



Mass sports and recreation events as effective instruments of health-oriented education

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Abstract

Effective health-oriented education in the area of sports and recreation events organization - is not a goal which is easy to achieve. The idea is certainly worthy of attention, since the benefits can be passed on to the organizer, sponsor and the entire society.

The purpose of this paper is to present sports and recreation events as a means of promoting physical culture and health-oriented education. Motions, proposals, and preconditions (as described here) of effective educational intervention in the organization of events are based on 15-years-long secret (hidden) participatory observation of 141 different (in terms of their organizational specifics) street runs - both in Poland and in the neighbouring countries - Germany, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Sports and recreation events can become an effective instrument of education for a healthy lifestyle only if they are widely available (easily accessible), if they draw media attention, are popular, cyclical (recurring), have a specific program and atmosphere.

The organizers of events in the area of physical recreation should not encourage competition but rather educate for regular participation in health-oriented training, while active participation in sports and recreation event might fit in the pre-planned health capacity control.

For sports and recreation events to become a carrier of socially desirable values such as health or healthy lifestyle, promoters should intentionally put emphasis on these values and place them above commercial or marketing strategies of sponsors.

Key words: health education, health promotion, sports and recreation events

Introduction

Health problems prevail in the contemporary world despite the extensive technological progress which enables rising standard of living and significant achievements in medicine. Still, even if over the years mankind has successfully coped with a number of dangerous diseases, new ones emerge in their place.

Global health policy, achievements in the domain of hygiene and modern methods of treatment permit to draw the conclusion that we have already learned how to control the most serious health risks. Observed over the last few decades a marked decline in infant mortality and increased life expectancy in the European Union prove this beyond a reasonable doubt [20].

At this time, health problems which are of the utmost importance both in the developing countries and in the highly developed areas are

associated with the civilization diseases. As has been repeatedly shown, these diseases have their source in the people's environment and behaviour [14]. That explains why the concept of lifestyle and more precisely – the concept of healthy lifestyle has entered the popular culture of western societies and is now rapidly spreading.

The purpose of this paper is to present sports and recreation events as a means of promoting physical culture and health-oriented education. Motions, proposals, and preconditions (as described here) of effective educational intervention in the organization of events are based on 15-years-long secret (hidden) participatory observation of 141 different (in terms of their organizational specifics) street runs - both in Poland and in the neighbouring countries - Germany, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Health perceived as a value

Amid the multitude of definitions and concepts of health it is not an easy task to unmistakably identify the right one which would be appropriate for all the communities in the entire world. At its establishment just after World War II the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the definition saying that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity [18]. This excessively idealistic, albeit comprehensive, definition has been widely applied to this day. Without much doubt it has become the reason why the notion of well-being was introduced to the wide circulation (also scientific one). However, the concept was often understood differently and, what is more, wrongly associated with happiness and high quality of life. The mentioned above most frequently cited definition has firmly established itself in popular culture and the concept of well-being has become excessively associated with notions like wellness or fitness.

Multidimensional perception, positive way of defining health, focusing on health and not on illness have opened up new opportunities for recreational and preventive health care services. Health promotion ideas are being increasingly adopted everywhere. Programs with local or international reach are implemented all over the world with the aim to promote health and healthy lifestyles. Awareness of the value of health perceived multidimensionally can be easily traced in a number of international legal acts and the legal systems of most countries, including Poland. The National Health Programme and recent reform of education which introduces physical education issues to the core curriculum in the field of health education are good examples of declarative concern of the State for the health and quality of life of its citizens [12, 8]. However, specific provisions implying individual responsibility for one's health very slowly (too slowly) translate into concrete, practical behaviours aimed at strengthening health.

Significant failures in this regard relate not so much to the way the health information is spread but rather to negligence in developing health-oriented attitudes, including the ability to

make the right choices. T. Maszczak [11] assumes that "all health behaviours are culturally conditioned, so you have to be able to select the appropriate models from a variety of proposals and reject then the unfitting ones." In the process of making choices useful are role models, beliefs and held values [3].

According to G. Kloska [9] value is "what is precious and desirable, and what constitutes the goal of human endeavour." K. Denek gives great importance to the values in human life. It is believed that they serve as the compass that guides the behaviour of people, affects their conduct and also makes possible their assessment [6].

