

ASSESSING THE VALUE OF ALTERNATIVE PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

As it stands the physical education teaching profession currently finds itself in a position of crisis, a position that was re-affirmed in an All Party Parliamentary Group report in November 2016 that called for an urgent need to revise the teaching of physical education in schools, suggesting that it had not changed since the 1940s (APPG, 2016). The report by the APPG pointed out a number of concerns with respect to the teaching and learning of physical education in schools, such as the dominance of traditional competitive team games within the physical education curriculum that are often based upon physical education teachers' own beliefs and personal experiences. The report suggested that such an approach fails to engage those who do not naturally excel at physical activity or traditional team sports whilst at the same time acknowledged that there is limited opportunity for pupils to explore and discover what types of alternative physical activity might have greater appeal.

These observations within the report were perhaps a 'canary in a coal mine' and reaffirmed the dominance of what Kirk (2013) has referred to as the multi-activity, sport-technique-based physical education that can still be seen in many secondary schools which may be extremely unpalatable for some physical education teachers and for many secondary school-aged pupils. In response to the observations of the APPG report and the questions that it raised, secondary school physical education teachers have been urged to make lessons more attractive to

pupils as there is a significant proportion who dislike physical education lessons. The reasons have been known for a long time as we were reminded once again by the Youth Sport Trust (2015), which reported that some pupils were put off taking part in physical education lessons because of an over-emphasis on competitive team games and a limited range of other physical activities. In addition, a 12-month study of 3,000 pupils conducted by the Youth Sport Trust in 2014 found that in cases where girls were allowed to design the content of their physical education classes, participation rates doubled. In short, there appears to be a need to review the design of the physical education curriculum in secondary schools.

Secondary school physical education teachers have always had the autonomy to make important decisions on behalf of their pupils and a great deal of leverage related to the specific activities to be incorporated in the curriculum, the time devoted to these activities, the way in which they are organised, and the manner in which they are taught. Physical education teachers play a pivotal role with respect to curriculum design, grouping arrangements, staffing and delivery. Critical decisions depend on their judgement. These decisions can 'make or break' a pupil's enjoyment of the subject and participation in future (Green 2008; Lamb 2014; Stidder 2015). Yet pupils are rarely consulted and often have different views about physical education compared to the perspectives of their teachers (Green 2008:20). All too often pupils are ignored when it comes to curriculum decisions

simply because their views about the nature of physical education are not shared by those who deliver it (Green 2008: 7). Choice and voice are frequently rejected in favour of a teacher-led curriculum typically focussed on competitive skill-based games rather than a made-to-measure programme suited to a broader population of pupils. Researchers have suggested that teachers of physical education who are prepared to accept a pupil-centred and pupil-led curriculum that provides for alternatives are more likely to open up new possibilities to shape the physical education curriculum into one that will meet the needs of a greater number of pupils (Theodoulides 2012: 47). Moreover, there is often an over-emphasis on discrete sports in too many secondary schools, which can deter a significant proportion of the teen-aged population from participating in physical education lessons (Ofsted, 2013). Almond and Ezzeldin (2013: 55) concluded that the consequences of a sport-focused physical education curriculum can be the neglect of pedagogy and the omission of aesthetic, artistic, adventurous and aquatic activities, leading to pupils taking part in a one-size-fits-all approach to physical education.

ALTERNATIVE PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES RATIONALE

In a previous publication (Stidder, 2017: 56), it was recommended that research is required to assess the response of pupil, physical education teachers and trainee teachers to alternative types of physical activities and the extent to which it may be feasible to integrate alternative activities



into the physical education curriculum. Kirk (2013; 228) confirms that whilst physical education teachers have recognised the subject does not deliver the benefits it aspires to, there has been little taste for radical reform amongst them, leaving the middle- to longer-term future of the subject looking bleak and in crisis. Moreover, Kirk (2010; 2013) suggests that a paradigm shift in the thinking of new entrants to the profession should become increasingly evident. Most worrying is Kirk's suggestion that 21st century physical education may become extinct within our secondary schools unless there is radical reform. Ward (2014: 570) has shown that the socialisation of physical education teachers is dominated by competitive sporting discourses often resulting in them teaching through performance-based coaching models. Alternatives to this are subordinated by notions of excellence in sport performance enthusiastically endorsed by politicians. Moreover, sporting practices under the banner of physical education have resulted in physical education teachers suffering from an identity crisis born out of its relationship with sport (Ward 2014: 571).

