

A STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH TO PHYSICAL EDUCATION, SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The view we have of children shapes what type of physical education (PE), school sport and school-based physical activity we provide. In a deficit-based approach, we see children as either at risk of becoming broken or already broken. We see their bodies, their movement or their character as something that requires fixing, and believe that, through PE, sport and physical activity, we can achieve that. We focus on what they don't do and what they can't do. A strength-based approach sees the children we teach as already having assets, capabilities and resources. It is one of the five propositions that currently underpin the Australian Health and PE curriculum (ACARA, 2018) and it is something we should seriously consider in England. As Karen Lambert and Justen O'Connor (2018) state, a strength-based approach is about "flipping the rhetoric" to what children can do and what they are striving to achieve and that we should rid ourselves of the deficit lens altogether. This would change our thoughts, our language and, ultimately, why we offer PE, how we offer it and how it is experienced.

A strength-based approach to health

A pathogenic view of health is deficit-based and sees us in one of two states: diseased (not normal) or healthy (normal). This perspective focuses on the prevention of disease and illness, with the aim being to help children understand how physical activity can overcome and avoid them. A physical education that focuses on highlighting the risks and deficits is a narrow view of learning about what health is. A salutogenic perspective (strength-based) offers a dynamic notion of health, and one that may be more suitable to the educative aims of PE, sport and physical activity. Health becomes about our response to the type of life we want to live and how we want to live it. Being healthy means being able to live a good life with ease rather than with difficulty. Whether we see health mainly through a pathogenic or a salutogenic lens can have a profound influence on how we shape the PE curriculum (McCuaig, Quennerstedt and Macdonald, 2013).

Mikael Quennerstedt (2019) suggests that this salutogenic notion of health changes the type of questions we ask about it.

Figure 1: Teaching for health.

