

# BUILDING PHYSICAL HEALTH

Mike Weeks

**A**t the age of five, one in five children is overweight or obese. By the last year of primary school, it is one in three (PHE, 2020). Reversing this trend is a monumental challenge. I believe we need to think differently to solve it. In this article, I invite the reader to join me on a physical education journey towards an approach that is working in schools today.

I have always tried to transcend the physical education experience for all pupils. I began teaching physical education in the state sector. I taught in three secondary schools, including four years as head of department. After a year qualifying and working as a personal trainer, I returned to teaching as director of sport at St Paul's Juniors – an independent school in London – for five years. Looking back, I can remember pupils whose subject enthusiasm grew as a result of good physical health. I can also remember pupils whose enthusiasm drifted because they lacked the physical health to achieve competence, in spite of differentiation and choice. These experiences convinced me of the importance of building physical health in the formative physical education years – in preparation for lifelong physical activity.

In 2016, I set up Gymrun to explore the term 'secondary ready' (DfE, 2013) and develop pupils' competencies in relation to physical education. I have since taught physical education lessons in more than 50 primary schools.

For clarity of purpose, I consider physical education as, 'Learning to use and move the body competently, efficiently and safely. Building physical health and wellbeing. Developing physical and environmental literacy for life (adapted from Lynch, 2020) – using individual activities such as athletics, fitness, gymnastics, dance, outdoor and adventurous activities and swimming, but not games.' I consider games to be a separate curriculum. Although enormously important and interchangeable, the broader benefits of social and emotional development are not unique to a physical education.

Using four principles – essentialism, transparency, inclusion and sustainability – I will make a case for thinking differently about physical education in the formative school years.

## ESSENTIALISM

Where should schools invest their energy for 5-11s? With time, facilities and expertise, schools can weave multiple opportunities into a holistic tapestry for physical education. Without such resources, I propose we narrow the focus. Using Simon Sinek's golden circle (Start with Why, 2009), I would like us to reach beyond what and how and begin with why we teach physical education. What is our essential vision? By answering this question, we can channel our resources. According to Whitehead (2001), the physically educated body is competent, confident and motivated. But it must first be physically healthy. The foundations of building physical health with Gymrun are:

- moving with (relative) speed and agility
- engaging the core for sustained periods of time
- supporting the bodyweight
- squatting and jumping with control
- jogging without tiring.

Beyond its significance in physical education and games, the wider benefits of building physical health include improved attendance, academic learning (Oliveira *et al.*, 2017 & Marques *et al.*, 2018), resilience, and mental and social wellbeing – not to mention a reduction in childhood obesity.

## TRANSPARENCY

Today, a school without assessment and progress data for literacy and numeracy is deemed inadequate. Today, a school without assessment and progress data for physical health and education should also be considered inadequate. It should be accountable for its failure to monitor progress in this critical area of development. "Documenting pupil

learning with data instead of relying on anecdotal evidence demonstrates that physical education is indeed a subject worthy of space in the school curriculum" (Lund & Kirk, 2020). Assessment exists where progress matters.

I use the transparency of assessment to inform, engage and motivate pupils, teachers and parents. I also use the transparency of assessment to hold physical education provision to account. Through assessment, pupils see evidence of what they have accomplished and where they have more to learn – a motivational tool for improving learning. Through peer- and self-assessment, pupils become more immersed in the wider culture of assessment – reflecting, critically thinking, more self-aware. Using information from assessment, all school stakeholders can plan and adapt future programmes.

Assessment is not a popular word in most contexts, but its origins are positive. We need to embed and embrace a positive culture for assessment in physical education. This can be achieved when we focus on personal competition and an acceptance that failure is a part of the learning process. Parkrun and Couch to 5k are good examples of this – monitoring physical performance in a way that is progressive and inclusive. The practical and often subjective nature of assessment in physical education can make it challenging to implement. I propose we reduce physical education assessment to a minimum. How about a one lesson peer-assessment – quick, objective and inclusive?

Using the Gymrun assessment lesson, we have physical health data on more than 20,000 pupils. Like the reception baseline assessment in core subjects (DfE, 2019), Gymrun data shows progress from Reception to Year 6. It shows that many pupils with a low baseline in physical health flatline or regress. These are the least active pupils who are the most at risk of becoming sedentary adults. In our flagship Gymrun school, we use this physical health data to identify underperforming pupils. We use co-curricular time to support them.

