

# RETHINKING THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

## THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AGED 10-11 YEARS: THEIR VIEWS ON PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN ENGLAND

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### INTRODUCTION

This article is submitted in full support of the call by Dr Jo Harris in the summer 2018 edition of *Physical Education Matters* where Jo presents 'The Case for Physical Education becoming a Core Subject in the National Curriculum.'

Taking a constructivist-interpretivist stance, this mixed methods case study gave a voice to 236 children from four different schools between 2008 and 2014 through questionnaires and interviews. The aim was to explore what the children thought about physical education (PE), with a view to illuminating and informing policy and practice in relation to the aims which underpin the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013). Year 6 pupils' voices have been conspicuously absent from any significant discussions about the National Curriculum (The Westminster Education Forum, 2012). It is the children's curriculum after all; it is *their* PE, and it is their voices which have been missing from the debate over the past 25 years. This article gives a view of the curriculum from the recipients' perspective, through including them in a discussion about their PE provision and entitlement. By involving the children, teachers can be seen to value pupils' voices as pedagogical tools and, in turn, this article shows that, through democratising the discussion, the children were more than just 'empty vessels' and were able to offer informed views about their health, PE and general physical activity.

### DEFINING PHYSICAL EDUCATION

As a number of researchers have acknowledged, defining PE is notoriously difficult. There are many contemporary definitions, for example, Kirk (2010), the Youth Sport Trust (2010) and the Association for Physical Education (afPE) (2010), and none appear to be any more authoritative than the others. Penney and Chandler (2000) have argued that the most enduring and resistant characteristic of PE is the focus on physical activity, and the main issue is in relation to what people *do* with these physical activities and how they are practised. The Youth Sport Trust (2010) and afPE (2010) have made a distinction between PE and sport. The afPE has at the heart the desire that all young learners should experience positive beneficial learning experiences through an engagement in physical activity. These experiences should include personal wellbeing, achievement for all learners, and an understanding of what makes a healthy life style.

Considering these informed definitions of PE, it is not unreasonable to summarise that PE is about giving children a broad range of physical experiences, presented in a positive way, where they can experience fun, enjoyment, success and learn through engaging at whatever level they access the physical activity, sport or game. Moreover, PE is also about helping young people to understand and value their physical selves, how the body works,

and how to look after it for a lifetime. If this aspect of the process is executed well, then hopefully the children will continue to participate and be involved in their preferred activities, games or sports, thereby continuing to be physically active and involved at a variety of levels for the remainder of their lives.

### THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In a democratic society, the learner has a stake in what is taught in school, and I argue that there needs to be a vigorous debate about *who* and *what* education is for. At the heart of White's narrative (2004, 2007), where he explores what a curriculum fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century might look like, is a call for "imaginative thinking instead of the kind of tired thinking that condemns children to years of study which may benefit no-one at all" (White, 2007: viii) One way forward is to include the learner's voice as a means of informing the debate surrounding the aims of education. It is by no means a new way of thinking about curriculum aims but it is an area still largely ignored, perhaps less so now than in the past.

The National Curriculum (2013) places an emphasis on competitive team games for all children aged 5-18 years. In the primary and secondary sectors, PE remains a *foundation* as opposed to a *core* subject. A core subject has much greater importance than a foundation subject, for there is a

very clear and acknowledged hierarchy. English, mathematics (and science) are core subjects and dominate the primary school curriculum. By comparison physical development (PD) in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sits on an equal footing with mathematical and language development as well as other areas of learning.

## GIVING PUPILS A VOICE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS – METHODOLOGY

Pupil voice is a means of valuing what the pupil has to say. That is not to say that everything that is said is always correct or indeed of value but, as a pedagogical tool, pupil voice can be a very useful teaching aid. Penney (2004) calls for a radical refocus and for a more flexible, interconnected and inclusive curriculum which is geared to children's current and future lives, with greater opportunities for choice given to schools and pupils. These views sit comfortably with those advocated by White (2004, 2007) in terms of making the curriculum relevant to young people. What better way to find out what PE looks and feels like, from the key stake-holders in the overall process, than to invite the children to share their views?

Data was collected from eight classes totalling 236 children aged 10 or 11 from four different primary schools from the same inner-city London borough. A decision was made to work with Year 6 because it is the children's last year of primary schooling and they would be able to draw upon at least seven years' experience of primary school PE.

Before starting the data collection, written agreement from the head teachers and the boards of governors was sought and gained. All children and parents/guardians completed an informed consent form detailing the nature of the proposal and relevant background information. Everyone had the right to withdraw at any time without prejudice. All parties involved were assured that all information collected would remain strictly confidential and only be used for this research. The voices and views of the children are presented exactly as they were recorded or written.

## PRESENTATION OF THE DATA – AN OVERVIEW

Through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews, responses from the children were sought and gained on several key questions. Responses to a selection of these questions are presented in this article.

