focus group guides. This was an important step given that each school approached the attainment of the ASF in different ways based on their self-evaluations and associated improvements.

Each interview guide explored experiences of celebration related to physical activity participation within the ASF processes, with particular reference to the activities the school had outlined in their application form. The individual teacher interviews started by exploring their understanding of celebration. Each teacher was encouraged to describe initiatives and events they had

Table 1. Participant details.

School	School type	Location	Size (number of pupils)	Number of teachers	ASF coordinator	Pupils Male (m)/female (f)
A	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	103	7	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 3, f = 1$)
B	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	60	4	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 1, f = 3$)
C	Co-educational Mainstream	Urban large town	250	22	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 2, f = 2$)
D	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	133	7	Female	$N = 11$ ($m = 6, f = 5$)
E	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	46	2	Female	$N = 5$ ($m = 3, f = 2$)
F	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	67	4	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 2, f = 2$)
G	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	87	4	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 3, f = 1$)
H	Co-educational Mainstream	Rural village	150	12	Female	$N = 3$ ($m = 2, f = 1$)
J	Co-educational Mainstream	Urban city	190	18	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 2, f = 2$)
K	Boys only Mainstream	Urban city	391	31	Male	$N = 4$ ($m = 4, f = 0$)
L	Co-educational Special school	Urban city	70	12	Female	$N = 4$ ($m = 4, f = 0$)
M	Co-educational Mainstream	Urban city	388	28	Male	$N = 4$ ($m = 2, f = 2$)
N	Co-educational Mainstream	Urban city	220	12	Female	$N = 2$ ($m = 1, f = 1$)
P	Co-educational Mainstream	Urban large town	144	12	Female	–

ASF: Active School Flag.

implemented and how they were celebrated, including consideration of who was involved, the emphasis of the celebration, and the outcomes and messages attached to the celebration. Teachers were also asked about how they celebrated when their school was awarded the ASF, who was involved and what the event entailed. Additionally, teachers were asked about their feelings of the importance of celebration when it came to the ASF initiative in their school.

Purposive sampling involved the ASF coordinator in each school selecting the children who participated in the focus groups. The researchers requested that the ASF coordinator teacher nominate children who had been part of the school's ASF committee, male and female, as well as children of varying enthusiasm with a range of sporting interests (i.e. a mix of children perceived to be sporty and non-sporty). While the teacher was asked to select three to four children, there was variation in teachers' approaches. The teacher in School D requested that all members of their ASF committee as well as non-members be included. Accommodating this request resulted in one much larger focus group ($N = 11$). Also of note was that the teacher participated in the focus group

alongside the children in School L (special school) to scaffold and provide support for the children as needed.

Our approach of using a focus group was to engage the group in ‘generating knowledge about a topic with which they have had direct experience’ (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 103) and aimed to empower children to share their experiences (Green and Hogan, 2005). The interviewer structured the conversation using details from the ASF submission and the teacher interview. Each question in the pre-prepared script homed in on celebration specifically. Questions explored their involvement in organisation and decision-making, what was important about celebrations, who was celebrated and why. Sample questions included ‘describe the activity/event, who was involved, how did they get organised?’ and ‘What were you celebrating? Was this important for the participants? What message do you think the other children took from this celebration?’ The tightly focused nature of the questions mitigated against going ‘off topic’ to wider ASF experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013) but may have inadvertently closed off the exploration of unanticipated issues and resulted in focus groups of a relatively short length. In each focus group the children were asked to describe their experiences of celebration activities and events while working towards the ASF.

The use of focus groups was advantageous given that children aged 7–12 can find participation daunting (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The interviewer was particularly careful to create opportunities for all participants to have input, and avoid vocal participants imposing a shared narrative on the group. For example, the researcher made an effort to include less vocal children through prompting and redirecting as well as asking children to consider the perspective of those who may not have had a positive experience, how that might feel and what the implications might be. Each focus group concluded with an opportunity for the participants to share thoughts and ideas related to celebration that were not already discussed. Interviews for teachers, and focus groups for children, varied in length across schools depending on the extent to which the school had emphasised celebration within the ASF processes; however, teacher interviews lasted approximately 15–20 minutes, and child focus groups lasted for 10–15 minutes.