For the purpose of this research, the term 'alternative' is used to emphasise physical activities that encompass non-traditional team games as opposed to the more conventional team games usually afforded a privileged position within the physical education curriculum. Equally, the term 'alternative physical activities' has been used to include examples of what has been termed by Green (2010) as lifestyle activities which may have wider appeal to a broader

population of pupils in secondary schools. These include physical activities considered to be less conventional compared to more established types of activities usually included in the secondary school physical education curriculum.

It is acknowledged that the provision of alternative physical activities in schools is potentially challenging for teachers of physical education and may be symptomatic of the many difficulties that schools have with respect to cost, expertise, facilities, time and training. These factors may contribute to the limited number of secondary schools that are able to include alternative physical activities despite the acknowledged popularity and educational value of such activities and may, therefore, restrict school staff from offering a broader, deeper and more balanced physical education curriculum. Evidence from secondary schools visited by Ofsted (2013) suggests that motivating hard-to-reach groups through non-traditional physical activities requires new practice and more attention to new activities so that pupils can be offered a much wider experience of physical education. Ofsted (2013) reported that golf, skateboarding, mountain biking, yoga, cheerleading, martial arts and problem-solving challenges were being taught alongside more traditional activities, often at pupils' request. This not only enriched the provision but provided creative solutions when facilities were limited or the programme of traditional team activities was proving unpopular. The report concluded that, in some secondary schools, alternative physical activities had reduced

disaffection and improved engagement, particularly among vulnerable groups. Subsequently, the desire to consider alternative physical activities was beginning to emerge as a dominant theme within the teaching and learning of physical education in secondary schools.

Studies have shown the potential appeal of alternative physical activities for pupils. In one case study school 84 per cent of girls reported they enjoyed physical education lessons more during an alternative unit of work that included cheerleading, aerobics, skipping, tag rugby and ultimate frisbee in place of their more traditional physical education curriculum (Griggs, 2008). Likewise, a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn, 2012) identified the school physical education curriculum as having an important role in influencing the take-up of physical activities amongst girls. The report suggests that for many girls traditional team games had little or no appeal, girls preferring greater variety including more creative and fitness activities. In schools where there was an over-emphasis on traditional feminised team games within the physical education curriculum there was a significant number of girls who found excuses to avoid participating in physical education lessons, especially in the 14-16 age range. Hildreth and Mackenzie (2015) concluded that one particular approach to include more girls in physical education lessons is to introduce gender-neutral activities such as VX (Rock-it-ball) as there are no ingrained cultural attitudes to change.

The revised National Curriculum for Physical Education in England (DfE, 2013) provides the opportunity for teachers of physical education to consider the types of physical activities to provide to pupils and the educational value and purpose for doing so. The increased flexibility and less-prescribed range and content areas offer the opportunity to (re)address the intrinsic value of physical education, moving towards a curriculum that focuses on the learning processes, compared to more traditional types of activity where there is an emphasis on the sporting performance. In essence, there appears to be a groundswell of opinion and growing support for an alternative physical education curriculum that is more suited to a broader range of pupils. An alternative physical education curriculum may offer a diverse range of activities and could potentially appeal to a wider number of pupils. A move towards alternative physical activities in schools seems to be representative of the views of pupils and would suggest there is increasing interest amongst those who are teaching and learning physical education in schools to consider alternative physical activities alongside mainstream activities within the formal curriculum.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

One hundred and eighteen Year 10 pupils aged 14-15 years old from nine secondary schools attended an alternative physical activities day at a university in south-east England. The event was targeted at pupils identified by their respective physical education teachers as being 'less sporty' compared to other pupils in their schools. The intended learning outcome was to promote a values-based approach to teaching and learning through alternative physical activities. For example, it was intended for pupils to experience a range of physical activities that they would be less likely to participate in within their physical education lessons designed to: promote communication skills (verbal and non-verbal); enhance interaction; break down inhibitions; build trust, co-operation and sharing; increase working relationships; develop leadership skills; encourage team work, joint decision-making and problem-solving; encourage individuals to work outside 'safe' friendship boundaries; and develop positive personal and social qualities.

