Transition in participation in sport and unstructured physical activity for rural living adolescent girls

R. M. Eime*, W. R. Payne, M. M. Casey and J. T. Harvey

Abstract
Physical activity (PA) is important for lifelong health; however, participation is lower in rural compared with metropolitan areas and declines during adolescence, particularly for girls. It is likely that this decline is related to the number of life transitions that occur during adolescence. This qualitative study examined the views of active rural living girls regarding the factors affecting their sport and PA participation, using the socioecological model. Twenty-seven girls aged 16–17 from four schools participated in semi-structured focus group discussions. Content and thematic analysis was conducted from verbatim transcripts using NVivo. The girls enjoyed involvement in community club sport with friends and they reported living in communities where participation in sport was a major form of social interaction. However, the desire to succeed educationally was a critical factor affecting their participation in sport and PA and influenced their movement from structured club sport to more flexible, but socially isolated individual activities. It is recommended that future longitudinal research should track rural living adolescent females as they complete secondary school, in order to better understand the influence of educational priorities upon sport and PA participation and to identify practical strategies for both schools and community organizations to foster continuing participation throughout this crucial period of life transition.

Introduction
It has been well documented that along with education, employment, occupation, working conditions, income and housing, place of residence is one of the key ‘upstream’ determinants of health [1] and that individuals living in rural settings have poorer health outcomes than their metropolitan counterparts [2]. Furthermore, physical activity (PA) participation rates are lower in rural than in metropolitan settings [3, 4]; one factor contributing to this may be poorer access to services and facilities [5]. From a health perspective, PA is considered to be an important health behaviour, which can be classified, along with psychosocial factors such as control, self-esteem, social support and marginalization, as ‘mid-stream’ health risk factors [1]. It is therefore important to ensure that rural living residents who are already active maintain this status and to identify and employ strategies at a population level to increase the PA levels of those who are insufficiently active.

For adolescents, the main opportunities for PA are school physical education (PE) classes, organized sport and unorganized or unstructured activities such as walking. It is known that involvement in sport declines during adolescence [6–9] and that adolescent girls are significantly less physically active than boys [10, 11]. Rapid changes in self-concept, sense of self-worth and body image also occur during the transition from adolescence to
adulthood [6]. Events which typically occur during this period include leaving school, entering further study or full-time employment, leaving home, getting married, becoming a parent and the acquisition of new social roles and responsibilities [6, 12]. Many of these factors negatively affect PA participation rates [6, 12, 13]. No literature was identified which specifically examined the impact of life transition on sport and PA behaviour in rural living adolescent girls. This is particularly important given the health and PA status of the rural population and the fact that active children and adolescents are considerably more likely to be active as adults [14, 15].

Recently, the study of PA participation has broadened beyond a focus on the effect of intrapersonal factors alone, towards the application of the socioecological model of health to PA. This new focus has revealed that many factors (intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental/organizational and policy related) influence PA participation [16–18]. However, there has been little examination of these multiple and interacting elements for specific population groups, and few studies have undertaken an in-depth qualitative examination of the factors affecting participation in sport and PA [19].

The aim of this study was to use the socioecological model to investigate the broad range of factors which individually and interactively affect participation in sport and PA for currently active rural girls. A secondary aim was to discuss the impact on participation in sport and PA of the likely move away from their home community after completion of secondary schooling. Finally, we sought to explore the perceived barriers to PA participation for inactive rural girls.

### Methods

The sampling frame consisted of all Victorian secondary schools (Government, Independent, Catholic). ‘Rural’ schools were defined as those outside the 31 Victorian Local Government Areas designated as metropolitan [20]. Four schools were randomly selected and checked for representativeness with respect to relative socio-economic advantage/disadvantage, using a Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas index [21]; geographical location, using the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) [22] and educational sector. In terms of ARIA+, the selected schools are classified as either Inner Regional (some restrictions to accessibility of some goods, services and opportunities for social interaction) or Outer Regional (significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction). The demographics of the towns in which the selected schools are located are summarized in Table I.