## CAN YOU TELL ME ANYTHING ABOUT HEALTH EDUCATION PLEASE?

Every child except one offered a view about what they thought health education was, and in some cases more than one view was offered. Almost half of the children felt that health education was all about understanding what being healthy is. Others felt that it was about diet and doing exercise. However, what was clear, is that the children considered health to be important. The views of individual children are most illuminative. For example, Ahmed at Green Park thought that: "Health education is teaching about your health and how important it is." Anisha at Abney Park wrote that: "Health education is when you learn to be healthy for when you grow up." Luke at Central Park felt that: "Health education is a lesson where children learn about the body, how to keep fit, and what we need to survive." Luke also made the connection that it could include learning and understanding about the body. Responses from the children were informative and demonstrated their level of care about their health. For example, Terrance at Abney Park felt that his health was very important because: "If you keep healthy you can live longer." In the same discussion, Izzy added that his health was important because: "It can expand your life span and you will live longer if you keep healthy." Ozgur at Green Park offered the view that his health was very important to him because: "If you are healthy you will be able to do lots of things. You can do other things when you are older. If you don't care about your health, you can have a heart attack." These examples show that the children are making connections with 'lifelong physical activity' (afPE, 2010) – one of the key components in my definition of PE.

## WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT PE? HOW MUCH DO YOU DO AND WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR PE LESSONS PLEASE?

Every child offered an opinion as to what PE meant to them. Shakeela at Abney Park thought that PE should take place: "Every day for like half an hour after lunch because children feel sleepy and they can't concentrate. They need to let their food digest." Jack at Lea Park offered a differing view that: "It should be more optional like after school."

The children were invited to talk to me about activities they 'loved' doing and 'hated' doing. These two terms were chosen by children from a school in a pilot study who did not take part in the substantive research. Again, the responses were

both informative and fascinating. A few examples are included here to represent the responses. The children's answers were, not surprisingly, very varied. For example, Annika at Abney Park wrote: "I love doing athletics, basketball and any other outdoor activity." Ahia at Abney Park appeared to enjoy most sports and stated: "Football, cricket, swimming, badminton, tennis 100%." Mohammed at Central Park admitted that: "I love doing football because you get to run around." An interesting point was that 23.5 per cent (nearly a quarter of the cohort) stated that they did not 'hate' or dislike anything.

## WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE SUBJECT AT SCHOOL AND WHY?

Pupils were also asked about PE in relation to other curriculum subjects and to state their favourite subject and why they had made the choice. Of the subjects selected, just under a quarter of the cohort chose PE as their favourite subject, followed by art and maths.

Calvin at Lea Park wrote that he chose PE as his favourite subject because, "It can make you have exercise and you can have lots of fun." Michelle at Green Park chose PE, "Because we get to learn new sports and have fun, but most importantly you learn how to play the game." Ben recorded: "Because you learn about your muscles and move a lot of the time. And you learn new stuff like how to control a ball and exercise." In explaining why they had chosen PE as their favourite subject, words and phrases such as *fun*, *doing things*, *health and being fit* were all mentioned consistently. Further examples included Ryan from Central Park who said that, "PE is my favourite subject because you learn to keep yourself active." Tyreke went further and noted how he valued PE, "Because you get to exercise your body and it makes your heart beat fast and quicker." Elizabeth kept it simple and to the point and chose PE: "Because it's fun and it helps keep you fit healthy and feeling good."

## PUPIL VOICE AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLICY AND PRACTICE

It was clear when reading the children's questionnaires and talking to them that *fun* was very important to them in PE lessons. In both data sets the clear majority of responses were positive. Children frequently talked about "having fun", "enjoyment" and having the opportunity to work and "play with friends". Gul at Green Park wrote FUN in capital letters. Gwen, at the same school, also used the term and Arlene at Lea Park wrote that



she “absolutely loved cycling”. Other words that the children associated with PE were *love, like, enjoy* and *exciting*. For example, Christine at Lea Park stated, “I like PE because I love playing games.” Jessie at Green Park wrote that she chose PE: “Because it’s fun and exciting. It also makes you exercise a lot.” Stanley at the same school selected PE: “Because I am a sporty person and I love swimming.” Robert at Central Park wrote that it was, “Because it gets me outside the classroom and the games are fun.” What was also evident was the positivity with which the children talked about their favourite subjects, and although the reasons varied the language was always upbeat. The notions of fun, play, enjoyment and positivity are, it appears, important for the children. This point was not lost on Wright (2004) where the concept of happiness was explored in relation to children’s learning in primary PE.