Pupils worked with PGCE and School Direct trainee teachers of physical education and experienced five alternative physical activities during the day. These included: alternative team games, such as kinball and ultimate frisbee; aesthetic activities that are creative and involve a combination of movements that require precision, fluency and control, such as cheerleading; athletic and aerobic activities that require physical skill, agility and stamina, such as street surfing; and adventurous activities that require precise decision-making skills, such as team-building exercises and problem-solving activities.

METHODS

In order to assess the strength of feeling for alternative physical activities in secondary schools a questionnaire survey of pupils and video recorded interviews with pupils, physical education teachers and trainee teachers provided quantitative and qualitative data upon which objective judgements could be made. A post-event questionnaire survey containing closed and open-ended questions was distributed to the pupils who volunteered to complete the questionnaire survey. Informed consent to participate in the research was gained from each school which informed the researcher whether the pupils were able to be filmed, photographed or interviewed in advance of the event. One hundred and five questionnaires were completed and returned. Data were then analysed and key categories and themes were identified based upon a Likert scale. Pupils were also asked to provide comments about their experiences of the alternative physical activities in the survey.

Table 1.1: Completed evaluations.

SCHOOL/ COLLEGE	ATTENDEES
School	13 (10 completed evaluations)
Academy	15 (15 completed evaluations)
Academy	14 (13 completed evaluations)
School	15 (12 completed & 1 partly completed evaluations)
School	5 (5 completed evaluations)
Academy	16 (14 completed evaluations)
Community College	15 (15 completed evaluations)
Academy	13 (13 completed evaluations)
College	12 (8 completed evaluations)
Total: 118 attendees	105 evaluations returned (13 incomplete forms)

RESULTS

PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Table 1.2: Pupil post-event questionnaire.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel more confident working in a group	34%	39%	19%	6%	2%
I worked with someone in my group that I have never worked with before	78%	14%	6%	3%	2%
I tried an activity that I have never done before	78%	15%	3%		4%
I was able to make joint decisions with my group	44%	37%	11%	6%	2%
All of the activities were taught very well	46%	43%	6%	2%	3%
I enjoyed these activities because they were different	50%	35%	11%	2%	2%
Pupils should be given more opportunities to do these type of activities	57%	24%	11%	4%	4%
The activities helped me to work well as a team	50%	34%	12%	4%	

It is acknowledged that 4-8 per cent of responses from pupils were negative within the post-event survey. Equally it was evident that a proportion of pupils offered neutral responses to the questions of 3-19 per cent whilst a high percentage of pupils' responses of 73-93 per cent were positive. Below is a selection of comments from pupils with regard to their experiences of the day.

- I have learnt many new activities and it was also very enjoyable and I like the street surfing the most.
- I feel I have learnt some key skills that may help me in future.
- I enjoyed the day, everybody was supportive and helped me feel confident. My favourite part was the cheerleading. This is because it showed different aspects and involved everybody.
- I felt good. I found the game ones such as Kinball, Frisbee etc. were really well taught.
- Overall, a very enjoyable day. I have strengthened my ability to work in a team and make joint decisions. I have also tried new things that I haven't done before which has inspired me to think about a sports course.
- I have learnt how to do other activities that I wouldn't usually do and I thought that each subject was taught well.
- I really enjoyed ultimate frisbee because it helps me think about getting into space which is useful as I play football.
- The programme was very well organised and the staff were helpful and gave us a good understanding about the activity/ rules.

PUPIL INTERVIEWS

During the day a number of pupils were selected by their teachers to be interviewed and their responses were subsequently included in the documentary film.

“Doing things like this, I think, takes our mind, like I'm in Year 10 now, and it takes you mind off the work you're doing. It also refreshes your mind.”

“Street surfing is really good because it's like hard at the start and you can get used to it and better and better at it and improve on.”

PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

Key questions were also addressed to physical education teachers and trainee teachers of physical education during the day with respect to whether the five alternative physical activities warranted a dedicated place on the physical education curriculum. Responses were recorded as part of a documentary film. Questions directed to physical education teachers aimed to elicit their thoughts about the inclusion of alternative physical activities such as:

- Do children develop physical literacy in these alternative physical activities?
- Are benefits transferable to other contexts such as education, work and community?
- Are there any particular issues concerning safe practice in these types of physical activities?
- Do these physical activities attract different pupils to those attracted to traditional competitive team games?

