

A 'Healthy School' is one which takes responsibility for maintaining and promoting the health of all who learn, work, play and live within it... (Public Health Wales, 2018)

Introduction

This essay will explore how a whole school approach can be a beneficial to support young people's physical activity and overall wellbeing. Using case studies found on the internet, and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a conceptual framework, the discussion will examine how individuals, social, environmental and cultural factors within school interact to promote safe, inclusive and active experiences for young people.

Health and wellbeing

Health and well-being are interconnected concepts, with health often defined as a complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not just the absence of disease, while well-being refers to a broader, holistic state of happiness, satisfaction, and comfort, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects, driven by choices and fulfilling life experiences stated the world health organization (2024). The aspect of mental health within health and wellbeing is crucial as it underlines the ability for individuals to realize their own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life and working productively whilst contribution to their community states world health organisation (2025). Also world health organisation (2025) states that mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with others, earn a living and enjoy life.

'Healthy school' and whole school approach

The Welsh network of healthy school schemes was launched in 1999 with the NHS (Wales) Act 2006 providing the legislative backbone for health promotion in Wales. The concept of 'healthy school' is a holistic approach to education where the entire school environment—policies, curriculum, ethos, and physical setting—actively promotes the physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being of students, staff, and the wider community, fostering a supportive place where everyone feels safe, empowered, and able to thrive academically and personally. It goes beyond just teaching health; it embeds healthy practices into daily life stated by the world health organisation (2024). Health and wellbeing in connection to school is central to effective schooling, as health and wellbeing is linked to improved attendance, behaviour and academic performance stated GOV.UK (2021). By supporting pupils' resilience and social-emotional development, schools can address physical, mental and social aspects of wellbeing within a holistic framework. Prioritising wellbeing also helps reduce stigma, encourages support-seeking, and promotes the development of confident, engaged learners stated the UK parliament (2025).

With the idea of a whole school approach in mind the Curriculum for Wales places health and wellbeing at the centre of learning through the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE). This AoLE aims to support learners to develop the confidence, competence and motivation required to engage in lifelong physical activity stated gov wales,(2024).Consequently, schools are encouraged to view physical activity not only as a curricular outcome but as a shared responsibility across the whole school states [GOV.UK](#) (2024).

Physical activity

Physical activity is said to have a positive effect on both mental and physical health as it releases mood boosting endorphins,that can boost esteem,mood,sleep quality and reduce stress as well as the potential of lowering your risk of early death by up to 30% stated the NHS (2024).More evidence on the positive effects of physical activity within school is A study from (Grieco et al., 2009; Bartholomew and Jowers, 2011), (Mahar et al., 2006), states when physical activity is used as a break from academic learning time, postengagement effects include better attention and improved academic performance as well as increased on-task behaviors.Recommendations from the The NHS (2024) stated that children and young people aged (5-18) need to engage in 2 different physical activity each week:aerobic exercise and exercises to strengthen their muscles and bones,and should aim for an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity a day across the week and Children and young people aged (5-18) who are living with a disability should:aim to do 20 minutes of physical activity a day, splitting this into smaller chunks of activity throughout the day if needed.However, [GOV.UK](#) (2020) states that when starting school the participation in physical activity massively decreases and children do not reach these recommended guidelines.One main barrier in school that decreases activity is the mindset of "Not being good enough" at sports and this becomes a bigger concern as kids get older states [GOV.UK](#) (2017).Also low participation in school PE stems from negative past experiences (bullying, failure), low confidence, fear of judgment, lack of challenge/boredom (repetitive drills, too much teacher talk), social pressures (peer exclusion), poor changing facilities/uniform issues, lack of teacher training, and focus on elitism rather than inclusion stated BBC (2025).Furthermore it is clear that absence of physical activity stems down to more than the individual themselves but the surrounding factors of their personal health and wellbeing and competence stated [GOV.UK](#) (2020). These trends highlight the importance of schools as critical settings for intervention,as well as pushing the importance of support for mental health and wellbeing.