Health is a universal value because it has the capacity of prerequisite making possible achievement of other values. High potential of health opens the way to satisfying important needs related to self-fulfilment and contentment and thus enabling increased quality of life both for individuals and entire social groups. WHO in its official documents promotes health as a value, giving emphasis to the fact that only a healthy society is able to grow and produce material and non-material goods.

Health-oriented education through physical education

In public education an important role is assigned to axiological category. M. Kowalski and A. Gawel claim that there is a need – more urgent than ever before – to emphasise the values in the educational practice because these values pertain to goals, content and methods of any educational process. Values, as both authors assume, are "an essential element construing an educational situation and forming the foundation which makes possible the educational process to take place" [10].

The process of health-oriented education begins at an early age and is sustained and supported by educational institutions. According to theoretical assumptions, physical education has a vital role to play in enhancing the value of health. However, A. Pawłucki argues that physical education teachers unfortunately are not prepared to meet the need for health-oriented personality formation that would emphasise taking care of the body [16].

Health education of children and adolescents usually focuses on abstract - from their point of view - problems. It is difficult indeed to convince to health-oriented values somebody who is in good health due to his young age. Still, health must not necessarily be treated as a physical condition; it may also be perceived as a process [17]. Understanding health's continuous heterostasis - moving through the continuum from one end of full health to the other of total disease - may result in developing personal interest and commitment [1].

Self-improvement can be a pleasant and rewarding experience. Working on health basically boils down to the implementation of a healthy lifestyle; one just works on himself. Effort that is put in the implementation of specific health-oriented behaviour can enhance your health and increase the potential. Understanding health in terms of resource or potential may also be an important factor that increases the motivation to work on it. At this point begs the fundamental question: why are we witnessing so many expressions of lack of respect to the health, even though in our culture it is commonly considered to be a great value, worthy of almost any efforts? Dangerous, risky behaviours are more attractive than the prudent ones. Refraining from any effort - physical and mental inertia - is the preferred pattern of resting. With no doubt it constitutes the educational challenge which parents, schools and other educational institutions are unable to cope with. Of utmost importance is to search for new solutions, new channels of communication and ways to build awareness.

Physical culture is the carrier of many socially desirable values. One of them is health. This value is especially appreciated in the context of its institutionalized forms such as physical education, recreation and rehabilitation. Physical recreation area is the broadest domain and most directly refers to the value of health and ways of increasing its potential. At this time, a wide range of available recreational activities makes it possible to put together an offer which accurately fits individual needs and abilities.

It should be noted that health-oriented education which emphasises value of health is a continuous process which proceeds through all

stages of human life and ever more often advances beyond school environment. Organizers of sports and recreation events might be among those who take on the role of educators and health promoters.

Sports and recreation events as carriers of health values

The vast majority of events in the domain of physical education involve emotions and competing. They act as motivators inducing people to gather in a particular place and time. Engagement which takes place between contestants – actors in this show - is restrained by strict rules and its aim is to single out the winner.

In the process of examining sports events one has to differentiate between the spectacle of sports and recreational event. While sport events attract large audiences which gather to cheer professional athletes, the typical recreational events involve massive participation of amateurs. The distinction is important as it determines the person's behaviour and the impact on health. Sporting events create the opportunity for dissemination of negative behaviours. Cheering often involves the consumption of alcoholic beverages and unhealthy snacks. Sport events can of course play a meaningful role in terms of psycho-social well being and indirectly affect the level of participation in physical recreation. H. Zdebska [21] is of the opinion that sports are an important part of popular culture; transcending the realm of sport, they act as a catharsis (discharge negative emotions).

However, active participation in recreational event not only encourages a healthy life but also enforces it through health-enhancing training, which opens the way for a successful participation in a recreation event with sport activities in its programme. Even if there are sports and recreation events which do not require prior preparation, the mere participation in a sporting activity has already a health-enhancing value. J. Szczepański writes "only action has the magical power that can trigger a new action, release new strength, ascertain the human possibilities, wake dormant forces, set in motion the chain of individuals, groups, social classes and nations in order to achieve very

different purposes, all of them multiplying and developing human strength and capabilities "[19].

Event organisers take on the responsible task of educating for the value of health by way of creating communities. Almost all the regulations of sports and recreation events have a provision relating to promotion of a healthy lifestyle. Unfortunately, in some cases it is nothing more than twaddle. Of course, the mentioned provision is always effectuated in an indirect way - to a lesser or greater extent.