Data analysis and trustworthiness. Final data for analysis included the ASF application ($N = 14$), transcripts of individual interviews with ASF coordinators ($N = 14$) and 13 focus groups with children ($N = 62$). The discrepancy between the number of schools and the number of focus group transcripts included in the final analysis was because the data from one focus group with children was eliminated from analysis due to issues with the audio recordings. Data were analysed inductively by the lead researcher using open and axial, and selective coding (Thornberg, 2017) involving the following steps. First, data from each school were reviewed, interpreted and assigned a code to identify relevant data. Teacher interviews and pupil focus groups as well as the school’s application form. For example, codes included ‘winning and competition’, ‘different talents valued’, ‘effort’, ‘new activities and novelty’ and ‘recognition of out-of-school activities’. Once this open coding process was completed for each school individually, the list of codes for each school was reviewed to identify distinct concepts and categories. For example, the codes ‘winning and competition’, ‘different talents valued’ and ‘recognition of out-of-school activities’ were grouped together in one category. Axial coding involved looking at relationships across the data from individual schools to identify patterns in coding and connections between categories to represent the important ideas and messages of these data across schools. As a result of looking at the relationships across data, the category in the example above was labelled ‘acknowledgement of achievements’. Finally, selective coding required focused re-engagement with the data (i.e. ASF

applications, interview and focus group transcripts) to code data related to each of the categories. Through this process, the final storyline related to the important role of celebration in schools' ASF experiences was confirmed. At this point, each category was named as a theme that captured the essence of analysis of the category. For example, the category discussed above was named as the theme 'celebration as public validation of achievement'.

As one researcher was responsible for the analysis process, a number of steps were taken to increase trustworthiness of the analysis process. A diary was used to take memo-style notes to track researcher thinking (Birks et al., 2008) at each step of the analysis process. Also, the second researcher acted as a critical friend, listening to the lead researcher's description of their approach to analysis, challenging assumptions, and seeking clarification and confirmatory evidence for decisions made on the organisation and analysis of the data. Her detachment from the analysis process itself allowed her to act as a sceptical sounding board in posing questions and seeking evidence for claims about the data. Also, the second researcher's expertise related to whole-of-school physical activity promotion, and knowledge of the context allowed her to critically engage with which codes were included in each category as well as the provisional themes shared as a form of peer-debriefing (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Sharing and back-and-forth discussion provided further support for decisions made at key points in the analysis process, including the comparison and organisation of codes in the development of categories. Both researchers were involved in deciding on the order in which the three themes were to be presented and drafting the outline of the three themes, including agreeing the final extracts of the raw data to be used. These examples of how the two researchers worked together to analyse and write up the findings strengthen the trustworthiness of our analysis.

Findings

Celebration was an important part of the whole-of-school physical activity initiative for both teachers and children, and teachers used celebration to convey important messages about the value of physical activity participation. These messages shaped the children's understanding of what was important in relation to their physical activity engagement, as well as acting as a motivator to increase participation for the participants of this study. Findings are presented in relation to three main conceptualisations of celebration: (a) celebration as public validation of achievement; (b) celebration as recognition of effort; and (c) celebration as acknowledgement of improvements. These three themes reflect aspects of participation that were emphasised in each school's approach to celebration within the ASF and the associated influence on children's physical activity experiences. Quotes from both the teachers and children illustrate each theme.

Theme 1: celebration as public validation of achievement

Celebration of children's physical activity achievements was an important facet of schools' ASF activities. Schools celebrated children's physical activity participation through various mechanisms. They included noticeboards, Active School assemblies, announcements to the school community through websites and newsletters, intercom announcements from the principal, certificates, 'sportsperson of the month' awards, and opportunities for children to demonstrate their physical activity skills through play and competition. Acknowledgement of children's achievements through these mechanisms marked them as valued and worthy of praise. The public nature of these

celebrations was of central importance as it allowed for validation of achievement within the wider school community.

Winning and successes in competitive activities were marked out for celebration. Medals and trophies were displayed as evidence of achievements. The primary purpose of the school in these celebrations was to praise publicly the children's achievements. The teacher at School J explained: 'highlighting the achievements of the kids basically, and the school or the teams . . . bringing it to the whole school community, not just the kids involved but showing the other kids'. Photographs of the 'sports person of the month' and successful competition participants were displayed on ASF noticeboards in various schools. Teachers emphasised that these celebration mechanisms were not only for participants in competitive sport, but rather an opportunity to acknowledge physical activity-related talents and abilities beyond winning. Opportunities to acknowledge individual children's strengths were particularly important. The teacher at School H explained: 'you have children who find [schoolwork] difficult but they may achieve outside on the sports field or they might just be very good to join in with other children . . . So it's important they get a chance to celebrate'.