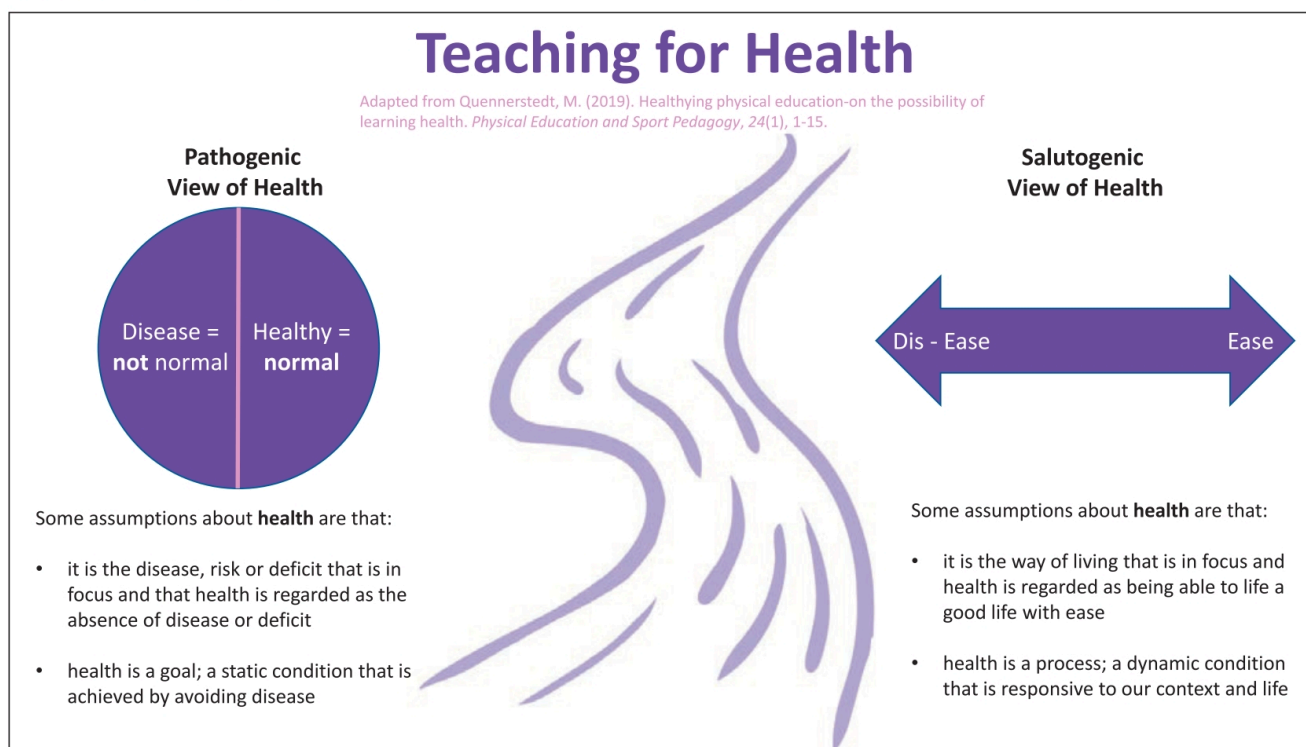
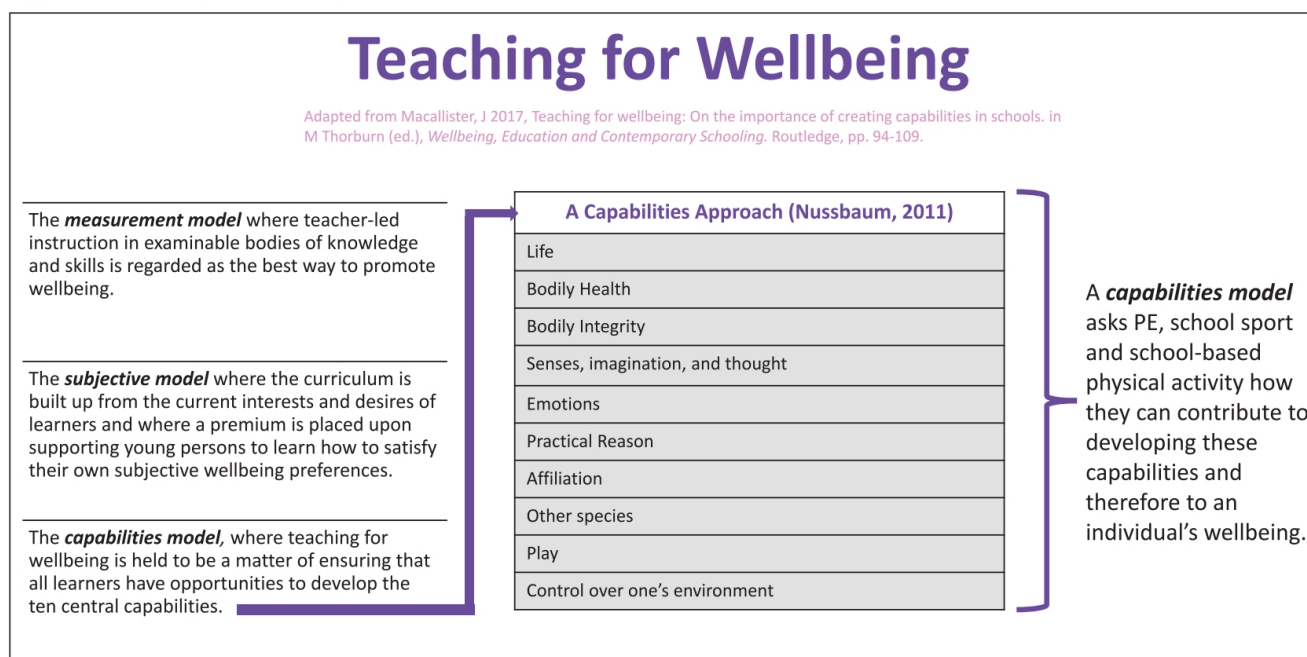


Figure 2: Teaching for wellbeing.



Questions about avoidance behaviours, such as ‘How do we use physical activity to prevent obesity, future diseases and premature death?’, transform into questions about growth, such as ‘How do we use physical activity to strengthen people’s health resources?’.