Girls were randomly selected from Year 11 class lists from each school and invited to participate in a focus group discussion. Six to eight participated in each focus group, with parental and student consent. Participants also provided basic demographic information. A semi-structured interview guide based on the socioecological model of health provided a common framework for each focus group discussion. Themes explored included activities

### Table I. Community demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Distance from capital city (km)</th>
<th>Distance from a regional centre (km)</th>
<th>SEIFA&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Approximately SEIFA Victorian percentile rank</th>
<th>ARIA+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>10,614</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.1&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>5,374</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1,034</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0.91&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>27,707</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.88&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2,272</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.51&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SEIFA, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas.
<sup>a</sup>Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003).<sup>b</sup>Inner Regional Australia: some restrictions to accessibility of some goods, services and opportunities for social interaction. <sup>c</sup>Outer Regional Australia: significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.
participated during spare time and sport and PA participation. The following prompts were used to guide the discussion on sport and PA participation: setting for participation; benefits received; influences, motivators and barriers to participation; type of involvement (e.g. social or individual PA, organized sport); likes and dislikes regarding participation; why or why not involved in sport and/or PA; what would make participation more enjoyable; what could be done to encourage participation; changes in participation types/levels to date and perceived future changes and aspects of rurality affecting participation. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and deidentified. Transcripts were read independently by two interviewers. A coding tree containing themes and sub-themes was developed collaboratively and used to code transcripts sentence by sentence using NVivo software. Transcript content was discussed with two independent researchers to validate the themes and increase the rigour and trustworthiness of the analysis [23]. Ethical approval was gained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee, the Victorian Department of Education and the Victorian Catholic Education Office.

Throughout the results, the community from which each quotation came is indicated by letters A–D, as per Table I.

### Results

All 27 participants were aged 16–17 years, born in Australia and lived in households where only English was spoken. The parents of 21.0% were farmers. All girls participated regularly (at least weekly) in some form of PA. Many (40.7%) participated in individual physical/recreational activities or socialized with friends/family in their leisure time. Many (70.4%) played club sport with 59.3% participating in an individual PA and 22.2% a group-based PA.

### Intrapersonal

The key intrapersonal themes identified were as follows: preferences and motivation; time availability and changes in the type of PA involvement and self-esteem and motor skill competence.

### Preferences and motivation

Common leisure activities undertaken included playing netball, homework and socializing. Most of the girls enjoyed team sports and thrived on competitive sport: ‘I like the flush you get out of being competitive, being competitive in sport. I love that (A)’. They reported participating in sport and PA for health reasons and to stay in shape: ‘I find more enjoyment now; maybe because I understand better how it helps my body and stuff (B).’

Sport was reported as being routine or a critical part of the girls’ lives: ‘It’s routine, we have done it every year (C)’. However, perception of skill was a factor influencing choice of sport: ‘As you get older you usually stick to sports that you can do, you don’t try to learn another sport (C).’

Inactive girls were variously perceived to ‘do nothing’, to get into mischief or to participate in other non-physical activities similar to active girls, such as work, homework, socializing or merely as having different interests. One active girl stated: ‘At least we have an outside (interest) with something to distract you from homework (A).’

Girls who did not participate in traditional Australian team sports, such as netball, were seen to participate (if at all) in individual physical activities: ‘They might go for a walk, the less active girls (D). I don’t think they do anything (C). Some girls simply didn’t enjoy sport: I just think they have no interest really (B).’

### Time and change in type of PA involvement

Lack of time was a commonly reported barrier to participation in structured sport, resulting from the increased burden of school study and homework and increased interest in social activities, which frequently conflicted with the perceived inflexible scheduling of club training and competition. Consequently, many girls reported changing from structured sporting activities to unstructured physical activities. ‘I just wanted a change (from team to individual) because you get a lot more homework and study and stuff so there’s not much time to do other stuff (A).’ Another reason for moving from team to individual activities was to have some time alone and relax. ‘School is so full on and at the end of the day...’
you don’t want to do anything involved around people (B). It’s my thinking time (A). When I run I can let out all my anger (A). I obviously prefer to play netball with friends than I would on my own, but in terms of going for a run I like to do that on my own’. Why is that? ‘I don’t know, just to have that break, its ‘me’ time (B)’. Both sport and unstructured PA were often described as a break from study. However, some girls felt that it was harder to be motivated for individual physical activities. In conjunction with these changes in the form of PA undertaken, the girls reported a decline in both the number of physical activities undertaken and total time spent in PA: ‘I am less active I have more school work and I have got a job. I like to keep active four times a week now rather than every day (B)’. Others reported that they were unable to overcome the time barrier and dropped out of sport entirely: ‘I don’t play at all … No. I play at school but I don’t have time to play after school (B)’.