Achievements outside of school, which may not have received attention before the ASF process, could also now be acknowledged within the school community. For example, the School B teacher said, 'a lot of them [children] were involved in outside clubs as well so they used to bring in their medals and trophies . . . so we'd take a photo of them with their medals'.

The children acknowledged the importance of a more inclusive approach, where physical activities outside the school were also deemed valuable. A pupil from School K explained:

It encourages them to show the other sports that they played. So, if they won a medal in a sport that no one knows about they won't be ashamed to come in then and show it because it's all positive.

Public validation made children feel proud and happy, and they saw merits in acknowledging each other's achievements. Another pupil explained, 'When they see that person's face they are like "Oh congratulations", and that makes that person feel proud. And it goes around in a circle and then everybody feels happy' (School K, pupil).

The teachers also recognised that the children benefited from this public validation. The value of praising achievements in a public way was that it gave children 'the opportunity to see you can achieve in all sorts of areas' (School E, teacher). The teacher from School J described a standout moment for her watching a child's reaction to the principal praising their achievement over the intercom: 'we had one boy who became a national champion at boxing. The principal actually announced it. I was in the class of the boy in particular and . . . his face just lit up, it was amazing'. Seeing the achievements of other children provided both inspiration and motivation to others in the school. For example, one pupil described how his appearance on the noticeboard might inspire others: 'when they see you on the board they'll be like "oh I want to be like him. I'll try to get on the Active Flag board". And then they'll push themselves harder to get it' (School D, pupil). Children consistently made connections between the value of being celebrated and their participation. For example, one pupil described how children were motivated to 'try harder in all your sports so you can get recognised' (School N, pupil). While we do not have direct evidence of a link between celebration activities and children's increased physical activity levels, quotes like these suggest that celebration did play a role in influencing children's physical activity dispositions and behaviours.

Validation of children who won in competitions and achieved physical activity-related awards was an important element of celebration activities in the ASF process in each school. These achievements were not the only cause for celebration. All schools adopted a broader definition of what merited celebration where increased participation and effort was as worthy of celebration as successes in competitive sport, as described below.

Theme 2: celebration as recognition of effort

All schools celebrated children who had increased their participation and effort in physical activity. Previously, a number of the schools had more traditional school sports programmes, with physical activity provision dominated by team games such as Gaelic football, hurling and basketball. Examples of how teachers described their provision included, ‘we were always an Active School . . . we had so many girls already on school teams’ (School P, teacher) and ‘our school has a very proud sporting tradition’ (School K, teacher). A consequence of this competitive team sport approach was that children who participated on these teams had opportunities for acknowledgement and praise of their achievements that other children did not: ‘you have the kids that are celebrated . . . rewarded for their activity with teams, with basketball teams’ (School C, teacher). Review of provision as part of the ASF process led to a change in approach based on the rationale that ‘there is enough catered for in terms of the high achievers’ (School M, teacher). Schools shifted their approaches to create opportunities for praise and recognition of their physical activity efforts for all children, regardless of the activity involved or the level of participation. For example, ‘celebration would mean everyone is involved and it isn’t just about the elite. It would be bringing every child into focus and getting everybody to participate’ (School G, teacher). As a result, schools adopted a broader, more inclusive interpretation of success. Effort and participation received greater emphasis, while success in competitive sport was still valued and acknowledged. For example, ‘it doesn’t have to be playing on the school team or whatever. It could be sack races, sports day or doing Zumba or the skipping workshop’ (School P, teacher). This allowed children who were not involved in competitive sport to also receive public validation for their efforts.

Individual commitment and effort to take part in more physical activity and increase personal involvement were important criteria for celebration in all schools. The teacher in School H explained the message they tried to convey: ‘every child is as important . . . we were really concentrating on participation rather than competing among themselves or competing with other schools. So that everybody got a chance to take part and feel that they have a reason to celebrate’.

The children noticed the school’s approach and understood the message that winning was not the sole mark of success and not the only reason to celebrate. They shared examples of how the school conveyed this message:

Like football matches. Even if they lost they’d go over the intercom ‘Oh congratulations to our team, they may not have won but they done [sic] the best that they could’ and then ‘they done [sic] really well’ (School J, pupil).

