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Commentary

Physical Education and Physical Activity Promotion: Lifestyle Sports as Meaningful Experiences

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Abstract: The value of embracing a physically active lifestyle has been well documented in recent times. However, despite this knowledge, physical activity levels in many western societies remain worryingly low in both adult and youth populations. Habit formation in youth is a key indicator of engagement in physical activity as an adult; therefore, maximising opportunities to develop motivation in young people is vitally important to increase the likelihood of maintaining physical activity habits as an adult. A key factor for the development of motivation is school-based physical education. This review considers the current landscape of physical education as a vehicle for physical activity promotion, and suggests that a change of approach that moves away from physical education focusing solely on sport techniques is long overdue. A culturally relevant curriculum that includes lifestyle sports, with a focus on mastery and enjoyment through a meaningful experiences approach, is proposed as a viable update to current practice.

Keywords: physical education; physical activity; motivation; lifestyle sports; youth culture; meaningful experiences

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1. Introduction

Participation in physical activity (PA) has been regularly highlighted as a vitally important aspect of health and wellbeing across the globe [1]. In 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) approved a new Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018–2030 [2] and adopted a new voluntary global target to reduce levels of physical inactivity in adults and adolescents by 15% by 2030. In a recent review of the WHO guidelines, Bull et al. [3] suggested that these new guidelines provide clear, evidence-based, recommendations on how PA provides a range of health benefits and on the potential risks of sedentary behaviours. Physical inactivity is considered one of the leading causes of mortality across the globe, leading to an increased risk of a range of cardiovascular diseases and cancers [4,5]. Indeed, physical inactivity has been highlighted as a major cause of premature death across the globe; it is estimated that 5.3 million of the 57 million global deaths in 2008 were associated with physical inactivity [6]. Habit formation in youth has been highlighted as a key predictor of adult PA [7–10]. It is, therefore, imperative that we seek to provide positive experiences for young people that maximise the likelihood that they will see value and enjoyment in continuing to engage in PA as they progress into adulthood.

Physical education (PE) has been regarded as a crucial vehicle for the promotion of a physically active lifestyle [11–14]. As a compulsory subject in schools in the United Kingdom from the age of 4–16 years, the window of opportunity here is vast. However, the effectiveness of current practice in achieving the aim of encouraging a physically active lifestyle has been questioned [15–19]. The major issues raised centre around the pedagogies utilized in PE and the relevance of the curriculum to the youth of today.

This review aims to consider how we might encourage more young people to take part in physical activity as part of an enriching lifestyle, specifically using PE in schools as a vehicle. Furthermore, it argues that although lifetsyle sports have a place in PE curricula, it is important that the pedagogies associated with these activities are aligned to the ethos and culture experienced by participants in real-world settings.

2. The Health of Young People: A Rising Concern

Within the United Kingdom (UK) the health of our young people has been a rising concern for several years, with the most recent guidance from the home nations Chief Medical Officers [20] highlighting a range of benefits associated with regular PA, including improved learning and attainment, better mental health and cardiovascular fitness, and healthy weight status. Recent figures from the Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People Survey [21] highlighted some worrying trends, with less than half of all children undertaking the recommended average of 60 min PA per day and nearly a third only reaching half of this amount. This has also been exacerbated by recent changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic [22]. PA levels are also shown to deteriorate with age, with a decline from key stage three (ages 11–14 years) to key stage four (ages 14–16 years). It is worth noting that the 2019–2020 results may have been partially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, it was necessary to revisit the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 data, these figures yielded very similar findings with only minor fluctuations. Additional recent data from the National Health Service [23] only deepens concerns surrounding children's health, with 1 in 5 reception children (age 4–5 years) categorized as overweight or obese; this figure rises to 1 in 3 by the time children reach year 6 (age 10–11 years), and the trend is worsening from one year to the next. The large sample sizes within these reports, alongside robust methodologies and data tracking over more than three years, provide confidence regarding the accuracy of the data, thus allowing firm conclusions to be drawn. Although some elements of self-report measures for PA are not without problems, it is more likely that participants overestimate their PA levels than underestimate [24]. Similar figures have been reported in other countries, with the WHO reporting that more than a quarter of the world's adult population (1.4 billion adults) is insufficiently active, with no improvement in global levels of physical activity since 2001 [25]. They also advocate the use of quality physical education that supports children to develop behavioural patterns that will keep them physically active throughout their lives [25]. This global perspective is further enhanced by the latest United Nations sustainable development agenda, with clear links to goal 3 (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and goal 4 (ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) [26]. PE provision has been advocated as a key site to help bring these goals to fruition [27].