Self-esteem and skill

Though generally active themselves, the girls discussed their perceptions as to why many girls did not participate in sporting activities. Many comments related to inactive girls not possessing the requisite motor skills and therefore lacking confidence or being self-conscious about their lack of motor ability or body image: ‘Some mightn’t have the coordination and if they are not as good they wont get out there (D). Some of them might feel self-conscious (B)’. These factors lead them to ‘make up excuses (A)’ and to not participate. One participant was active but specifically chose an individual activity, while all of her friends played together in a team club sport because of a perceived lack of skill. The discussion around her limited motor skills drew laughter and ridicule from the group: ‘We pay her out and she pays herself out (A)’.

Interpersonal

The main interpersonal themes discussed were family, friends, coaches and peers.

Family

Family were regarded as pivotal to the girls’ involvement in sport and PA. Parents also supported the girls by watching, showing general interest, encouraging, teaching them sport-specific skills and transporting them to activities. Comments about parental influence included: ‘Yes our parents, they encourage sport (D). Mum always wants us to play team sport not only for getting fit and healthy but also for interacting with other people (B)’. Often, girls played the same sports as their parents and siblings: ‘Dad plays tennis and when I play tennis; he has got these skills and he teaches me (C). My Mother and my Dad and my sister and my brother they all play tennis. Mum and Dad used to play and you would come along as little babies to the tennis every Saturday so somehow it was brought back home (C)’. Conversely, limited interest or support by family was perceived to negatively influence girls’ activity: ‘Maybe if your parents don’t play sport and don’t make you play sport then they won’t do it (D)’.

Parents, while being supportive, could also deter, get too involved, or embarrass the girls, and this made sport less enjoyable for them: ‘Like sometimes people get really like aggressive. Yes, there are huge pressures there. Like angry parents’. What do you mean by angry parents? ‘Sometimes they get really involved on the side with the coaching and stuff (D)’.

Friends

Whether it was choosing a sport to facilitate engagement with friends or making friends; playing sport was reported by the participants to be all about friendships: ‘I played hockey in my old place and then I moved here and the friends that I made were into netball so that sort of got me into netball more than hockey (C)’. Another explained: ‘Well I am doing dance this year, because I used to dance where I used to live and then I moved here and I just found out about it last year and I thought I would join because I knew some of the girls who were in there, but if I hadn’t known them then maybe I wouldn’t have joined (C)’. The fact that friends have similar interests and choose the same leisure activities to be together was also perceived to influence the recreational or leisure choices of inactive girls: ‘They do not have any friends really that are like active (D)’.
Coaches
Aggressive or unsupportive coaches were a deterrent to some girls. The coach was sometimes the reason girls chose one sport over another: ‘He was this bad coach and he would scream. He would make you cry if you dropped the ball (D)’.

Peers
There was a consensus that all girls, including active girls who acknowledged their high personal level of sport competency, would enjoy participating in single-sex school PE classes more than the current mixed gender structure. This was due to the differences in motor skill levels between the sexes; boys teasing, being too competitive, being stronger, not including girls and girls feeling intimidated because of these issues: ‘Sometimes when we play netball with guys they get so competitive (A). They (boys) hog the ball and they grizzle about you (D)’.

It would appear that the girls’ concern for gender-related issues overcame any desire that they may have had to seek a personal challenge by engaging with more skilled male members of their class: ‘It’s more like (participating in mixed gender classes) we don’t want the guy thing (A)’. In addition, less confident girls reportedly would not participate because of the mixed gender classes: ‘I think male influence is a big thing (for those inactive girls) because it means that they had to perform in front of boys (B)’. Some girls did not participate in school PE: ‘They usually make up excuses. They sit in the corner … Like they won’t bring their PE gear so they can’t play … Yes they always do that (C)’.

Organizational/environmental
The key themes identified at the organizational/environmental level were rurality, community sport and school.

Rurality
There was much discussion about both positive and negative aspects of living in a rural environment, with regard to participation in sport and unstructured PA.

The social capital that sport brings to rural towns was clearly articulated: ‘Well, we are in small town sports, it’s (sports) everything, it’s everybody’s life (C)’. This was also linked with limited opportunities in general: ‘There’s not much else to do (C) … And like we said before there is nothing else to do (C)’.

The social aspect of knowing everyone in a small community was reported to both hinder and heighten participation and enjoyment in sport. It was seen negatively by those with limited sporting ability: ‘You know everyone (A) … Well in a way that’s bad because you know who is probably going to be in the team or whatever (A)’. The girls talked about ‘being judged’ and this put girls off playing sport and led to a lack of ‘confidence to want to be part of a team’. Traditional Australian sports were most commonly offered and there were a limited number of teams, or positions in teams, which greatly restricted the sporting opportunities for girls in general and particularly those with limited ability. Many girls felt that they would like to be able to access a greater variety of sport and PA opportunities: ‘Yes there’s only a limited number of spots per team (A). There’s limited stuff you can do It would be nice to try something different (A)’.