Acknowledgement of effort as well as achievements resulted in photographs of ‘the “athlete of the year” award but also “most improved” award’ (School M, pupil) to be displayed side-by-side on the ASF noticeboard. Such demonstrations that effort was valued provided encouragement for children to keep aspiring towards their goals: ‘You’ll get where you want to get if you keep on trying’ (School J, pupil).

Teachers also saw benefits for children in seeing a tangible reward for effort that may not otherwise have been clear to them. At School L the teacher explained:

It's important for their achievements to be celebrated and it's important for them to realise that if they put in an effort that their efforts can be rewarded and it's a reward. I mean taking part is a reward, being active, we'd like them to see that being active is a reward in itself, you know, it has all these healthy rewards. But, sometimes it's harder for children to see that so it's good to celebrate them participating.

This new increased emphasis on participation and effort opened up the possibility of children trying out new activities at School C, with the teacher explaining: 'before it might have been more "who's good at what?" Whereas now it's "come along with us and we'll give it a go and if you don't like it, you don't like it"'.

The children noticed that participation was now more open to all skill levels, explaining that, 'you don't have to be bad or good to do something. You can do it if you want to' (School A, pupil) and 'it made people determined to play all those kind of sports' (School F, pupil). The noticeboards were important in sharing the message that participation in new activities was valued and worthy of celebration. For example, 'you want to do something so you can get your picture up on the board... because it feels good to see your picture' (School D, pupil). The final theme below outlines the important role that celebration played in acknowledging improvements in collective physical activity provision.

Theme 3: celebration as acknowledgement of improvements

Both teachers and children concurred on the value of celebrating improvements in physical activity provision. The ASF process prompted schools to evaluate their provision, and in the process promoted celebration activities. The teacher from School K captured this when he explained that 'the process encouraged celebration. I know it was a criterion but really that was one of the areas, that if I was talking about us doing 90%, celebration was probably one of the areas where we were falling down'. The inclusion of celebration as a facet of physical activity provision resulted in more positive physical activity experiences for children. In addition, other improvements to provision beyond the addition of celebration activities, such as non-competitive and more inclusive activities with an emphasis on participation, played an important role in facilitating the celebration of effort and participation. One teacher shared, 'a huge number of children would have started new activities they might not have done before' (School N, teacher). Most of the teachers cited examples of the impact of opportunities to celebrate associated with improvements made to provision and new initiatives offered. For example:

Two children I can think of straightaway... it greatly enhanced their confidence and their belief in themselves and their pride in themselves, in what they achieved... The beaming smile off her for that day will live in my memory happily (School G, teacher).

As this quote suggests, the message that effort was worthy of celebration seemed to free children to participate more and to try new activities. Celebration was clearly an important influence on children's physical activity experiences during the ASF process and the award of the ASF provided a further opportunity to celebrate.

The culmination of the school's collective efforts was the presentation of a physical flag intended to fly outside the school and announce their ASF status. The flag represented the school's investment in and improvement of physical activity provision: 'it gives them a sense of achievement' (School N, teacher). Given that celebration of children's physical activity was a requirement of the ASF process, it is unsurprising that most schools used the presentation of the flag as an opportunity to celebrate their ASF success. Each school organised a special celebration event to mark the achievement of the ASF award and the raising of the flag. These events included special dignitaries, local community and parents, speeches, songs, dances and physical activity displays. The teacher in School G described how 'there was the tea, the coffee, the cakes and that. Home early and no homework – so a true celebration for them'. The children described how they celebrated: 'we all met up and had a few sweets and then we went around the classes and showed them our active flag' (School N, pupil), and 'we had a day and people started talking, playing instruments and there was teas, coffees and cakes' (School E, pupil). Schools valued the opportunity to celebrate their achievements in the ASF process: 'if you ask me about celebrating it – that was probably just the icing on the cake' (School J, teacher).

Marking the award of the ASF through celebration was important to the children and the teachers in a number of ways. Firstly, these celebrations allowed for public validation and praise for the overall achievement of each school's improvements in meeting the ASF award standard. The ASF celebration allowed others to see the school's achievement. For example, one teacher described how:

Parents came in – anyone who was available came in. So, we had parents there, grandparents, people I've never seen before in my life, and we had some of the coaches come in and we had you know presentations to both of those parents. Two of the children made a speech (School E, teacher).

