

# IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES TO CREATE MEANINGFUL PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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In recent times there has been growing concern surrounding young people's health and physical activity. Recent figures from the NHS (2017) show that one in three Year 6 children measured overweight or obese (a rise from one in five in Reception), with the most recent Sport England Active Lives Survey (2019) indicating that only 48 per cent of children are meeting current guidelines for daily physical activity, with 29 per cent gaining less than half of the recommended 60 minutes of activity per day. Whilst it is by no means the sole responsibility of school physical education to engage young people in physical activity within and beyond the school gates, there is a feeling that we could do more. Tinning and Fitzclarence (1992; 2012) present the view that physical education could be described as a subject in crisis and that children are bored and disaffected in lessons. This is supported more recently by Petrie (2016) who argues that physical education is still being presented in very traditional ways and is progressively getting more narrowly focused on traditional sports but shouldn't be constrained by the antecedents of traditional practices.

## SCHOOLS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROMOTION

Kilgour, Matthews, Christian and Shire (2015) suggest schools offer a good platform for physical activity promotion that should not be overlooked. Hills, Dengel and Lubans (2015) support this notion, with the fact that young people spend up to 195 days a year in the school-setting, and reinforce that quality physical education has the potential to affect future physical activity behaviours. They

suggest that physical education needs to focus on giving students the knowledge and skills to participate in a lifetime of physical activity. Earlier work by Haerens *et al* (2010) proposed that young people with greater levels of self-determined motivation in early adulthood reported being more active at secondary school. With this in mind, the suggestions from scholars such as Laakso (2008) and Green (2014), that physical education should be a crucial vehicle for promoting young people's engagement with physical activity, are worthy of reflection.

In recent times there has been wide concern over the dominance of traditional activities within physical education curricula, most notably competitive team games (Stidder and Binney, 2011; Green, 2008). Reflecting on the occupational socialisation of physical education teachers might provide

some clarity as to why change seems to be slow in this area. Lawson (1983) suggested a three-stage process that provides a useful tool to analyse the development of physical education teachers (Table 1).

If we are to see change of a more rapid nature in the design of our physical education curricula, we need to challenge the status quo. We may question what we see in front of us on a day-to-day basis and reflect more critically on why we do what we do: is physical education in its current form fit for purpose? There have been calls for curricula to better reflect the interests of youth culture and include a broader range of activities. Binney and Smart (2017) suggest that physical education should mirror the changing trends within society and youth culture, with a need to review what is currently being taught within many schools.

**Table 1:** Occupational socialisation of physical education teachers

|                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Acculturation</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your own school/PE/physical activity experiences</li> <li>• Influenced by your own sporting habits, parents, coaches, teachers etc.</li> <li>• Often the most potent form of socialisation</li> </ul>                        |
| <b>Professional socialisation</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University and teacher training experience – teacher educators battle to dispel traditional myths and misconceptions</li> <li>• Often face resistance to change previously held views</li> </ul>                             |
| <b>Occupational socialisation</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiences in the real world – first teaching posts etc.</li> <li>• Conforming to the social norms of the job/department/school</li> <li>• Own views can be 'washed out'</li> <li>• Do what has always been done</li> </ul> |

(Adapted from Lawson, 1983)



Photo credit: Jordan Wintle, taken outwith a PE context.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2015) highlighted how physical activity patterns have changed in recent times and that the number of different activities that people participate in has grown. Different activities appeal to different people, and this diversity should be celebrated and encouraged. Further support for a change in practice came from Ofsted (2013) which recommended that schools broaden provision further to incorporate non-traditional activities in the curriculum to motivate hard-to-reach groups. More recently the latest Sport England (2019) figures show a large growth in informal activity as opposed to organised sport.

### MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

For physical education programmes to have greater relevance to today's youth, recent research by Beni, Fletcher and Ni Chronin (2016) centred on the theme of meaningful experiences offers a useful framework for practitioners and teacher educators. The research around meaningful experiences identified five key factors that could help make meaning for young people. These were social interaction, fun, challenge, competition (positive and negative), motor competence and personally relevant learning. Table 2 summarises these factors which, if featured in our programmes, are likely to lead individuals to commit more readily to a physically active lifestyle (Teixeira, Carraça, Markland, Silva and Ryan, 2012).

**Table 2:** Features of meaningful physical education

|                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Social interaction</b>                  | Creating opportunities for positive relationships with others can have a positive effect on the meaningfulness of classes. Teachers should carefully consider how they structure learning to promote interaction between friends, peers, teachers and family members.                                                                                            |
| <b>Fun</b>                                 | A perception of fun appears to be an important motivating factor for many young people. Perceptions of fun for different groups vary so it is important for practitioners to understand how this concept is perceived in a given context. Challenge and avoiding boredom as well pupil-centred pedagogies appear to have a positive impact on the notion of fun. |
| <b>Challenge</b>                           | Engagement in activities that provided an appropriate challenge for participants was noted as another important component of a meaningful experience.                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Competition (positive and negative)</b> | For some participants an element of competition can be a motivating factor whilst for others it is not. Physical education teachers should carefully consider how competition is presented. Competition might not be for everyone.                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Motor competence</b>                    | Participants' experiences in physical education were more positive when students' perceptions of their own motor competence were high. Pitching activities at the right level and utilising praise and encouragement were identified as important.                                                                                                               |
| <b>Personally relevant learning</b>        | Participants were able to recognise the importance of what they were learning and could make explicit connections between their current physical education and sport experiences and future aspects of daily living outside of the school or community.                                                                                                          |