Remoteness was discussed both in terms of living ‘out-of-town’ and in terms of living far from larger towns with more sporting opportunities. Associated with this was the cost of travel. One girl, in discussing a peer who did not participate in sport at present, said: ‘No, I think maybe her parents and siblings live way out of town so I think that is probably another thing that may have influenced her (D)’. For others isolated by living out-of-town, sport was the vehicle for socializing: ‘I think I come in to sport to pretty much see my friends because I live out of town’. How far out are you? ‘50 km (C)’.

Remoteness was mainly discussed as a barrier when parents did not support involvement in sport. One girl talked about her mother being willing to travel: ‘If its sport my mother goes ‘oh yeah get in the car’ (C)’. For others it was: ‘Its hard also to get there, like I live 10 mins out of the nearest town and they don’t have any big sport there, I don’t know whether they even have netball there or not (B)’.

In addition to the transitions, the girls were currently experiencing in moving away from club sport...
to individual activities, and in a general decline in sport and PA, there was much discussion about foreseeable future life changes. Many girls talked about moving away, mainly to large regional or metropolitan centres, for study or work. They discussed the importance of having initial opportunities to develop skills (physically and socially) in the rural setting, to provide them with the confidence to be active in larger urban centres. However, even the most active and confident participants stated that they would find it difficult to approach and join sports clubs in these larger urban centres. At the same time, they highlighted the importance of engaging in community-based sport for social interaction and connectedness. It was, therefore, perceived that inactive girls would have great difficulty making new social connections in larger urban centres without the sporting link. When moving away: ‘You have to put yourself out in the community more and that can be highly social. If you are not a social person a lot of people might not do any PA at all (A). Yes to get involved you have to find a team and you have to put in time to meet new people and join a new club. I have just joined a new club for the first time; I am just getting into it now. Its pretty hard though (to join new clubs) … (A)’. Another stated that: ‘When I went to Portland and I knew no-one there and that was scary (A). Its hard, like when you are little meeting new people you have to really motivate yourself and say ‘I want to do a team sport’ and you would have to push yourself to get involved with new people, to start all over again (B)’.

It was thought that those who lacked the confidence to join new sporting clubs would tend to gravitate towards unstructured individual activities or would travel great distances ‘back home’ to participate in team sports with existing friends and family: ‘I will probably just go to a gym rather than go and play team sport. Yes because you wouldn’t know anyone (C). I would want to come back and play, if I was in Ballarat I would want to come back’(B). That would be a lot of travel, why would you want to come back and play. ‘It would be just familiar. Its easier when you know people in those situations (A)’.

The influence of the family support when young was thought to hold the girls in good stead when they move away from their home community: ‘It’s the upbringing as well, our parents put themselves out and make us do stuff. Yes if the family is involved with a sports club then they will keep going. The family has to really got to help you as well (A)’. A wide-ranging discussion transpired concerning the perceived differences between sport and unstructured PA in small rural towns compared with larger urban centres. While the girls did not feel deprived by living in small rural towns, they indicated that they would welcome the more varied sporting and leisure opportunities available in larger centres. One reason cited for participation in sport was the limited number of non-sporting leisure opportunities available in small rural towns. Some thought that they were more active than their urban counterparts: ‘It would increase living in the country, there’s not much else to do (C). My cousins and all their friends they don’t really play sport in Melbourne.’ What do they do? ‘They just go shopping. Yes probably the fact that there’s not much more to do and everyone is so easy to get along with (C)’.

Others believed that they were more advantaged than those living in larger centres, through their enhanced social network and the closeness of rural communities: ‘I think we are more advantaged here. Getting there (to facilities) is hard. Also the environment (urban) there, its all concrete and they don’t have the same things we have. Like when you are younger you can go around with friends on farms and do that kind of thing whereas they are not exposed to that they don’t have that. If you want to meet people its easier because it’s not a big town (D)’.

For some, the sporting competition in large urban centres was thought to be of a higher standard, and others who already sought to compete at a higher standard actually travelled to the state capital for competition opportunities. ‘In the city its more tougher competition to here. There’s more people and that makes it harder as well (B). Like if you go to Melbourne the sports up there are so much more competitive (D)’. However, this did involve travel
and sacrifice of time: ‘I have had to go down (to Melbourne) a few times and you have to get down there half an hour earlier and it takes you an hour to get there and then you play a game and then you come home that’s another hour again (B)’.