Celebrating the award of the flag also allowed schools to share their accomplishments more widely, for example, 'we put it on Facebook and it was in the local paper' (School B, teacher).

Secondly, the ASF celebration event allowed schools to share all the activities they had engaged in with others: 'we displayed all the photographs on the windows of all the improvements that took place as a result of the flag' (School B, teacher). A capstone celebration event allowed schools to take stock of their achievements:

It's important to look back and see what you have achieved and acknowledge it . . . sometimes you kind of forget we did all of these things. You put your folder together and you realise, 'actually we do an awful lot' . . . I think it's important to acknowledge that and celebrate it (School C, teacher).

The children also emphasised the importance of celebrating their achievement: 'our school put a lot of effort into it. It was good to know that it paid off' (School C, pupil). These celebratory events were therefore both a reward and a recognition of the effort the school community had invested in the process.

Thirdly, the ASF award celebration was also an opportunity to reinforce the messages associated with celebration throughout the application process:

It's very important that people enjoy it and you can get people together and say well done – you've done really well at this . . . we can all take part in sport, we can all enjoy sport and you can do this all through your life (School E, teacher).

The ASF celebration therefore facilitated a schoolwide acknowledgement and celebration of effort and increased participation collectively. The event announced physical activity as an important element of school life and allowed the children to celebrate the role of physical activity in their lives: ‘the world is a happier place’ (School A, pupil). The final culminating celebration event was an important marker of the improvements that the school had made in their physical activity provision as well as another opportunity to reinforce messages about the place and meaning of physical activity in the school. Below, we explore the significance and implications of the purposes of celebration represented in the themes above.

Discussion

Overall, the findings of this research indicate the valuable role of physical activity-related celebration as part of whole-of-school physical activity initiatives. Both the teachers and children perceived that the celebratory aspect of the ASF initiative created a more positive school-based physical activity culture. Carson et al. (2014) developed a conceptual framework that represents the system of influences that interact to determine children’s school-based physical activity behaviours and helps us understand how celebration influenced participation within the ASF initiative. The focus and emphasis of individual celebration activities at a micro-level promoted an inclusive message that all levels of accomplishments associated with sport and physical activity were valued. The consistency of messages related to celebration across activities, before, during and after school, from all teachers and the principal as well as the children-led ASF committees (at the meso- and exo-levels), ensured that children received one cohesive message about what was valued relative to their participation. Celebration activities were embedded within school physical activity culture. This overall message at a macro-level represented a new culture related to physical activity celebration, which was reflected in the school environment (e.g. noticeboards), and leadership from the ASF teacher coordinator. Embedding celebration within this whole-of-school initiative ensured micro-, macro- and meso-level influence on children’s physical activity behaviours. This finding provides important direction on the future design of school-based physical activity initiatives and the potential role of celebration in enhancing such initiatives. The way that schools approached celebration and the messages they communicated through these celebrations are significant in a number of ways.

First, schools celebrated winning and excellence through public recognition (e.g. school assemblies and public address announcements). Despite cautions in the literature that less successful children can be turned off by an emphasis on winning and competition (e.g. Sagar et al., 2007), the children in this research saw value in acknowledgement of excellence and success. Rather than a drop-out effect (Allen, 2003), celebration of winning seemed to promote a shared sense of achievement. One possible reason for this may be that children perceived that they were all working together towards the awarding of the flag and that individual children’s achievements contributed to this collective goal. Also, given that more avenues to celebration were available, children may have been more content to celebrate others in the knowledge that they too had access to celebration mechanisms. Teachers also viewed these celebrations as beneficial in a number of ways, such as providing validation for children who may not excel in other aspects of school life. Highlighting these examples of excellence also provided motivation for others to aspire to emulate these achievements. The opportunity to make visible role models through celebration merits further consideration given the influence of role models on children’s sport participation (Allender et al., 2006). Celebration activities also provided an opportunity for acknowledgement of

achievements outside of school. This is important given recent calls in the literature to make links between in-school and out-of-school activity more explicit to children (Parker et al., 2018). Celebration may be one useful mechanism to make these connections. These findings suggest that attention to outcome sources of judgement (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010), such as competition and excellence, are valued by both teachers and children in relation to their physical activity participation and merit consideration in the design of whole-of-school physical activity initiatives.

