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DeskCycles in the Classroom

By Lynn Pantuosco-Hensch

Almost 10 years ago the Let's Move! Active Schools campaign raised awareness on the importance of physical activity throughout the school day. Since then, valuable research by the Centers for Disease Control (2020) and major universities continues to support the impact physical activity can have on academic achievement. Physical activity in the classroom has been shown to increase student cognition, memory and recall (PHIT America, 2020). Increases in daily physical activity are also positively associated with social–emotional aspects of learning, such as mood, behavior and stress level. Today, SHAPE America continues to promote some of these key findings through the *health. moves. minds.* initiative. Specifically the *health. moves. minds.* program provides lessons, activities, and community building ideas directly to participating schools (SHAPE America, 2020).

Physical and health educators are often the primary advocates for movement in schools. Typically, most elementary classroom teachers utilize movement or "brain breaks" throughout the day, as well as other classroom tools. Alternative seating options like stools, bean bags, and crates have grown in usage and popularity. Standing desks are also more prevalent in classrooms now. A variety of classroom tools, such as bouncy bands for active feet or balance discs to sit on, increase the opportunity for subtle movements throughout the day (Pantuosco-Hensch, 2016).

A new trend in classroom movement tools are DeskCycles. A DeskCycle is a low-profile pedal unit designed for use under a table or desk. DeskCycles have a tension dial and an odometer. DeskCycles are reasonably priced and highly functional (e.g., $159 each). The primary advantage of DeskCycles is that students are able to be physically active without detracting from academic time. The cycles are quiet and portable. Students can cycle while they read, write, listen or interact. DeskCycles are an example of classroom tools that can provide students with an opportunity to be physical active intermittently throughout the school day. DeskCycles can also be used for a "brain break." Recently, researchers have examined the role of DeskCycles in the classroom.

A series of university studies was conducted with an elementary school in the Northeast to determine the effect of DeskCycles on academic achievement, physical fitness,

and student behavior. Researchers experimented with a classroom set of DeskCycles, stations, pairs and individual DeskCycles. Initially, student feedback was generally positive on the affective measures (e.g., journals) and statistically neutral on the academic and physical fitness measures (e.g., AIMSweb and FitnessGram).

After some exploratory approaches, DeskCycles were placed in 14 classrooms across grades 2–5. Each teacher was given 2–4 DeskCycles and encouraged to use them in their preferred manner and to make observations about the usage. Toward the end of the school year, teachers were interviewed in small focus groups by grade level.

General findings showed perceived benefits for fidgety, anxious or busy students. Teachers reported that students were more attentive, better-focused or calmer in the classroom after DeskCycle use. Classroom usage patterns depended on the comfort level with movement in the classroom and routine of each teacher.

The qualitative data showed that the effectiveness of the DeskCycle use was dependent on both 1) the investment of the teachers, and 2) the attitudes of the students. Logically, increased teacher investment and/or student enjoyment resulted in more frequent usage.

Overall, the DeskCycles assimilated into the classrooms and were utilized like any other classroom tool (which, interestingly, the principal predicted). The minimal negatives included 1) some need for repairs, and 2) the available options for classroom desks or tables. Table height and body size influenced the ease of DeskCycle use for older or taller students (e.g., grades 4–5).

If your interest is piqued about DeskCycle use in your classroom, consider applying for a grant or investing in a pair of DeskCycles to start. There is a growing body of research to support the need for more movement during the school day and the related benefits on learning. To maximize the benefits of DeskCycles, use two key findings from our research:

1. DeskCycles are used more if/when teachers encourage or remind students of the option to use them.
2. Individual students tend to benefit more from the DeskCycles when a teacher suggests the DeskCycle to a specific student who may benefit from use.

Various classroom configurations have shown positive outcomes. Teachers have successfully set up stations, rotations and self-selection routines. DeskCycles can be used with music or video to enhance the movement experience. A variety of academic tasks combine well with DeskCycle use, such as: math facts, spelling words, vocabulary matching, or flash cards. We learned that these evidence-based movement and learning strategies need to be shared with K–12 educators.

In the focus groups, teachers reported that they did not get enough time with colleagues to discuss movement in their classrooms. The teachers in the study were not well aware of the DeskCycle use or movement breaks in other classrooms in their school (especially not in other grades). The teachers welcomed an opportunity to talk about movement in the classroom and share their ideas. These findings suggest the need for scheduled meeting time and/or professional development on "movement in the classroom" for K–12 educators. Both physical and health educators are the ideal faculty members to facilitate internal efforts with classroom teachers to increase movement during the school day. University faculty can also support professional development efforts in K–12 school systems. Our research supports the use of classroom tools, such as DeskCycles, to improve social emotional learning, as well as attention and focus. Sharing these evidence-based strategies for using DeskCycles has potential to really *move minds*.

Disclaimer

DeskCycles were donated by the company for research purposes; researchers were not paid to conduct studies, and so on.

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Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send "Theory into Practice" submissions to column editor Anthony Parish at aparish@georgiasouthern.edu.

The purpose of the *Strategies* Theory into Practice column is to distill high-quality research into understandable and succinct information and to identify key resources to help teachers and coaches improve professional practice and provide high-quality programs. Each column (1,000 –1,300 words or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages) summarizes research findings about a timely topic of interest to the readership to enable practitioners to apply research, knowledge and evidence-based practice in physical education and sports.