PE-physical education.Old vs New curriculum

In the old PE curriculum [GOV.UK](#) (2008)consisted of a sports specific approach and wasn't inclusive or accessible for every pupil .However the new curriculum redefines PE by moving

beyond traditional sports to a holistic focus on health, wellbeing, and active lifestyles. It emphasizes authentic learning, student voice, and life skills such as leadership, supporting the Health and Wellbeing AOLE's aim of developing healthy, capable individuals (GOV.UK, 2024). There is clear progression of the the new curriculum from the old curriculum using the whole school approach. One positive example of clear progression is a case study called "Active Schools (CAS) journey across Greater Manchester" they implemented changes such as changing breaktimes to smaller groups and rotating them to allow more time for pupils to be active this method was called the (phase breaks) which was shown to build better relationships with other pupils. Another whole approach they implemented was activities such as dancing and active lessons, which was shown to have better participation levels and fun from pupils than traditional sports stated GMmoving (2025).

Whole school approach within micro/misosystem-social connections and support

Young people's participation in physical exercise is greatly influenced by their social ties, since interactions with peers, teachers, and family members greatly influence their behavior. Supportive social environments in schools can increase students' motivation, enjoyment, and continued participation in physical activity. For this reason, a whole school approach recognized that social factors can either help or hinder physical exercise, which is not just a matter of personal preference. A greater variety of extracurricular activities, including dance, theater, sports, outdoor adventure, and scouting, are being used by schools to address social obstacles. These groups are becoming more accessible to all students, regardless of social or financial background, thanks to growing variety and support from communities and councils. Additionally, Greenhill Academy – Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Social Skills (Uganda) is a case study that bolsters these conclusions. This case study examines how students' involvement in extracurricular activities affects their social growth and academic engagement within The study found that involvement in extracurricular activities including debate, sports, music, and clubs was associated with improved social skills like leadership, cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution. According to Metropolitan International University Research Repository Extension (2024), students who engaged in these activities showed higher levels of self-esteem, stronger relationships with peers and teachers, and more prosocial behaviors than those who did not. These findings suggest that extracurricular activity promotes social and emotional wellbeing in educational settings.

Travel-active travel

Active travel to school has always existed, but formal programs gained more attention with the Active Travel (Wales) Act (2013) and organizations like Sustrans. Government backing, including Active Travel England in 2022, has since made walking and cycling a mainstream, supported policy focus rather than an informal practice stated walkwheelcycletrust (2013). Active school

travel is an approach to transport that involves physical activity in the journey to school, such as walking, using a wheelchair, scooting, and cycling. A case study from Hallwood Park Primary School (Runcorn, UK) took part in the WOW (Walk Once a Week) programme, supported by Living Streets and Active Travel England. After identifying barriers such as missing footpaths and improving routes with new paths, dropped kerbs, and clear markings, the proportion of pupils walking or wheeling to school rose from 52% to 69%, with over 75% of parents reporting improved access stated [GOV.UK](#) (2023). Active travel and increase of it is substantial as Increasing physical activity and minimising time spent sitting down helps maintain a healthy weight and reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and depression states the health foundation (2021).

Pupil voice and pupil agency-Pe

Pupil voice involves listening to and valuing students' views in decision-making, while pupil agency goes further by empowering pupils to make choices, take initiative, and actively shape their learning states evidence based education (2023). Student voice pedagogies in primary PE support meaningful learning by involving pupils in decisions about their learning. A year-long self-study of a primary teacher's practice, alongside pupil feedback, showed that implementing student voice requires significant scaffolding for both teachers and pupils. Teachers must learn to listen to and act on pupil voice, while pupils need support to develop confidence in sharing their views. The study highlights that authentic student voice takes time, reflection, and trial and error, and contributes valuable insight into student voice practice in primary PE, stated cardiff, et.al (2023). A Case study that supports The article Learning to facilitate student voice in primary physical education written by cardiff, [et.al](#) (2023) comes from Teign School PE Ambassadors (UK). At Teign School they have PE Ambassadors — students that are selected to represent their peers — play a central role in shaping the physical education programme. These ambassadors gather and act on pupil feedback to influence decisions about the PE curriculum, promote inclusivity, and improve students' overall experience of the subject. They help identify and remove barriers to participation, manage a suggestion box for pupil ideas, and work with staff to adjust activities and grouping methods based on student voice. This approach empowers pupils to lead change within PE, builds leadership skills, and makes the curriculum more responsive to student needs states PE scholar (2025).