Second, schools celebrated effort and individual investment in physical activity participation. Attributing value to a variety of sport and physical activity types and levels was important in disrupting previous traditional sporting hierarchies where only some activities (i.e. football) and winning merited recognition. Children previously excluded from celebration mechanisms because they were not involved in formal competitive sport now had more access to physical activity-related affirmation. Celebration was influential in promoting physical activity because it was perceived to be available and accessible to all. Within the ASF frame more activities and more levels of performance were worthy of acknowledgement, reflecting a change in both outcome and social support messages (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010). Celebrations that valued effort and participation through non-competitive avenues (Allender et al., 2006; Somerset and Hoare, 2018) were particularly significant in promoting physical activity. Not being pitted in competition against others appeared to help children to feel more competent in their own abilities (Ames, 1992) and promoted a culture where it was safe to take risks.

Third, improvements in physical activity provision opened up the possibility of new opportunities for celebration. Both children and teachers valued celebration as a part of their physical activity culture. Celebration was a particularly important element of acknowledging the overall achievement of the ASF award. The final capstone celebration allowed for both public recognition of improvements as well as reinforcement of what was valued within the school's physical activity culture. Coakley (2015) reminds us that celebration of physical activity may sometimes emphasise values related to winning, achievement, participation and effort. These schools found ways to celebrate all of these elements in complementary ways that allowed for achievement and excellence to be valued alongside participation and effort in ways that were acceptable to the children. Interestingly, framing celebration as a less exclusive construct did not dilute its value. Inclusion of both effort-based and achievement-based acknowledgements in the capstone celebration reinforced messages about what was important in relation to participation (Kidman, 2005) in the physical activity culture of these school communities. In addition, these flag-raising celebrations provided an important source of social and outcome support for the school community. Marking the school's achievements and receiving positive affirmation through celebration may lay the groundwork for continued engagement and commitment to physical activity at the macro-level (Carson et al., 2014).

Celebration provided a collective positive motivation for the school community in their efforts towards award of the ASF. Celebration of effort as well as achievement influenced some children's judgements about their participation (Kidman, 2005), and, in turn, their motivation and participation appeared to increase (Ames, 1992; Stuntz and Weiss, 2010). As rewards became more accessible, the teachers in this study perceived that children were more motivated to participate. For example, teachers provided examples of how celebration of effort and a reduced emphasis on competition led some less active children to get more involved. Both social and outcome-related sources of judgement about their competence (Stuntz and Weiss, 2010) were influenced by celebration activities. Social sources of influence included teachers and peers (Beets et al., 2006; Smoll et al., 1993), who consistently echoed inclusive messages related to what was valued in relation to participation.

Physical activity-related celebrations helped to communicate the outcomes that were valued, including effort and increased participation. Cope et al. (2013) suggested that sending positive messages that are inclusive and far-reaching could help to increase children's participation. These findings provide support for this suggestion. Importantly, celebration seems to provide a vehicle to communicate physical activity-related values in ways that are accessible to children and influential on their engagement in and enjoyment of physical activity. This finding provides useful direction that celebration, and associated concepts such as praise and acknowledgement of achievements, may be one avenue to encourage reluctant participants (Beets et al., 2010).

A word of caution in relation to our findings is that a limitation of our research was that the school's ASF coordinator selected the children who participated. While teachers were requested to select children from a variety of physical activity backgrounds (and data seem to support this), we do not have direct data, such as a physical activity diary, to support this claim. Therefore, it may be possible that data did not represent some children's experiences and that there was some bias towards those who excelled more within the ASF culture. Notwithstanding this, our findings suggest the influence of celebration on children's physical activity dispositions is an area that merits further attention from those interested in promoting children's school-based physical activity.

In school settings, there is already a comprehensive body of research providing compelling evidence of the overall value of whole-of-school physical activity initiatives (Carson and Webster, 2019). We build on this literature by highlighting the role of celebration in promoting a positive physical activity culture in these schools by celebrating winning and achievements as well as effort and increased participation. As well as contributing understanding of what schools celebrated, we also indicate the value of paying attention to fine-grained analyses of aspects of whole-of-school initiatives, such as celebration, in in-depth ways. Insights gleaned from this study can provide further understanding of how whole-of-school physical activity initiatives operate to influence children's physical activity dispositions in positive ways.

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