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## **Contemporary Policy Debate:**

### **To be (physically active), or not to be, that is the question! Special educational needs, physical education and leisure lifestyles**

**Anthony Maher, Leeds Beckett University**

The UK's coalition government released a statutory national curriculum in September 2014 that specified the programmes of study and attainment targets for each subject in all local authority-maintained mainstream schools in England (DfE, 2013). The aim of this short article is to debate the potential impact of the 2014 national curriculum physical education (NCPE) on the long-term participation in physical activity as an aspect of the leisure lifestyles of pupils identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Positive early learning experiences in mainstream PE are supposed to have a significant impact on the lifelong participation in physical activity as part of young people's leisure lifestyles (Kirk, 2005), including those with SEN.

While attempts to address lifelong physical activity as part of people's leisure often focuses on young people generally, and their experiences of PE in particular, the needs of those with SEN are rarely considered by government, schools, service providers or academics. Of course, differences in national legislation, education structures, funding mechanisms, school priorities and conceptualisations of SEN will influence the PE experiences of pupils with SEN in other countries (EADSNE, 2003) and, therefore, future lifestyles. Particular light is

cast in the direction of the UK's newest NCPE given that the position of team games and competitive sport appears to have been strengthened, rather than challenged, in mainstream secondary schools despite research suggesting that (1) it is more difficult to meet the needs and capitalise on the capabilities of pupils with SEN when these activities are delivered (Fitzgerald, 2005; Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004); and (2) that the traditional, structured and hierarchal sport-based PE curriculum is at odds with the lifestyle activities of adults, which can influence whether young people carry on participating in physical activity into adulthood (Wheaton, 2010).

### **Team games and competitive sport in the NCPE**

It is important to note, from the outset, that the roots of team games and competitive sport in British schools can be traced back a long way beyond the formulation and implementation of the first NCPE in 1992 (see, for example, Dunning and Sheard, 2005). The same has been said about sport-based PE curricular across much of Western- Europe and the Commonwealth (Kirk, 2002). Nonetheless, the inception of the NCPE in 1992 was of particular significance because it provided a statutory acknowledgement by the British government that team games and competitive sport should be prioritised in local authority-maintained secondary schools in Britain (Green, 2008). The dominant position of these activities was strengthened through subsequent revisions of the NCPE in 1995 and 2000 (Maher, 2010). It is important to note, however, that some attempt was made to broaden the range of physical activities available in PE in order to diversify the sporting repertoire of young people (Green, Smith and Roberts, 2005) as a way of stimulating a sporting interest that would last the life course. Games were also downgraded to an 'option' at Key Stage 4 (QCA, 1999) but this did little to challenge their ubiquity in British schools (Kirk, 2005).

The position of team games and competitive sport was further challenged through the NCPE 2008 (QCA, 2007). By encouraging schools to provide more challenging, inspiring and flexible approaches to PE, it was argued that young people may be able to develop skills and an interest in different forms of physical activity, thus enabling them to make informed choices about adopting a healthy, active lifestyle for life (Johnrose and Maher, 2010). In many schools, however, a team game and competitive sport culture was perpetuated by those PE teachers who had a longstanding ideological commitment to those types of physical activities.

Longitudinal research would have been required to explore the impact of a more flexible approach to PE on the physical activity participation tendencies of those young people who experienced the 2008 PE curriculum. However, the re-establishment of the dominant position of team games and competitive sport in the newest NCPE (DfE, 2013) has made such research difficult to undertake. Indeed, while the NCPE 2014 aims to develop competence to excel in a 'broad range of physical activities', a high quality PE curriculum, according to those who developed the NCPE, 'inspires all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport' (NCPE, 2013).

Unfortunately, it is too early to explore the impact of the newest PE curriculum on the views, experiences and physical activity tendencies of pupils, including those with SEN. Nevertheless, previous research relating to the influence of prioritising team games and competitive sport can be used to discuss the potential impact of the NCPE 2014 on (1) the PE

experiences of pupils with SEN; (2) their tendency to continue (or not) participating in physical activity beyond compulsory education.

### **Team games, competitive sport and including pupils with SEN**

There is a well-established body of research suggesting that one outcome of the increasing emphasis given to performance and achievement in team games and competitive sport has been that many pupils with SEN participate less frequently and in a more restricted range of physical activities *vis-à-vis* their age-peers in PE (see, for example, Fitzgerald, 2005; Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004). A large-scale study by Sport England (2001) suggested that 64 per cent of pupils with SEN in England had participated in PE on at least 10 occasions in the last year<sup>1</sup>, whereas during the same period 83 per cent of all pupils had participated in PE on at least 10 occasions. While a clear disparity in participation is clear, it is notable that (1) the research is out-dated in that two revisions of the NCPE have occurred since then; and (2) using a marker of ‘at least 10 occasions in the last year’ may mask far greater differences in the frequency of participation between those with and without SEN. No large-scale, follow-up research has been undertaken relating to the participation tendencies of pupils with SEN in PE, which is perhaps indicative of the subordination of pupils with SEN when it comes to understanding their (physical) educational opportunities and experiences (Maher, 2010). A more recent, but smaller-scale, study by Atkinson and Black (2006) suggested that only 50 per cent of the 170 pupils with SEN in their study received the government-recommended two hours or more curricular PE. What these two studies do not do, however, is explore the reasons underpinning differential opportunities in PE.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of such a low measure of participation is itself an indicator of a worrying lack of aspiration for the involvement of pupils with SEN.

