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Can ‘English Premier League’ funding for PE and school sport achieve its aims?

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ABSTRACT:

There are a number of assertions being made for a £10 m investment by the English Premier League for primary school sport. For example, it is claimed that Physical Education plus school sport can improve cognitive functioning, concentration, behaviour, educational attainment and overall physical health. However, far from being sufficient in helping to achieve these benefits and sustain long-term activity participation, for some children, Physical Education and competitive sport may actually be counterproductive. In some instances, it may switch them off from activity altogether. Therefore, we need to understand more about which elements of this scheme work, who they work for and which circumstances they work in. Fundamentally, this will only be achieved through hard evidence and robust evaluation.

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In 2014 the English Premier League (EPL) announced £10m funding for a 3 year programme (2014-2017) of primary school sport across the country.¹ This engendered a mixed response; the EPL were enthusiastic about the timing and size of this £10m investment while some members of the press labelled it as a PR stunt, comparing the funding to the vast expenditure of EPL clubs in player transfer fees.² Critics didn't reserve reproach for the EPL, detractors also questioned the propriety of any collection of private companies filling the void left by the government's underfunding of PE and school sport.³ To this end, the UK Sport approach to funding was also drawn in; they were accused of 'Olympic medal hunting'. They were also suspected of ignoring the majority of the population; who are both under-active and incapable of achieving any benchmarks for sporting eliteness.⁴ With these thoughts in mind, it is worth taking a closer look at the assertions being made for the EPL school sports scheme.

In business, market forces often drive large investments supported by easy and slick lines of argument using imprecise and exaggerated claims. In this instance the EPL might reasonably claim that it is giving the schools and school children what they want and how they want it.⁵ However, the rhetoric around the EPL investment is hyped, and metaphorically it is important that advocates have their feet held to the fire for the big claims they make. One problem of the imprecision underpinning these big claims is that they – quite wrongly - conflate PE with school sport to claim that 'they' (i.e. PE plus school sports) improve participants' cognitive functioning, concentration, behaviour, overall physical health and educational attainment.⁶ Isn't it more reasonable to expect that the different experiences that PE and school sport might represent will bring about distinctive outcomes? Equally, it would be more compelling if the evidence showed that it was the programme – and not some tangential, coincidental change – that produced any increase in physical activity. Without empirical evidence, assumptions that primary school PE - which is limited to life before age 12 - or involvement in sport - which is little more than a distant memory for most over 40 years of age -⁷ will help to tackle the onset of major lifestyle diseases, appear hyperbolic.

Moreover, the evidence that underpins many of the claims made for this new scheme has only been previously linked to regular and sustained involvement in physical activity.⁸ Ironically, on their own, PE lessons rarely produce the levels of physical activity required to generate these benefits.⁹ Indeed, there is ample short-term evidence to show that the structure and

content of PE is often unsuccessful in helping children accumulate enough of the moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity (MVPA) that enhances health. At present, children and young people (5-18 years) are recommended to engage in 60 minutes of MVPA each day.¹⁰ Further, there are limitations regarding the effectiveness of coaches working in schools, for delivering on the health agenda.¹¹ Indeed, even when academics have strictly controlled two hours of 'quality' MVPA, the evidence is inconclusive that any of the 'big' claims made for the EPL investment are achievable.¹² In essence, neither PE nor school sport is sufficiently structured to develop lifelong activity participation.

To compound this, the experiences of physical activity that stem from organised school sport and PE seems to have been central to switching off many of our long-term inactive people from any form of exercise.¹³ Central to these aversive experiences are those relating to competition and to handling high levels of unaccustomed exertion.¹⁴ This is compounded when activities entail social judgements of competence and social standing. For many inactive individuals this alone is a powerful reason not to engage. Therefore, offering more sport to individuals who don't like sport is rarely, if ever, the answer to their inactivity. Worse, it may be helping to drive the modern day epidemic of inactivity. In this understanding, it is difficult to envisage how the promotion of competitive sport will meet the needs of even a sizeable minority of our under-active individuals.

Nevertheless, emerging findings from this school sports programme have suggested that it has already *"delivered more than 66,000 PE lessons and sport sessions in 1,279 schools to over 103,000 pupils"*.¹⁵ While this seems impressive, two important questions remain; which of the specific big claims is this delivering, and what proportion of young people feel and have actually accrued these benefits from their involvement? To answer these questions would have required that funders and stakeholders invest in quality evaluation specifically designed to establish impact. Furthermore, these investigations should not only evaluate outcomes, but also the process by which the impact occurs.¹⁶ It is important to address the 'active ingredients' that make this happen to find out which elements work and which don't. Evaluators need to detail how programmes develop and progress year-on-year, and then show the hard evidence that confirms what the investment has achieved. Only when that's clear can we understand these big claims more accurately.

Additionally, evaluation should be integral to intervention design and made part of intervention mapping;¹⁷ too often evaluation is included as an afterthought. Where interventions lack a robust evaluation they risk failing to identify the overall panoply of outcomes, including those that are hard to anticipate and/or hazardous to overlook. This ill-advised practice means that stakeholders can end up making approximations and assumptions about ‘outcomes’ that are much cruder and far more unrefined than we might initially realise. School sport is replete with examples where stakeholders, using half-baked evidence from previous interventions, invest in what looks to be a powerful programme. Too often that ends with an awkward, whispered acknowledgment that the financial investment has been squandered.

Yet, there is much good in promoting physical activity, exercise and health through football. As the national game, and notwithstanding the massive spectatorship that it generates, it also supports extensive – if declining - levels of exercise in community settings.¹⁸ Ultimately, most people aspire to live well - whether or not this involves leading a healthy lifestyle - and to have the functional capacity to go about their daily lives. These are not incompatible goals, and in many circumstances these goals have the potential to be mediated through an active lifestyle fostered while at school. Schemes like that established by the ELP investment are desirable to children because they are ‘designer’ or ‘branded’, which implies that they represent an innovative approach. However, in these circumstances the level of engagement they create may only last as long as the fashion cycle. Yet to support inactive individuals in becoming more active it is helpful to think more of a ‘perpetual purchase’, rather than encouraging the pursuit of the latest trend. To do this, we need to establish effectiveness and determine the possible effects of taking action, or not. In the long run, there will always be a little bit of uncertainty because there are some processes that we don’t fully understand, but we measure scientific progress by our ability to reduce the uncertainty, and by that yardstick there is plenty of room for improvement.

Notes:

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- ¹ The Premier League, *School sports and PE initiative*
 - ² Moore, *Premier League plugging the gap in funding*
 - ³ Phillpots & Grix, *PE & school sport policy*
 - ⁴ Moore, *Premier League plugging the gap in funding*
 - ⁵ Moore, *Premier League plugging the gap in funding*
 - ⁶ The Premier League, *School sports and PE initiative*
 - ⁷ Sport England, *Active people survey*
 - ⁸ Department of Health, *Start active stay active*
 - ⁹ Fairclough et al, *Physical activity in school*
 - ¹⁰ Department of Health, *Start active stay active*
 - ¹¹ Parnell et al, *Football in the community*
 - ¹² Van Sluijs et al, *Physical activity in adolescents*
 - ¹³ Robson & McKenna, *Sports and health*
 - ¹⁴ Robson & McKenna, *Sports and health*
 - ¹⁵ The Premier League, *School sports and PE initiative*
 - ¹⁶ Pringle et al, *Premier league health*
 - ¹⁷ Ransdell et al, *Physical activity programmes*
 - ¹⁸ Zwolinsky et al, *Optimal lifestyles*

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