



IF PHYSICAL EDUCATION WAS A POST-COVID INITIATIVE, WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE?

Many PE staff will tell you about a curriculum vision of students enjoying lifelong physical activity. Unfortunately, the current national obesity crisis and the number of people suffering with mental health problems, tells us that lifelong physical activity is not the case for the majority of adults. Terrifyingly, children's obesity data tells us a lot of young people (about 1 in 5 by the age of 11) are already obese and on a pathway to inactivity and poor health. Furthermore, 1 in 6 school age children are reported to have a mental health problem, up from one in 10 in 2004 (NHS 2021).

The truth is the skills and knowledge to achieve lifelong participation go far beyond sports techniques and tactics, beyond fitness and leadership skills, beyond evaluating and improving skills. While these skills are all important and valuable in a PE programme, it is essential that students also gain a deep understanding of why it is so essential to be physically active, with a secure understanding of the abundant health benefits of

physical activity and are absolutely clear of the dangers of living a sedentary lifestyle.

Enjoyment is vital to participation, giving us an intent to be active. Actually, being regularly active goes far beyond 'enjoyment' of physical activity, as what happens when at age 18, or 35 we find something we enjoy more? What happens when sport is no longer free and organised by dedicated, passionate PE staff? What happens when working hours are gruelling? When future childcare responsibilities leave us tired and with little free time? When an injury or illness means we can't take part in the sport you love? Or when confidence takes a hit because we don't know anyone at the gym? Or when our role models or peer groups are inactive? We need to prepare our students for all these (very likely) scenarios they may face at times during their life, so they make time for physical activity, prioritise their physical and mental health and wellbeing, even when the barriers seem too great.



Add a global pandemic into the mix, with schools closed to many, sports facilities shut and numerous lockdowns, the challenge seems infinitely greater. We need to help students develop habits which will enable them to avoid the vicious circle of inactivity, more barriers and further inactivity.

Enjoyment, confidence and a secure, unwavering understanding of the importance of being active, together are key to lifelong participation.

So how do we prepare students for a lifetime of physical activity?

PE is so much more than skill development in a narrow range or sports, with increased performance levels as the ultimate aim, as often used to be the case. There is, of course, a big place for skill development and competition. So much confidence and enjoyment comes from skill acquisition and mastery. Exposure to a wide variety of sports and activities helps students find the activities they love. Tactical understanding is still very relevant; as well as helping with performance levels, it develops decision making and problem-solving abilities which transfer into many aspects of life. Developing fitness levels improves health, increases confidence and endurance, enabling more time to be spent being physically active. Improving leadership skills not only opens doors to be involved as a coach or an official, but also develops communication, organisation, decision making and confidence (I could go on) to be able to initiate and maintain involvement in physical activity.

We need to be explicit to students about why these elements are in our lessons. The bigger challenge is how we educate young people on the importance of physical activity and the dangers of inactivity. This needs to be engrained in our PE curriculum, for all ages. Not a one off message, but integrated into our weekly provision, a thread that runs through everything we deliver. A clear message which is also given beyond the sports pitches, endorsed by all members of staff and embedded in all aspects of teaching and learning.

What is more important than their future health?

And how can our assessment processes, so crucial to all learning, support this drive?

Assessment that helps identify strengths, monitors progress and highlights areas for development. What and how we assess in curriculum PE is just as important as what we teach and needs to go beyond

simply assessing skills, tactics and fitness levels. Assessment needs to be multidimensional and reflect the vision and aims of the curriculum. If something is important enough to be in the curriculum, we need to validate this by assessing it and ensuring the data is shared with students and parents. This poses problems itself; assessing understanding of the benefits of being active (especially if outside on a field, potentially in the rain!) is much harder than assessing performance levels during an athletics lesson. However, assessing only the times for a 100m sprint or the distance of a javelin thrower reinforces the fact that performance levels are the most important element of the PE lesson. How many people ever throw a javelin once they finish school? Not many in my experience!

At Lionheart schools we have thought carefully about how we develop innovative ways to assess knowledge and understanding using our central virtual learning environment. Designing regular multiple-choice progress checks that self-mark and are completed at home to ensure workload is not impacted, we encourage a metacognitive, self-reflective learners who are reminded of the benefits of lifelong participation.

The message that it matters less how good you are, but more how often you take part and how hard you try needs to be reiterated. We can assess how much students participate as well as how good they are, in order to build confidence about themselves and lifelong participation. We can also build confidence through assessing students on controllable factors (such as how often they take part) rather than just performance levels, which can be demoralising for some.

So how do we address the national obesity crisis, improve the nation's mental health and inspire lifelong participation in physical activity?

At Lionheart we embed a knowledge rich curriculum rooted in the benefits of exercise and the dangers of inactivity. We teach transferrable skills across all aspects of the curriculum and make this (and the reasons for this) explicit to students. Further to this, we develop assessment policies which assesses and reward factors that will increase the likelihood of lifelong physical activity, knowing that this is our moral obligation and ambition for all our children.

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