The samples of data provided in this overview have shown that children are able to offer views on PE and health issues; that they have their own thoughts and ideas on a range of things. For example, 80 per cent said they loved games, 64.3 per cent stated they loved gymnastics, 80.9 per cent loved outdoor and adventurous activities, 73 per cent loved swimming, 38.3 per cent loved

dance and 60.9 per cent loved athletic activities. The data showed that nearly half (46.1 per cent) of the cohort felt they did not do enough PE, whereas only slightly less (45.2 per cent) felt they did the right amount of PE. What the children collectively recorded was that they wanted a larger variety of activities to be included in the PE curriculum, not more of the same traditional formats. For example, Shakeela noted, “We should have more choice of what we do in PE. We need more fun, a mix ‘n’ match of things.” Louisa at Lea Park said, “We should do more things, a bigger variety of sports, not only doing games.” Inez continued, “We don’t do enough types of sport. Ok, we did Aussie rules, which was fun, but we didn’t even do like, cricket.” These views are certainly in line with the work of Penney (2004) and Boorman (1998), where they show that different children like different sorts of activities and sports. The question that does not go away easily is that, if the children are saying they value their health and enjoy lots of physical activity, *why does PE continue to be only a foundation subject within the National Curriculum?* In 2013, when the last National Curriculum was drawn up, did the policy makers ‘miss a trick’ by not rethinking the role of PE within the curriculum? I contend that giving PE core status would have been

the greatest Olympic legacy we could have given the future generation of children.

As has been demonstrated so far, the children involved in this research were willing and able to express opinions on a range of issues. This suggests they might be able to play a greater role in informing debates about curriculum design. As Lawton (1996, 2000), Fielding (2004, 2008), Simons (1987, 1999) and White (2004, 2007) argue, it appears there is a mismatch in terms of pedagogical approaches between the National Curriculum (a transmission model) and the child’s role in their own learning. Moreover, as White argues, the real problem lies in the lack of clarity regarding the basic aims that underpin education. What common goals and aspirations are we striving for? Should they include the views and aspirations of the recipient group? Should pupils have a role to play in their own learning and should they be encouraged to enact this role and be given greater responsibility? Advocates such as Mullan (2003) argue that an educational system that focuses on the rights and responsibilities of the child will involve children in decision-making processes in all aspects of school life, and where the emphasis should not be on absorbing curriculum content alone.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been contended that there has been little or no dialogue with pupils about their views on health and PE when compared with the core subjects or with secondary schooling (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006 and Rudduck, 2007). It could be claimed that a focus on competitive team sport will be prohibitive for many primary children, as not all children enjoy competitive team games. I, like Harris (2018), have also questioned the positioning of PE within the National Curriculum framework and challenged the logic of the structure based on what the children have shared with me. Children are asking for a greater variety of activities to be offered to them (Costas, 2011) and this is considered key if they are to be encouraged to be physically active. If a curriculum that distinguishes between core and foundation subjects is to remain, then PE *must* be given core status, if we are genuinely to value what the children are telling us about PE, their health and overall wellbeing.

## CONCLUSION

Children have a voice worth listening to if given the opportunity. The children have shown that the current National Curriculum needs reviewing in terms of the positioning of PE within it. A curriculum that is based on a model from 1904 (White 2004, 2007), does not appear to recognise that children can be intrinsically involved in their own learning. If one of the re-emerging pedagogical approaches for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is for a greater emphasis on pupil voice to enlighten the curriculum debate, then perhaps now is the time to give the children, the chief stake-holders in education, the opportunity to be centrally involved in this process. It seems at best unwise, at worst invidious, not to include them in discussions about their own education, health and wellbeing when, as this research shows, they are clearly able and willing to speak for themselves if given the opportunity. ■

## THOUGHT PIECE

Following the points made by Jo Harris (2018), I wish to make three further points to support the case for making PE a core subject in the National Curriculum.

- 1 Notwithstanding what the children are telling us, moving PE to core status sends a clear and loud message to children, teachers, headteachers, governors and parents that children's health and physical activity are of paramount importance. On a personal level, I think one of the single biggest changes we have seen in the last 30 years in teaching is that we are having to educate many parents, as well as the children, as to the value of being physically active and the links to being healthy. We have seen at least two generations who have believed 'the hidden curriculum' within the National Curriculum, which suggests that, as a foundation subject, PE is not as important as the core subjects. So, is it hardly surprising that we have many inactive children and increases in childhood obesity and diabetes.
- 2 Moving PE to core status would also force Ofsted to view PE provision and delivery more closely. Of course, there are some good outside agencies involved in delivery, but my observation is that some choose the areas they want to teach, not what the children should be getting. Very few offer the broad range of activities that should be taught within the NCPE (2013). Teachers have reported to me that some lessons have been taught by unsupervised 17-18-year-olds, and this leads to all kinds of legal issues.
- 3 While the Primary PE and Sport Premium is welcomed by all schools, it is still not hard to wonder whether the government could have saved millions of pounds by rethinking PE's place in the curriculum instead of giving schools money. Although Harris (2018) does not agree with this observation, and "is not convinced that it would save any money, as core subjects receive additional attention, through funding professional developments and specialist teachers for example", she is convinced that "by making PE a core subject the money could have been used much more effectively". So, in effect, we have a mandatory foundation subject where schools have been guaranteed supportive funding until 2020. What happens after that? Would it have not been more beneficial to all our children, and a more empowering and lasting Olympic legacy, if, as Harris (2018) has argued, PE had been moved to core status from its present foundation status in 2013? However, 2018 is better late than never. The children who took part in this research would not disagree.

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