Conclusion

In conclusion, encouraging health and wellness in schools necessitates a comprehensive, all-encompassing strategy that goes beyond conventional physical education. The significance of physical exercise, active travel, and inclusive PE in promoting students' physical, mental, and social wellness is demonstrated by evidence from policy, research, and case studies. A key

component of this strategy is the meaningful inclusion of student voice and agency, which gives young people the ability to direct their educational experiences, boosts engagement, and promotes positive wellbeing outcomes. Health-promoting schools, active travel programs, and student leadership positions are examples of initiatives that show how schools, communities, and legislators can collaborate to create environments that support the development of resilient, capable, and self-assured people as well as lifelong healthy behaviors.

References

BBC (2025) *Social groupings and participation in sport – OCR: Factors affecting participation in sport.*

Cardiff, S., et al. (2023) *Learning to facilitate student voice in primary physical education.*

Cook, V., Maine, F. and Fozzard, L. et al. (2023) 'Building cultural literacy through dialogue: Democracy at the heart of learning', in Biddulph, J., Rolls, L. and Flutter, J. (eds.) *Unleashing Children's Voices in New Democratic Primary Education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 145–159.

Evidence Based Education (2023) *Student agency in classroom practice.*

GM Moving (2025) *Creating Active Schools: A whole-school approach.*

GOV.UK (2017) *Number of children getting enough physical activity drops by 40%.*

GOV.UK (2020) *What works in schools and colleges to increase physical activity?*

GOV.UK (2021) *Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges.*

GOV.UK (2022) *Research review series: Physical education (PE).*

GOV.UK (2023) *Living Streets: Improving access to primary school in Runcorn.*

GOV.UK (2024) *Enhancing physical education provision and improving access to sport and physical activity in school.*

GOV.UK (2024) *New PE guidance for schools strengthens equal access to sport.*

Legislation.gov.uk (2006) *National Health Service (Wales) Act 2006.*

McLeroy, K.R., Bibeau, D., Steckler, A. and Glanz, K. (1988) 'An ecological perspective on health promotion programs', *Health Education Quarterly*, 15(4), pp. 351–377.

Metropolitan International University Research Repository Extension (2024) *Effect Of Extracurricular Activities On Social Skills: A Case Study Of Students In Greenhill Academy*

NIHR (2022) *Children's physical activity levels fell below national guidelines in wake of pandemic.*

NIHR (2024) *Physical activity insecurity is stopping youngsters from getting active.*

NHS (2024) *Benefits of exercise.*

NHS (2024) *Physical activity guidelines for children and young people.*

NHS Wales (2025) *Welsh Network of Health and Wellbeing Promoting Schools.*

PE Scholar (2025) *PE Insights Episode 47: Using pupil voice to shape PE experiences and the benefits of leadership.*

Premier Education (2025) *How PE and physical activity can improve pupils' concentration and behaviour in classrooms.*

UK Parliament POST (2025) *Children's wellbeing in schools.*

Walk Wheel Cycle Trust (2013) *Active School Travel Programme FAQs.*

Welsh Government (2025) *Education Wales: Areas of Learning and Experiences.*

World Health Organisation (2024) *Health and wellbeing.*

World Health Organisation (2024) *Health promoting schools.*

World Health Organisation (2025) *Mental health.*