Notwithstanding concerns about the inequality between the opportunities available for pupils with and without SEN in mainstream PE, it is perhaps more noteworthy that young disabled people in special schools were more likely to participate in PE than those attending mainstream schools, both 'at least once' (93 per cent and 89 per cent, respectively) and 'on more than 10 occasions' (69 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively) (Sport England, 2001). Again, Sport England (2001) do not go far enough to explore why participation figures differ so much from the perspective of those involved in attempts to develop inclusive policies and practices in PE or, indeed, the pupils themselves. What is of far greater concern is that attempts to 'mainstream' education and, thus, improve the educational experiences of pupils with SEN (DES, 1978) seems to have resulted in these pupils being further disadvantaged and subordinated, in PE at least.

Research by Fitzgerald (2005) and Smith (2004) suggested that it is common for some pupils with SEN to be withdrawn from PE (particularly if it was a team game or competitive sport) and, perhaps more notably, from their age-peers, to do physical activities separately if the pupils were unable to integrate themselves into what had been planned for the rest of the class. In a similar vein, some of the pupils with SEN interviewed by Fitzgerald *et al.* (2003a) identified a tendency for them to be involved to a much lesser extent in learning activities when team games were delivered. Thus, it appears that teachers are not doing enough to ensure that PE lessons are planned and implemented in a way that meets the needs and capitalises on the capabilities of all pupils, including those with SEN. When pupils with SEN do participate in the same physical activities as their age-peers, their involvement is often restricted by the actions of some of their *ostensibly* more able peers. For instance, using the

theoretical tools of Bourdieu to analyse embodied identities, Fitzgerald (2005) argued that pupils with SEN have experienced processes of peer-led exclusion whereby they were bypassed in certain activities, particularly in team games (during a passing move, for example) because of their seemingly inferior ability. Hence, it seems that some pupils without SEN are using their influence, which they have because of their *apparently* superior capabilities (in PE, at least) to constrain, intentionally or otherwise, the extent to which some pupils with SEN can actively participate in learning activities. Whether PE teachers are facilitating peer-led exclusion or actively challenging it is not clear from the data available. What is clear is that more needs to be done to ensure that the power differential between pupils with and without SEN is redressed so that all pupils can have enriching learning experiences in PE.

For some pupils with SEN their restricted experiences of the breadth of physical activities offered to all pupils, by schools, together with negative perceptions that both they and their age-peers have about their bodies and capabilities, is said to have a ruinous impact on their self-esteem and confidence in school life generally and PE more specifically (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b). Many of the pupils involved in research by Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) reported being embarrassed by their impairment, which was a direct result of the behaviour of their age-peers. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Fitzgerald (2005) some of the pupils with SEN suggested that they frequently experienced social isolation in PE when they participated in separate activities, which often had a detrimental impact on their social interaction with pupils without SEN. Similarly, while some of the participants in a study by Pitt and Curtin (2004) reported having a small group of friends at school, most experienced varying degrees of social isolation; all reported being both overtly and covertly bullied while at mainstream school, thus resulting in many feeling lonely and depressed (see, also,

Monchy, Pijl and Zandberg, 2004). Thus, for some pupils it seems that mainstream PE lessons, especially those that are orientated towards team games and competitive sport, are doing more to normalise segregation and fortify, rather than change, discriminatory attitudes.

### **Concluding thoughts and future directions**

If we are to believe that positive early learning experiences of mainstream PE can shape lifelong participation in physical activity (Kirk, 2005), it is not unreasonable to suggest that such negative learning experiences of PE may have contributed in some way to only 18 per cent of disabled adults taking part in physical activity once a week for 30 minutes compared to 39 per cent of non-disabled people (Sport England, 2014). The decision to reposition competitive sport at the heart of the PE curriculum, by the Coalition government of Britain, may further increase the disparity between the participation tendencies of disabled and non-disabled adults given that this type of physical activity has been found to exclude many pupils with SEN.

Future research is required that systematically analyses the impact of early PE experiences on future participation in physical activity of pupils with SEN, particularly when those experiences comprise mainly competitive sport. The proposed research will also, lest we forget, have to consider significant structural changes to physical and special education in Britain. Together with a new curriculum, the landscape of physical education teacher education (PETE) is changing in that those who aspire to enter the PE teaching profession must achieve a non-qualified teacher status (QTS) undergraduate PE degree before a one year school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) placement at a government-approved school



(DfE, 2014a). Therefore, the onus has shifted more to schools to ensure that aspiring PE teachers have the knowledge, skills, experience and confidence to create an educational culture that: (1) promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of *all pupils*; and (2) prepares *all pupils* for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life (DfE, 2013). The new SEN Code of Practice and the displacement of Statements of SEN by Education, Health and Care plans (DfE/DoH, 2014) are two other developments that may influence the PE experiences of pupils with SEN (Maher, 2013; Maher, in press; Maher and Macbeth, 2014) and, thus, their inclination to be physically active in later life.

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