Adapted from Beni, Fletcher and Ni Chronin (2016)

Given the need for reform in physical education and taking into account the features of meaningful experiences, one area of potential growth lies in non-traditional activities, often referred to as alternative or lifestyle activities (Wheaton, 2013). Green (2014) noted that lifestyle activities have not only experienced the most substantial increases in participation among young people in recent decades but also remain the kinds of activities with the most regular participants. Gilchrist and Wheaton (2016) propose these activities often require high levels of commitment, with a style of life that exists around the activity; this often creates a subculture and identity that increases commitment from their participants. These types of activities often take place in re-appropriated urban and rural spaces without fixed boundaries, and often denounce formal regulation; this is in direct contrast to the traditional games we see currently dominating physical education. Given the growth of these activities in recent times, it is highly appropriate for physical education to catch up.

This article will now present a case for one lifestyle activity to be considered for inclusion in physical education curricula linked to the features of meaningful experiences, with some suggestions on how this might look in practice. Whilst this article only has scope to link to one activity, practitioners should be encouraged to look at the broad range of activities from the alternative sector that could fit into this framework.

## PARKOUR IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Parkour (also known as Freerunning) is a method of navigating the objects and spaces of urban environments. It was developed in France in the 1980s and has been used as a basis for military training as well as an urban way of life and, more recently, a recognised sporting activity (Parkour UK, 2017). Parkour has been characterised as an intermittent practice of the body's displacement (Art du Déplacement in its French origins), usually repeated over a series of obstacles of varying size and shape. Much like a climbing, skiing or snowboarding performance, for a traceur (parkour participant) to successfully negotiate a course the performer must make a range of decisions regarding the most appropriate movement patterns to overcome the obstacles or environment (James and John, 2017). Practitioners try to overcome barriers in the most efficient manner, jumping or scaling an obstacle, which is often done with a high degree of acrobatic skill. These actions are related to preventing energy expenditure, gaining time and overcoming obstacles in a dynamic and fluid action (Bavinton, 2007; Miller and Domoiny, 2011; Marchetti *et al.*, 2012).

The physical demands of parkour are well documented, as recent research by Marchetti *et al.* (2012) demonstrated. Regular practitioners of parkour presented higher levels of physical performance (across a range of fitness tests) compared to a control group of active individuals, demonstrating the level of physical prowess needed to perform this activity at a high level or, more importantly, demonstrating parkour presents an appropriate level of **challenge** to its participants as well as requiring a high level of **motor competence**.

The most recent Sport England (2018) figures demonstrated the popularity of parkour, with over 99,000 people having taken part at least twice in the 28 days prior to the survey. The popularity of parkour has increased enormously in recent years and has attracted a lot of new participants among young people (Angel, 2011; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Clegg and Butryn, 2012). This highlights how parkour is seen as **personally relevant** to many young people.

From a teaching perspective, we must provide pupils with a toolkit of movement patterns and skills to enable them to apply these to different courses and environments. Parkour uses many strategies and, whereas many sports use these against opponents (in direct competition), parkour uses these against the environment and different situations, such as varying conditions. This includes problem-solving skills (trying to solve a movement problem) and devising the quickest and most efficient way to tackle a route. The optimal solutions will vary from student to student; this encourages individual thought, as well as learning and understanding their own capabilities and limits. These elements of **challenge** and **competition** are against the environment rather than others.

Whilst parkour is an individual pursuit, in its performance there is a large degree of **social interaction** and identity. Participants often gather in groups to practise and perform skills (Gilchrist and Osborn, 2016) with high levels of frequency and often long durations of practice. With this combination of factors, it is evident that for many participants parkour is deemed to be **fun**.

In order to transfer parkour into physical education curricula there are some factors to consider in terms of safe practice and teacher competence. In most cases, where parkour is delivered in schools it takes place indoors utilising equipment typically found in a gymnastics store that has been designed for climbing, jumping and landing (benches, boxes, wall bars, pommels etc.).

In terms of professional development opportunities, formal qualifications to deliver parkour are available from Parkour UK and the 1st4sport Introductory Award in Teaching Parkour/Freerunning would be an ideal starting point, as recommended by the Association of Physical Education (2018).

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided a critical lens to view current curricula in physical education and suggested a framework for reflection and design linked to meaningful experiences. Whilst the example of one activity has been utilised (parkour), there is the potential for many other activities that fit in the alternative category (skate sports, mountain biking, combat sports, golf, walking/jogging) to feature more prominently in our schools. It is clear from the evidence presented here that there is a need for change for our curricula to have greater relevance to the youth of today. Do not see this as just a means of extending the menu of activities we offer, but a reconsideration of why we do what we do and who it is intended for. Practitioners should reflect on this to ensure we gain maximum impact from the opportunities we have to influence young people's health and physical activity within and beyond the school environment. ■

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