Community sport

Although the participants reported a shift from club sport to individual activities because of the time-related barriers, they generally enjoyed the competition and structure of club sport: ‘Yes. It has to be organised for me to go (A)’.

Another barrier discussed in relation to the lack of opportunities was limited community support for alternate forms of PA. ‘We did start doing a hip-hop class and it was good fun but there was hardly any support from the community and it was a waste of time and it was so difficult for us to get there on time and get changed after school and all that. I ended up just stopping because I couldn’t be bothered with the whole thing (B)’.

School

As reported above under ‘Peers’, single-sex PE school classes were preferred by the girls. This can also be viewed from an organizational perspective. One school had addressed this issue and had instituted separate-sex PE classes. ‘For the first time this year our Year 10 they have split the girls and the boys up, so the 1st Semester the girls do PE while the boys do work and then we swap around (C)’.

Other barriers in the school setting were having to change in and out of the sport uniform, not wanting to be hot and sweaty in school, and a preference for studying while at school: ‘I don’t like doing it at school because I don’t have anything to change in to and I don’t want to be sitting in class after I have done a massive run and throwing and stuff I would rather go home and do it and have a shower (B). I don’t have time, I have things that I might need for my uni and don’t have time to do PE as well (B)’. School like local club sport was sometimes limited to traditional Australian activities, and girls would like more variety: ‘… really interesting stuff like rock climbing (D)’.

The interactions between elements of the socio-ecological model are presented in Figs 1 and 2. Figure 1 summarizes the factors affecting participation for active girls and Fig. 2 perceived barriers for inactive girls.

Discussion

A range of intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental/organizational factors affecting participation of rural living adolescent girls in sport and PA have been individually identified and described. The interactive linkages between these factors, shown in Fig. 1, are now discussed with respect to a number of key themes identified in this study and with reference to the existing literature.

One of the most prominent intrapersonal themes reported by physically active participants was a move from structured club sport to unstructured individual activities. A drop-off in organized club sports participation for female adolescents has previously been reported [6, 13], despite the fact that girls enjoyed this form of involvement, and particularly the opportunity to engage with their friends [24]. This change was largely precipitated by time pressure and the inflexible nature of structured club sport. Lack of time for participation in sport is commonly reported by adolescents, and this is also sometimes due to them undertaking part-time employment [13, 25]. However, these girls indicated that for them time pressure was mainly associated with a higher priority being put on education by themselves, the school and their parents, rather than work commitments.

The intra- and interpersonal themes identified in this study were similar to those reported in other research. Female adolescents are active for health reasons, to stay fit and to seek enjoyment [6, 8, 19, 26]. Many participants talked about ‘feeling good’ when being physically active, and that PA was an outlet from educational pressures. This finding was also reported by Rees et al. [27]. However, in contrast to other reported findings [28], the motivation for this cohort to participate in sport and PA was not specifically for weight
loss. Instead, motivation was related to health, fitness, social relationships and enjoyment, which may be linked to the social nature of club sport, and the dominant role club sport plays within the rural communities [29]. It was also clear from this study and previous research that if girls who live in a rural setting do not play sport, they are socially isolated [15, 26, 30].

While sport was considered by the participants to be ‘everything’ to the rural communities, which positively affected social networks and community cohesion, there were barriers to participation in club sport for many. A major barrier was perceived lack of motor skill competence [25–27, 31]. Perceived competence is strongly related to self-efficacy, a construct which has consistently predicted participation in both moderate and vigorous PA by adolescent girls [24, 32, 33] and may be the most critical self-perception in sport [34]. Active adolescent girls have higher scores in self-efficacy, attitudes towards PA, perceived behavioural control and enjoyment of PA than do less active girls [35, 36]. In line with Harter’s Theory of Competence and other research [37], when girls perceived they were competent (i.e. possessed the requisite motor skills), they participated in club sport; those who did not believe that they were competent either did not participate or participated only in individual, non-motor skill-based physical activities [38]. Similarly, a systematic review has shown that young women with low activity levels express a dislike for competitive sport and that sport is seen as requiring hard work and requiring considerable skill [27].