The sport and recreation event programme may include provisions related to healthy lifestyle, prevention and health promotion. Event can also be a carrier of a "hidden agenda" – message unconsciously transmitted both by organizers and participants. Promotional power of events is being noticed by more and more cities and businesses interested in image building. Events can promote almost anything; a particular activity, place, people, goods or leisure offers [2].

It is important for the organizer to be fully aware of the influence it exerts and, going even farther - consciously model it through the events' programme. The impact may vary, depending on the characteristics and size of the event. It is worth noting that not only the active participants but also the spectators and passers-by who watch the event from the outside can experience self-reflection regarding their own performance, health and lifestyle. Thus, the goal of mass commercial sports and recreation events may surpass the popularization purposes and include education for active participation in the health training.

Occasionally, during recreational events participants can undergo a free, preventive examination and talk with experts in many fields that are relevant to a healthy lifestyle. So, the programme may be intentionally directed at socially desirable values.

One should not overlook the socio-cultural determinants of health behaviour. Though the lifestyle is shaped in adolescence in the process of socialization, it is subject to change in the later stages of ontogeny. Change in the way of life is preconditioned however by re-orientation in the value system of the individual. M. Nijakowski assumes that "the mode of existence of a human

being differs from the mode of existence of animals in this that it constitutes an intermediate form of satisfying particular system of needs by means of values." Following this line of thinking, he believes that the way of life is determined by the way the values are implemented [13].

As healthy lifestyle is of great worth from a social point of view, important is also education aimed at promoting and fostering the values of a healthy lifestyle.

Changes in the lifestyle of adults are usually carried out in several successive stages [4]. The first, preliminary, is characterised by manifesting resistance to change. The second step is considering - the individual begins to deliberate about the eventual changes. The next step is preparation - the person is ready to make substantial changes in his life. The fourth stage is action - it is only now that the specific changes are implemented. The last stage is about sustaining - putting the changes into regular practice. The ultimate goal in the process of change of the particular health behaviour is upholding this change. Perseverance in the self-imposed change and firmness in implementing it in the own life are usually the most difficult tasks.

Recreational events are able to not only inspire to action and cause the desired change, but most importantly - make it possible to maintain and deepen the changes introduced in the lifestyle. A well filled calendar of regular events in combination with putting forth one, dominant form of recreation (such as street runs, bike rallies, kayaking, etc.) creates the possibility of allocating significant share of people's free time to a hobby activity. This entails a permanent change in the overall philosophy of life.

It should be noted that the process of changing health behaviours is influenced by many different factors which affect people participating on the regular basis in sport and recreation events such as popular street runs. These are the *reinforcing factors* (i.e. success – as a result of competing, not necessarily with the other contestants, but also with oneself; social support - the coach, the community of runners, etc.), *facilitating factors* (setting goals, self-assessment, planning, time management, etc.), *predispositional factors* (motivation, readiness for

self-development, etc.) and *personal factors* (age, sex, recent health condition, etc.) [4].

Events have the capacity of meetings integrating a community of runners, cyclists, skaters, etc. – a community of active people with lifestyle characterised by health-enhancing behaviours. This sports community focuses on health values and strengthens the members' attachment to them. People who establish contacts in the place set by the organizer move to virtual reality to continue their encounter. Focusing on common values leads to ever bigger involvement in the preferred activity. Still, preparation that enables achieving satisfactory results requires understanding, approval and implementation of principles of the healthy lifestyle. Here comes the awareness-building role of a coach, instructor, organizer of sports and recreation events, of people who should assume responsibility and act as leaders in the world of physical culture and health. They should act as educators and health promoters, and not just limit themselves to organising leisure time events amassing unreflective participants.

Self-reflection on health-oriented values - in other words, a volitional act of thinking about oneself, about one's performance - is a necessary pre-condition for having full control of one's life, embarking on an active lifestyle and implementing plans which change one's way of living and improve health. Events which mobilise people to work on their psychological and physical fitness can be qualified as effective instruments of health promotion. M. Demel is of the opinion that health promotion belongs in an axiological category as it is oriented towards a tangible value [5].

