

TOO MUCH FOR ONE CURRICULUM?

The purpose of this article is to consider whether there may be too much developmental learning in physical education (PE) to be covered effectively in one curriculum area.

As a subject, PE can deliver so much more than a physical education. Since 2008, the Real PE programme for primary schools (Create Development) has highlighted six areas of developmental learning available through a physical education. (Figure 1.)

When taught well, PE is a cognitive, physical, personal, social, emotional and creative education (Opstoel *et al.*, 2019; Lykesas *et al.*, 2020). Each PE curriculum should provide a good balance of these developmental learning areas. There will, of course, be variations in that balance, based on the contextual needs of different school communities.

An early example of this context is the enhanced focus on teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) through physical activity used by Don Hellison in the 1970s with 'tough' children in inner city schools (Hellison, 2011). A more recent example is the concept-driven PE curriculum created by Lee Sullivan in 2021. Here the focus is on better preparing children for life through PE, using more fluid themes, with a strong focus on personal, social and emotional learning.

How we prioritise these developmental areas will be shaped by our own experiences. Concerned by the lack of fitness displayed by the children in her school, primary school head teacher, Elaine

Wyllie, introduced The Daily Mile in 2012. My own teaching has led me to support a more regular and reflective focus on the fitness and physical literacy needs of every child. In doing so, I am acutely aware that our role is not to build highly tuned physical robots.

Today, schools and practitioners are each placing a very different weighting on cognitive, physical, personal, social, emotional and creative learning in PE.

Cognitive learning should be taking place in all PE lessons. Movement implicitly requires us to link our mind and body, using sensory and motor neurons and our central nervous system. I often reinforce to children how we must think, learn and feel in movement, even before we address our external environment. When taught well, PE curriculum models will also provide more explicit opportunities for cognitive learning. The Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) approach to teaching games is an excellent example.

Next, we have curriculum models which focus on the development of physical skills and understanding, in relation to activities such as fitness, gymnastics, athletics and swimming (PENC, 2013). These are physically demanding and require exertion. The acquisition of fundamental movement skills in physical learning is viewed by many as the bedrock of PE.

We then have PE curriculum models that address personal, social and emotional learning overtly.



We don't have to look far in the wider school curriculum to find examples of subjects which have been sub-divided, to address the different developmental learning focuses of their component parts.



Figure 1: Developing the whole child through PE. Adapted from Real PE.



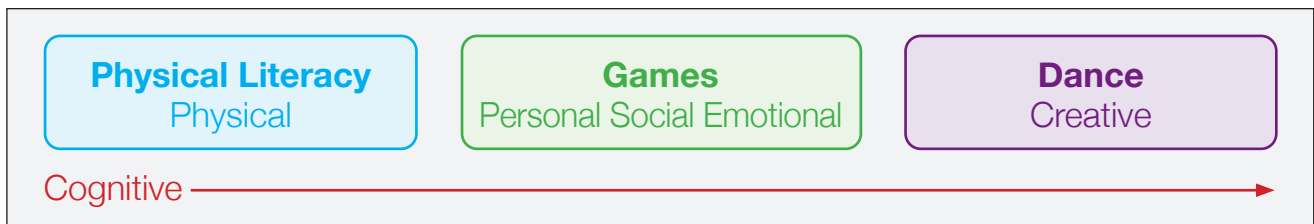


Figure 2: Developing the whole child through PE: physical literacy, games and dance.

These are often holistic and play-rich in their design. They are fun, cooperative and collaborative. These models can appeal to those people with negative memories of team sports, cross-country, competition, gymnastics and fitness testing in PE lessons when they were at school (Morgan & Bourke, 2008; Ladwig *et al.*, 2018).

So where do we position team sports? Team sports are no longer considered as lifelong physical activities or for every child (SHAPE America, 2014). The challenge of team sports is that they need to be pitched appropriately and delivered effectively, with adaptation and differentiation. Team sports provide a powerful vehicle for the development of life skills. As such, I would centre team sports on personal, social and emotional learning, often with greater relevance for older children (Johnson, 2018).

Finally, we must plan for developing creativity, originality and expression. Dance is very often the chosen vehicle for creative learning.

So how do we package all of these manifestations of PE into one curriculum? I don't think we can. We don't have to look far in the wider school curriculum to find examples of subjects which have been sub-divided, to address the different developmental learning focuses and intentional values of their component parts. Some obvious examples are:

- science – biology, chemistry and physics
- English – language and literature
- humanities – geography, history and religious education
- technology – information, design and food.

PE and games are used by many schools as co-components, but often with little conscious reference to their learning focus, beyond that which is specific to each activity or sport. Another challenge with PE and games is the lack of an umbrella subject definition. What if we elevated physical education to be this umbrella term? Under such an umbrella term, we might then separate PE into three components, each with a clear developmental learning focus and intentional value.

This categorisation is by no means perfect. I want to reinforce how each developmental learning focus must hold value across each curriculum component. For example, physical and creative learning opportunities must be recognised and nurtured through games. The difference is that we are formalising one clear learning focus for each curriculum component. Sometimes less is more.

We must also observe the PE curriculum in the wider context of co-curricular and whole school physical activity provision (Creating Active Schools Framework, Daly-Smith *et al.*, 2020).

I have long posited the idea that we should be monitoring the progress made by every child in PE, to raise its status and protect its curriculum hours. But how do we effectively monitor (actual) cognitive, physical, personal, social, emotional and creative progress in every child? Honestly speaking, I have yet to see this achieved.

To better hold ourselves and our subject to account for every child's progression, I propose we draw on the work of Whitehead (2001) to consider **physical literacy**, alongside **games** and **dance**, as three component vehicles in the garage of PE. Each vehicle has a clear developmental learning focus and an intentional value. PE may then hold greater currency for building physical literacy, developing life skills and exploring physical expression in every child. ■

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