

PHYSICAL EDUCATION OR SPORT?

AN EXPLORATION INTO PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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For most pupils, primary school represents their first experience of structured physical education (PE) and, for some, their only opportunity to engage in moderate to vigorous activity on a weekly basis (Faulkner and Reeves, 2000). Consequently, PE's relatively minor place in primary curriculums is of concern when it is accepted that the knowledge and understanding acquired at this stage informs one's way of viewing physical activity for the rest of one's life (Green and Hardman, 2005). It is therefore essential that this can be influenced through a high-quality PE curriculum by nurturing and developing a strong movement foundation from which lifelong learning can follow (Griggs, 2012).

TRADITIONAL GAMES: A 'SPORT FOR ALL' APPROACH

Worryingly, MacNamara *et al* (2011) identified that the fundamental movement skills, knowledge and understanding essential for lifelong participation are not integral and valued elements of PE. Instead, the subject is typically characterised by short blocks of often unrelated activities which, arguably, represent a watered-down version of a secondary curriculum, where less emphasis is placed on the learning experience (Rainer *et al*, 2012). MacNamara *et al* (2011) support this notion of a sport-for-all approach, employed by teachers who perceive that offering a variety of activities will increase the likelihood of pupils finding a sport they enjoy and, subsequently, extending participation into their post-

school lives. With teachers defending this approach on the premise of it developing lifelong participation, this poses the question: why do so many pupils remain disengaged from curriculum PE?

Traditional games often dominate PE programmes and although posing as a critical opportunity for the application of co-operation, fair play and tactical thinking, such approaches often alienate those who have failed to grasp even the most basic of fine motor skills (Griggs, 2012). Combine this with being forced to attempt such skills in a high-pressure situation and being blamed for losing possession or slowing the tempo of a game and these pupils will inevitably develop a state of learned helplessness and feelings of inadequacy (Bailey *et al*, 2009).

Rather than encouraging participation for all, these environments widen the gap between those developing and those excelling, highlighting an opportunity for pupils who are exposed to games outside of school to demonstrate their physical dominance over others (Griggs, 2012). Perhaps this depicts the growing relationship between sport and PE, where an over-emphasis on competition has appeared to cause educators to lose sight of the need to remain inclusive in practice and tailor the subject to benefit all (Wright, 2004). Such lack of distinction between the two concepts, paired with the theoretical benefits of increased sporting participation (Bailey, 2005), naturally raises the question: are we trying to build athletes or well-rounded, confident individuals with the knowledge and competency to engage in a lifetime of physical activity?

FOSTERING PHYSICAL LITERACY

Whitehead, Durden-Myers and Pot (2018) support the case that PE has the unique power as a subject area to encourage moral education, enrich social skills and promote characteristics such as loyalty and resilience. Central to ongoing debates in educational discourse is this notion that, to truly influence lifelong learning, PE must encompass more than physical movement; it must foster pupils' abilities to read the environment and respond effectively through the development of physical literacy (Whitehead, 2001). Evidently, current pedagogical approaches have been identified as neglecting child development across the cognitive and affective domains, and this whole child approach offers critical opportunities to make more meaningful and personal connections through PE experiences (Sharples, 2018).

Perhaps, most importantly, pupils who are physically literate will develop a well-established sense of self which can engender greater self-respect and self-belief in one's ability (Whitehead, 2007). PE should, therefore, underline the intrinsic value of each individual to move away from perceptions that bodies are objects that need to match an ideal image, arguably a difficult task in today's world where self-criticism is made easy (Whitehead, Durden-Myers and Pot, 2018). Lee (2004) further supports that it is unsurprising children actively seek information about themselves and generate such conceptions of social comparison when primary school

teachers tend to focus on issues related to pupil conduct as measures of success in PE. These easy-to-measure aspects, such as skill and attainment, are too often valued over what really matters in physical literacy: self-efficacy, motivation and competence, with Pot, Whitehead and Durden-Myers (2018) reiterating that wider appreciation needs to be given to the unique learning paths of individuals.

OUTDOOR EDUCATION FOR HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Outdoor education's growing popularity has sparked debate in regard to its characteristics and nature, with Zink and Burrows (2008) broadly defining the subject as "learning in, through and about" the outdoors to influence both personal and educational development. The subject is underpinned by constructivist theories which view learning as an active process whereby the teacher's role is that of a facilitator, scaffolding education in a way that allows for the development of independence (Williams and Wainwright, 2016). O'Neill and Fleer (2015) highlight that it is this style of interaction that plays a fundamental role in contributing to a child's holistic development, suggesting that child-teacher relationships should be built on trust and mutual respect. This is predominantly achieved through outdoor education's use of peer-to-peer, collaborative learning which not only enhances social-emotional wellbeing, but places self-regulation at the heart of the experience to foster a child's ability to function autonomously in various personal and social contexts (Van Kuyk, 2009).

CHALLENGE: A TEACHER'S CHOICE?

It is indisputable that the implementation of outdoor education presents extensive and unique contributions to a child's holistic development, which naturally prompts discussion around why its provision in the United Kingdom has declined over the past two decades (Sutherland and Legge, 2016). With an emphasis on cultivating challenge, perhaps the willingness for learners to invest in these situations stems from a practitioner's confidence to offer such experiences, suggesting that "challenge by choice" starts with the teacher (Williams and Wainwright, 2016).