For sports and recreation event to become an effective educational tool it should meet several conditions. The following factors should be considered:

Cyclical character of the event – produces motivation for training and other activities, usually health-enhancing ones, with the aim to achieve improvement of results in future contests; periodicity contributes to event's tradition, increases thus its importance and augments organiser's credibility.

Programme - should enclose specific messages and take into account the way they

are communicated. The programme should be diversified, include various forms of contests belonging to different categories (particularly important are the entertaining ones). There may also be so called "hidden agenda", which will change not only the level of participant's health awareness, but also his personality.

Availability - events should be open to all interested parties, regardless of age, gender, level of fitness, physical disability, etc. Rules for competition should be flexible - tailored to the participants and the costs of participation should be small.

Mass scale - the larger the event in numbers, the greater the potential impact on the promotion of the fostered value. The mass participation verifies the attractiveness of the event and draws media attention, enhancing thus influence exerted on the participants and also on spectators.

Activity – emphasis put on dominant role of active participation.

Familiarity - the programme builds on the family nature of the event, and therefore makes possible joint multi-generational participation.

Mediality - extensive cooperation with the mass media such as television, Internet, newspapers or radio stations.

Opinion leaders - active participation of well-known and admired people who attract both the viewers and potential participants. The use of celebrities authenticates the main message of the event.

Building relationships - the organiser's website should serve as a channel of communication and platform for creating and maintaining relationships among the participants.

Authority of the organiser - his credibility; much can be gained if the event falls within the auspices of a recognized institution or organization.

Sports event as a commercial venture

As demand for recreational events is large and growing, new companies spring up with services like organisation of events (in various places), IT infrastructure or media coverage. Trends favouring development of the event industry are firmly rooted in the encouraged model of taking leisure on weekends. This form

of taking leisure, defined as the average, is gaining popularity. More and more fans of physical activity (runners, cyclists, skaters, kayakers, etc.) engage in events held far away from their place of residence. The amateurs are tempted to combine sport objectives with sightseeing and recreation. Rapid growth is observed in the international event tourism [7].

In my country (Poland) operate numerous businesses which specialize in complex services. For instance, to runners they offer organized trips to places abroad where street runs are being held. Community of runners has access to information and knowledge related to their discipline through web portals, books, various publications and periodical magazines for runners (currently three). Guiding the interests of such a large group of people, counting thousands of fans of running events, is certainly not an easy task and requires in-depth knowledge and responsibility. Developing health-oriented attitudes should prevail and replace the purely instrumental approach to physical activity [15].

There is a risk that the idea of sustaining health might get warped and transformed into a cult of body or fixation on efficiency, independence and success. This could happen as an outcome of commercialization - process, which is gaining ground also in the areas of physical culture and health education.

It is hard not to notice its consequences; one of them is the undermining of the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Health-oriented education should not mean building loyalty with the purpose of attracting potential clients for recreational services. Unfortunately, more and more examples of how the notion of health is being exploited are easily traceable in marketing strategies of corporations, various institutions and in politics.

There is no doubt that the commercial dimension of events makes them more attractive and this, in turn, significantly boosts their popularity. These days, evidence of commercial approach to sports and recreation events is omnipresent, but is especially abundant in the case of large events which attract thousands of people. The organizers are competing among themselves and this business practice serves

well to the quality of events. It can be assumed that in this area free market will procure added value under the corporate social responsibility. The organizers of major international events (e.g. marathons held in the capitals of Western Europe) do not usually complain about the lack of sponsors.

Businesses are willing to support events which play the role of clamorous manifestos of activity, fitness and health awareness even if their products or services are in no way related to the value of the health-oriented lifestyle. The necessity to undertake quality enhancing actions - carried out under the quality policy - obliges the organizers to create health-oriented programmes and long-term social activities which are based on health - value which is listed high in the generally accepted hierarchy. This is particularly evident in the efforts of the organizers to get their business certified (less often - the event itself), under the international quality standards (e.g. ISO 9001 et seq.)

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Conclusion

- Sports and recreation events can become an effective instrument of education for a healthy lifestyle only if they are widely available (easily accessible), if they draw media attention, are popular, cyclical (recurring), have a specific program and atmosphere.
- The organizers of events in the area of physical recreation should not encourage competition but rather educate for regular participation in health-oriented training, while active participation in sports and recreation event might fit in the pre-planned health capacity control.
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