## INCLUSION

As Director of Sport at St Paul's Juniors, with time and resources, I was able to explore assessment, recording and reporting in depth. I began to better understand its value for all pupils. Assessment in isolation is meaningless – it must have context and relevance. There must be inclusive standards for assessment to map onto (Tsuda *et al.*, 2019). There must be an attainment level for every pupil to work towards. Process must be carefully considered, to avoid exposing and embarrassing pupils. Today, inclusive assessment is the central axis to my work in schools.

Assessment in physical education has too often been humiliating and embarrassing – especially fitness testing. It frustrates me to hear of the insensitive pedagogy and assessment methods that shaped physical education experiences until the late 1990s. These are highlighted by Cale and Harris (2006). I strongly empathise with this position, but I believe we have moved on. This paper also recognises that assessment of fitness can be motivational – if health-related, linked to physical activity and taught in the right way – and educational – where it aids learning, supports pupils to maintain a healthy lifestyle, gives understanding of how the body moves, informs about the strengths and limitations of the body, and enables pupils to make informed decisions and learn how to improve their fitness.

Without assessment, how do we know which pupils are improving, which are flatlining and which are regressing? How do we know if all pupils are being challenged? Some pupils are challenged to reach the most basic performance standards – and this is where inclusive assessment has its greatest value. Using this information, content and expectations can be adapted. I use an example of a pupil who can only perform a sit-up using their hands to help them to get up. Firstly, this pupil should know that his level of performance is okay. Next, he should learn how to perform one sit-up unaided, then two, and so on. In time, he will learn to engage his core muscles for a sustained period. It is better to identify a development area, to work at this, and to praise the resulting effort and progress, than to avoid short-term failure. By sweeping the realisation of low competence under the carpet, we create a more humiliating and damaging situation in later life. Today, we do not know of the actual physical education progress that is being made by all pupils – and particularly those who are least able, least active and most at risk of disengaging. Inclusive performance standards provide a framework where every pupil is encouraged to chase their own unrealised potential.

## SUSTAINABILITY

We can use a three-legged stool analogy to show the interplay between standards, assessment and curriculum. Unless we pay attention to all three areas, the stool wobbles. Standards and assessment must pre-date curriculum instruction – so pupils work purposefully and avoid wasted lessons on irrelevant activities. To be truly sustainable, curriculum instruction must have clear direction and be simple in design. With these features in place, all of those working in education (receptionists, playtime supervisors, teaching assistants, classroom teachers, school leaders and policy makers) can transcend the message of a positive physical education experience.

Primary school teachers are normally required to deliver all curriculum subjects – a fantastic testimony to their charisma and professionalism. Some educationalists believe all classroom teachers can deliver high quality physical education and games. I do not believe this assertion to be wholly inaccurate. However, we must recognise the difference between what is true theoretically and what happens in practice in our schools. The lack of physical education training is not the real issue. Most teaching competencies are consolidated in the school setting and after initial teacher training has been completed. The real challenge is the perceptions we display towards physical education, physical activity and sport. Formed over the life course, these perceptions take a great deal to unlock and change.

Teaching any subject in a way that is accessible and engaging for all pupils takes great skill. When we introduce teaching in a practical environment, these skills change considerably. There are so many metaphorical trap doors we can fall through. Combine these new skills with the extra subject knowledge (DfE, 2013) required and it is no surprise that many classroom teachers drop physical education and games when given the opportunity (DfE, 2015).

How do we nurture a positive shift in the motivation of busy classroom teachers towards delivering physical education? Using the Gymrun curriculum, we reduce content, simplify delivery and make it relevant for all pupils and teachers. This model recommends additional areas of physical education and games to be delivered by subject experts. This balance provides a sustainable compromise – enabling classroom teachers to take some ownership for physical education without feeling consistently underprepared and overwhelmed.

## GYMRUN

In Gymrun we have an essential vision – building physical health. We recognise the need to be transparent – by embracing assessment. We note the importance of inclusion – of leaving no pupil behind. And we have a sustainable, supporting curriculum. Every pupil receives a graded woven badge following completion of the Gymrun assessment lesson. Every school receives progress data. For two years, I have taught a weekly 20-minute Gymrun curriculum lesson to 120 pupils in a north Bristol primary school. Using the Gymrun assessment, this school has recorded a 42 per cent increase in physical health since the programme's inception. In 2019, 75 per cent of Year 6 in this school, compared with 41 per cent in all schools, reached the blue Gymrun badge (stage 5/8). We call this 'Blue by Eleven'. Imagine working in a school where good physical health is like blood running through the vascular system of its culture. Where all pupils run, push, pull, ache and sweat. Imagine working in a Gymrun school? ■

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