Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

STEPHANIE FIELD

MSc (University of Victoria, 2014)
BA (University of X, 2006)

“The Influence of Selected Individual and Contextual Factors on Active Physical Recreation Participation in Middle Childhood”

School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education

Tuesday, June 29, 2021
9:00am (PDT)
Remote Defence

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Viviene Temple, School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Patti-Jean Naylor, School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, UVic (Member)
Dr. Sandra Gibbons, School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education, UVic (Member)
Dr. John Foley, Department of Physical Education, State University of New York at Cortland (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Jackie Goodway, Department of Human Sciences, The Ohio State University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Deborah Begoray, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Middle childhood is a dynamic period in children’s lives marked by a host of dramatic and concomitant physical, cognitive, and social changes. Typically, during this time, fundamental motor skills improve and children develop sport-specific forms of those skills as they participate in active physical recreation. This participation occurs in expanding social worlds, and changes in children’s cognitive development heightens their ability to reflect on their successes and failures in those contexts. This dissertation examined some of these concomitant changes and interactions longitudinally in three related studies among approximately 450 children from grade 2 to grade 5. In Study 1, “Perceptions matter! Accuracy of perceived physical competence in middle childhood and the impact on active physical recreation participation,” I found that children’s self-perceptions of their physical abilities became more accurate by grade 3, and that children with both positive perceptions and high motor skills participated in the most active physical recreation. Contrastingly, children with less positive self-perceptions, whether they had relatively high or low motor skills, participated in less active physical recreation. The expanding social worlds of children were explored in Study 2, “Social contexts and participation in recreational activities across middle childhood.” Supporting what had been theorized for children, I found significant expansion in with whom and where children participated across the grades, including a significant increase in children’s participation by themselves and with friends, and a concomitant decrease in activities with their family. Overall, however, children still spent the largest proportion of their recreational time with their family in each grade. Lastly, in Study 3, “Latent profile analysis of children’s active physical recreation patterns in middle childhood,” I identified unique profiles of children from grade 2 to grade 5 based on combinations of motor skills, perceptions of physical competence, social contexts, and active physical recreation. Two consistent profiles of children persisted across the grades: one of children on a path toward active physical recreation engagement, and one seemingly at risk of disengagement. Ultimately, however, I discovered that with each subsequent grade came increasing diversity in children’s profiles, highlighting the need for tailored programs that can accommodate children’s individual differences. The findings from these three studies confirm that middle childhood is a dynamic time where children experience a multitude of changes. Overall, I found that children are developing cognitively as evidenced by improvements in accuracy, and socially, as evidenced by expanding social networks. Physically, in terms of motor skill development, children were not optimally developing, which is concerning.

Three concrete recommendations arising from this work relate to (a) children who underestimate their abilities; (b) the early engagement of many children in organized sports; and (c) how perceptions of physical competence are used in physical activity research during middle childhood. Approximately one-quarter of children underestimated their physical abilities, and of great concern was their lack of motor skill improvement from grade 2 to grade 5. Along with opportunities to develop their motor proficiency, children who underestimate their abilities, need instructors in active recreation contexts to point out, affirm, and confirm their actual abilities. The second recommendation relates to the early participation of a majority of children in organized sports in the community. As such, children were participating in formal physical activities, such as team sports, during a turbulent time in the development of their self-appraisals. Leaders and family members need to ensure that the expectations they convey to children are realistic. Further, children will benefit from activities and learning opportunities that are meaningful and provide choices that are suited to their current skill and confidence levels. Finally, when examining children’s physical self-perceptions during middle childhood, researchers should consider the expected developmental trajectory of the accuracy of those self-perceptions. A drop in perceptions of physical competence levels among children with inflated self-perceptions at the beginning of middle childhood is expected as these perceptions become more accurate. Overlooking this expected developmental trajectory may confound research findings, particularly if self-perceptions are an outcome measure.