Thorburn and Allison (2010) highlight the distinct lack of "low risk, high transfer value" approaches to outdoor education, reinforcing that experiences should be deliverable by all, based around the normal school day and remain low in cost. Leading on from this notion that outdoor education doesn't have to be expensive to be effective, it appears that best practice involves the resourceful use of available space through exploiting woodlands for climbing, shrubland for shelter-building, slopes for sliding and, for urban schools, the adaptation of open spaces for running and play-based activities (Maynard and Waters, 2007). It is, therefore, proposed that available space alone should not define the boundaries of outdoor education provision and, instead, the versatility of teaching styles best ensures that children can benefit from outdoor learning regardless of school settings (Burris and Burris, 2011).

METHODS

This research took a qualitative, multiple-methods approach through combining non-participant observations and semi-structured interviewing to contribute to the study's validity. Eight non-participant observations of both PE and outdoor education were conducted across every year group of the chosen primary school to allow data to be gathered in the most natural context. Purposive sampling was then used to select four teachers and eight pupils for semi-structured interviewing. Pupil interviews involved a method of photo-elicitation, where visual prompts were used to provoke deeper reflection. Interviews were manually transcribed for the purpose of data analysis, where raw data was coded and placed into hierarchical tree diagrams. As this research involved participants under the age of 18 years, ethical approval was issued from Hartpury University's Ethics Committee and all participants were issued with information sheets and consent forms and asked to provide voluntary, informed consent. Parental information sheets and consent forms were sent home to parents and returned via the classroom and pupils selected for interviewing also voluntarily signed assent forms.

DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of pupil interviews has produced three corresponding, higher order themes of style, purpose and enjoyment; however, the raw data themes indicate the distinct differences amongst these categories and, thus, between PE and outdoor education.

The style of PE has been portrayed as heavily sport-focused, which resulted in pupils discussing predominantly game-based activities. It is also worth noting that, through visual prompts, pupils were given the opportunity to highlight what they feel epitomises PE; the majority excluded outdoor activities in their selection. When asked about PE's purpose in the curriculum, a further second order theme, all pupils described health-related reasons. Finally, it is evident through the theme of enjoyment that the majority of pupils enjoy the free, active and competitive nature of PE, although some pupils report less enjoyment when variety is restricted.

Contrastingly, the style of outdoor education is perceived by pupils as learning orientated. Here, pupils identify a broader purpose to the subject, with learners referencing both the outdoor environment and recalling their experiences of cross-curricular topics. The final second order theme of enjoyment stemmed from pupils' reflecting on their level of social interaction across lessons and the diversity that the subject offers.





The thematic analysis of teacher perceptions of PE draws attention to four emerging, second order themes. Here teachers spoke of confidence, finance and resource limitations which highlight the perceived barriers to provision. The recognition of PE's benefits across social-emotional, cognitive and, particularly, physical domains has led to the theme of holistic development. For achievement across these areas, it was commonly identified that lessons require structure and competition and are active and engaging, with these themes subsequently categorised under high-quality PE and further exemplified through coding analysis. Finally, it was apparent that teachers aim to influence the social and behavioural patterns of pupils whilst fueling a lifelong passion for learning; thus, philosophy has emerged as a second order theme.

The thematic analysis of teacher perceptions of outdoor education also depicts four emerging, second order themes. Planning, experience, resources and behaviour management present distinct challenges of implementation. Similarly, it was acknowledged that outdoor education has positively affected the physical, social-emotional and, notably, cognitive domains of learning, which led to the emergence of holistic development as a further second order theme. Such influence on the cognitive domain has led to the theme of cross-curricular learning, where participants reference the breadth of wider National Curriculum subject areas that outdoor education targets. Philosophy has been presented as the final second order theme and participants made reference to institutional, teacher and governmental philosophies which clarify outdoor education's perceived purpose and position as a subject area.

CONCLUSION

Both subjects hold their unique merits and have illustrated pupil development across physical, cognitive and affective domains. However, this research concluded that outdoor education appears to achieve holistic development more consistently. It is important to note that we cannot undermine PE's influence on laying the foundations for physical competency and promoting active lifestyles but a growing relationship with sport seems to present distinct challenges for the subject's inclusivity. Although, for many pupils, this offers a motivational climate to excel, the increasing perception of competition as win or lose calls out for teachers to realign this concept. Perhaps, to build self-belief in learners, competition should be as much about competing against oneself as it is about competing against others. Outdoor education presents a critical opportunity for children to push past their own perceived barriers and overcome adversities with resilience and determination.

This research recommends that many of the issues raised in PE could, perhaps, be resolved through establishing a stronger connection with outdoor education and an awareness of how complementary these disciplines are. It is further argued that PE comprises three subcomponents which need clearer distinction: physical activity for the acquisition of fundamental movement skills, sport to offer game-based competition, and outdoor education as an emerging model to address physical literacy. It is proposed that this revitalisation of PE could preserve the subject's potential to offer a whole-child approach and, thus, better contribute to children's holistic development. ■

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