A strength-based approach to wellbeing

Wellbeing as an educational aim of PE, sport and physical activity is growing in its support and advocacy (Youth Sport Trust, 2022). However, this can only happen if PE teachers (and schools) are clear about the sort of wellbeing they wish to achieve. James MacAllister (2017) highlights a distinction between pseudo wellbeing and real wellbeing, with the pseudo type offering activities and designing curriculums that might contribute and satisfy the children’s own subjective wellbeing preferences. Real wellbeing is a strength-based approach, ensuring all children develop capabilities so they can act in ways that aid their own and others’ wellbeing. He draws upon Martha Nussbaum’s (2011) capabilities approach, where capabilities are “what this person is able to do and be”. There are ten capabilities (which appear in Figure 2) and PE, sport and physical activity are well placed to support the development of a significant proportion of them. A capabilities approach to teaching wellbeing is fundamentally based on dignity and will require teachers to help children to support each other in caring ways, to work out what a good life is, and how physical activity might contribute to it.

A strength-based approach to conversations

When observing children who are participating in PE, sport and physical activity do you wear glasses with deficit-based lenses or strength-based ones? The ones you wear influence what you look for and how you engage with the children. When we wear deficit lenses, we are scanning for things that are wrong, and we rectify them by pointing them out and telling children what to do better. We solve their issues for them.

In their book on motivational interviewing, Stephen Rollick and colleagues (2019) recommend that we need to overcome this “righting reflex” and wear our strength-based lenses. This does not mean we ignore issues, but rather we notice and use the children’s strengths to address them. This leads to a change in mindset from ‘I have all the answers to your problems’ to ‘What do you think the problem is and how can we work together to solve it?’. The authors call this a change talk, as it is about getting the children to think about the benefits of making a change and the ways in which they can make it happen and adapting our language to best support them to do this. To do that well, we must connect with them, inquire about the best way forward, offer advice with choices, and develop action plans together.

Concluding thoughts

The demand to fix is everywhere. It means we get trapped in the details and miss the bigger picture. We see the child in front of us as faulty object which we need to fix, rather than a complex human being with assets, capabilities and resources.

Therefore, PE, sport and physical activity are framed as ways of solving perceived deficits within children and are positioned as the means of sorting out poor character and behaviour. They are also framed as being able to fix issues with health and wellbeing (a pathogenic view). Their focus is on minimising disease and illness – a narrow and impoverished view of health which lacks meaning for many. Rather we need to embrace what Corey Keyes (2002; 2014) calls the “salutogenic challenge” as, by focusing on the outcomes of positive health, we can better learn how to promote and protect good health. A strength-based approach does not mean turning a blind eye to problems, but about what we look to first highlight and prioritise.

When we reflect on what drove our involvement in physical activity in childhood, it was never about overcoming deficits. For example, Alex didn’t get up every Saturday to play rugby because he thought it would improve his blood pressure, weight or resilience. He didn’t engage in sport because of the



perceived deficits he saw in himself. It was and still is about building strengths and providing positive experiences that enrich his life. Alex's engagement in rugby was fundamentally about the feeling of belonging and affiliation. Now, as adults, whilst health concerns are more on our minds, they are still not the main motivational drivers for why we continue to have a place for movement in our lives and we are unlikely to maintain a commitment to movement based on these concerns alone. We may struggle to adhere to exercise or activity regimes founded on a pathogenic view of health, no matter how much teachers, parents or doctors sell us the health-based incentives for doing so, perhaps because of the deficit-based lens it requires us to view ourselves with. Moving to overcome deficits suggests a scenario in which we are already failing and seems far less appealing than moving for fun. So it should be of no surprise that intrinsic factors, such as enjoyment, are far more likely to predict our behaviour patterns when it comes to involvement in physical activity, something that, as educators, we would be wise to remember when working with our students.

A crucial point of taking a strength-based approach is that we must get to know our students – what their needs are, what their capabilities are and what interests they have. To do that we need to facilitate more meaningful dialogue and reflection about how forms of movement could support a life worth living. Some questions that could be asked are: Who do you want to be? What do you want to do? What do you think is a good and meaningful life? How could movement support this and enrich the quality of your life? (Kretchmar, 2005). These are challenging but important questions to ask and reflect upon. To do this, PE needs to focus on acknowledging the strengths children and young people have, creating environments to develop their capabilities and deliberately promoting positives that can make a distinctive contribution to children's wider flourishing. ■

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