The apparent causal link between skill, competence and participation is likely to have a strong influence upon overall PA participation rates in rural communities due to the small range of PA and

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**Fig. 1.** Factors affecting participation in sport and physical activity for active girls, showing interactive links.
sporting opportunities available. Girls who perceive that they have a low motor skill level in the small range of PA or sporting opportunities available are unlikely to participate. This is compounded within the school setting, where PE classes involve mixed gender, individuals with a range of motor skills and competency and limited choice of activities. In general, the lack of choice of physical activities, sports teams and team positions available in rural communities places more pressure on those girls with less developed motor skills and competency. Skilful girls report practising more, and therefore increase their PA levels, and in doing so have more opportunities to enhance their motor skill proficiency and competency [39].

Competence and confidence in sport are strongly linked to social support for participation, particularly support provided by friends and family [9, 10, 40]. Friends and family are important influences for female adolescents [6, 8, 10, 19, 25, 27] though in one study friends or general peer support were found to have more positive influence than parents [9]. In the current study, both parents and friends were identified as critical links for participation in club sport.

It seems that parental actions, in playing sport, assisting with transport and teaching their children skills are more important than verbal support [8, 26]. Parents who are engaged in PA, particularly those involved in club sport, are more likely to have active children [8], and in the current study, the girls often played the sport in which their parents participated. This finding may apply particularly in rural settings where sport plays such an integral role in the community and where a small choice of activities is available. Without parental support, the barrier of geographic remoteness becomes more apparent, especially for rural girls who live on farms and rely on parental transport to participate in sport.

Fig. 2. Factors affecting participation in sport and physical activity for inactive girls, showing interactive links.
There was little discussion about role models, except in the negative sense that disliking a coach was a deterrent to participation. Girls often report less exposure to sporting role models than boys [41]. Nonetheless, parents are clearly role models for many of the girls who participated in this study.

One organizational factor that promoted extensive discussion was the school environment. School PE was not enjoyed by any girls, irrespective of their sporting expertise and involvement. The structure of school PE was not considered to be conducive to participation or enjoyment in PA by any of the participants. The published literature, including a systematic review, has consistently found that adolescents often held negative perceptions of school PE and that school PE was particularly problematic for females [19, 27, 42]. In keeping with recent research findings, the girls in the current study reported often making up excuses and resisting participation in PE, thereby avoiding having to display any weaknesses in their performance or ability [42]. Notwithstanding this, if adolescents do not have access to community sport, the school plays a pivotal role because it becomes the only formal opportunity for participation and development in sport and PA [43].

In summary, it is clear that rural living adolescent females are experiencing many life changes during this transitional time in their lives. As found in other research, the desire to be educationally successful seems to be a strong factor motivating change in sport and PA [13]. Furthermore, the desire to succeed in education is likely to affect sport participation for rural girls more so than their metropolitan counterparts. Rural living adolescents are considered to be educationally disadvantaged, and hence they need to study especially hard and may be forced to make more personal sacrifices in order to succeed educationally. Specifically, the priority for education over sport contributes to a move from participation in organized sport to individual physical activities. For rural girls, participation in club sport is considered to be a significant predictor of PA participation, and therefore, it is likely that they will experience a decrease in PA participation, at least in the short term, if they wish to succeed educationally [29, 36, 39]. If girls move from this supportive sporting structure, it also affects them socially since team-based club sport plays a very important social role in a rural setting due to the limited alternative social outlets available. It is important to note, however, that given the role of education as a health determinant, the desire for these individuals to further their personal educational level, if fulfilled, is likely to have a positive impact on their long-term health despite the short-term negative impact of focused secondary school study on their PA levels and social connectedness. Finally, the shift in the mode of PE being undertaken by the girls while living in their rural communities together with the anticipated move away from their ‘home’ community will no doubt negatively affect the ability of rural communities to sustain their sporting and community infrastructure and social capital; especially, given that these communities already struggle with a transient younger population [44].

It is recommended that future longitudinal research track changes in sport and unstructured PA participation and examines the influences on these changes, specifically for rural adolescent females. In doing so, practical strategies for both school and community organizations need to be established and implemented. For example, establishing single-sex PE in schools and where possible offering different PA opportunities within the community would be positive steps. In addition, in line with the socioecological model, engaging parents and peers and building individual skills is important to develop active lifestyles. While education is a priority among older adolescents, there needs to be widespread support from schools and parents to encourage and support at least some sport and PA involvement and to offer flexible sporting opportunities. Empowering students, giving them choice and including them in the decision making would assist participation [42]. Finally, for non-active girls living in a rural setting, it is critical to develop motor skills competence in younger years so as to provide them with the physical and social confidence to engage in lifelong PA.
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References


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