Below are the video recorded responses from physical education teachers:

“New activities are putting them on a level playing field, pushing them outside their comfort zones, creating barriers they've got to overcome.”

“So we do lots of football, rugby, hockey, but recently we've started to introduce these kinds of activities. They're really valuable for students in terms of their leadership skills, team work skills, co-operation and what they're doing today, actually mixing in with other students, with other schools, is really valuable as we don't get opportunity to do much of that in our school.”

“Because they've engaged so much today engagement breeds confidence, confidence is going to breed quality and the quality overall is going to be beneficial to the school. It gives those pupils who don't engage in the traditional sports a chance to engage, a chance to take part, a chance to be active and a chance to have more confidence and that's what the key is. If they have more confidence around the school it's going to be beneficial for the school.”



The [physical education] curriculum has to change as times are changing and with the alternative sports that are available we need to have them more in the curriculum to provide breadth in the education system.

PGCE AND SCHOOL DIRECT TRAINEE TEACHERS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

PGCE and School Direct physical education trainees also commented on the activities and how they were presented to pupils; these were also included in the documentary film.

The teachers got involved saying they've ordered a bunch of Frisbees in. How they think it's really inclusive and how they want to start to incorporate it into their own curriculum.

Everyone's involved, everyone's really eager. They're talking tactics and it's really competitive as well so Kinball is a really good alternative sport.

[Street surfing] is a brilliant activity for PE in schools. Not only is it something completely different to what they would do on a normal curriculum, it teaches them different skills such as balance, co-ordination and physical movement.

I mean, [cheerleading] is a great alternative to gymnastics, trampolining. The kids love it. Even the boys, as we have found out today, seemed to love getting involved.

So, I think it [team-building] gets everyone involved, not just the main people who play the team sports.

DISCUSSION

The consensus of opinion from physical education teachers and pupils was that participating in alternative physical activities provided pupils with the opportunity to engage in activities that many had never tried before and to work co-operatively with others whom they had never met before. The data from the alternative physical activities day showed that pupils benefited from and enjoyed different types of physical activities. Equally, physical education teachers were in favour of a more diverse and inclusive physical education curriculum whilst trainee teachers felt that their subject knowledge was significantly enhanced and gave them the confidence to introduce new activities into schools. Moreover, trainee teachers

of physical education were able to work towards achieving Standard 3 of the Teachers' Standards for qualifying to teach:

- Have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s) and curriculum areas, foster and maintain pupils' interest in the subject, and address misunderstandings.
- Demonstrate a critical understanding of developments in the subject.
- Demonstrate improvement across a range of physical activities to achieve their personal best.

The findings from this study are consistent with other research and suggest that physical education teachers can address the issue of pupil disengagement and disaffection by making changes to what some have described as a standardised American fast food menu (Frapwell 2014: 19). Based on the findings of this study there may be a need to review the content of the secondary school physical education curriculum. Evidence from this research suggests that alternative activities were well received by pupils whilst physical education teachers and trainee physical education teachers were very receptive to the inclusion of such activities in their own physical education curriculum.

CONCLUSION

In this study physical education teachers recognised a need to adapt and change the way in which physical education lessons are experienced by pupils in secondary schools. It is acknowledged, however, that the activities presented to the pupils may simply have had nothing more than novelty value and further research would need to establish whether pupils and teachers believe there should be dedicated number of hours to each of these activities within their respective physical education curricula. Moreover, it is further acknowledged that only a small percentage of pre-selected pupils from each of the schools were represented and that it is unknown whether these types of physical activities would have universal appeal to all pupils. Nonetheless, this research suggests that a range of alternative activities has the potential to capture the interest of all pupils, particularly those not suited to conventional team games or those who are at risk of disengaging from traditional physical education lessons. Certainly, a focus on traditional competitive team games may only serve the interests of the most able pupils and provide less-positive experiences for other pupils. Consequently, this has the potential to marginalise those pupils who are disaffected and unmotivated by what is on offer and they may be deterred from participating in physical education altogether unless there is breadth, depth and balance within the secondary school physical education curriculum.

The documentary film can be viewed at: <http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/sasm/2017/02/28/alternative-physical-education-documentary-film/> ■

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