It is unsurprising that with relatively low PA levels, sedentary behaviour is becoming an ever-growing concern. Recent systematic reviews, including longitudinal studies, concluded that there was little convincing evidence of a clear relationship between childhood sedentary behaviour and various health outcomes [28,29]. However, sedentary behaviour does track from early childhood to adult life [30,31] and for adults, evidence for an adverse relationship between sedentary behaviour and ill health leading to premature death is emerging [32,33]. Therefore, increased sedentary behaviour among young people remains a major public health concern, and seeking ways to reduce it seems highly appropriate.

With reduced levels of PA and increased prevalence of sedentary behaviour, it is perhaps logical that children are also becoming much weaker, negatively impacting motor competence, which is subsequently limiting engagement and enjoyment of PA. Recent research [34] tracked trends in the muscular fitness of UK-based 10-year olds from 1988–2014, with the results suggest declining levels of muscular fitness in both genders which also appear to be accelerating in the last decade. A simultaneous drop in self-reported PA suggests that these trends could be related to decreasing levels of habitual PA in children, and raises concerns around the long-term physical condition that these young people may face as they mature.

In addition to the obvious concerns regarding the physical health of young people, more recently, apprehensions have been raised regarding their mental health. Data suggest that the mental health of many young people is far from optimal. In 2019, Deighton et al. [35] reported a significant number of young peopledisplay signs ofpoor mental health (e.g., anxiety or depression), and this trend appears to be increasing in the wake of the

COVID-19 pandemic [36]. Evidence from a range of sources suggests the positive impact PA can have on mental health, including a reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression alongside improvements in self-esteem [37–39]. This adds further weight to the argument that PA promotion in youth is a key priority.

In response to the concerns listed above, the UK's CMOs have recently updated guidance for PA in youth populations [20], highlighting the need for regular PA, but also PA that is classed as moderate to vigorous (i.e., the type of activities that leave you out of breath). They also reference the need to engage in activities that build muscular fitness and bone strength, as well as reducing sedentary behaviour. Specific reference to PE is also central to the guidelines, stating that PE plays a key role in the development of movement competence, and supports the development of children's skills and confidence to be physically active. In a similar vein, Sport England recently launched a new strategy—Uniting the Movement [40], whose central focus is on providing positive experiences at an early age to help build the foundations for an active life. If children and young people have experiences that are fun, positive and give them a sense of confidence, they are more likely to want to be active in the future. This is key for educators working with young people to understand, to maximize the opportunity they have to provide a solid foundation for a physically active lifestyle.

In summary, several key issues can be identified through the literature concerning the health and wellbeing of young people: (i) levels of PA are low, with the majority of young people not meeting national minimum guidelines; (ii) children are becoming both heavier and weaker, partially as a result of declining PA and increased sedentary behavior; (iii) PA levels are declining as children progress through adolescence; (iv) there are increasing concerns surrounding the mental health of young people; and (v) habits set in youth can provide the foundations for a more physically active lifestyle.

3. Time for Change in Physical Education?

The core purpose and benefits gained from PE are contentious issues within the literature [41–43], with claims centred around personal development, social skills, academic achievement and wellbeing. However, whilst there has been some contention around the broad range of benefits that could be gained from PE, health promotion has remained a central focus across the globe [44–46] Schools, and in particular PE, have been identified as a significant site for the development of a physically active lifestyle [11–14]. However, current practice has been seen as being ineffective at achieving this goal, which makes up one of the four key aims of the English national curriculum for pupils to "lead healthy, active lives" [47].

Green [12] (p. 357) highlights that it is widely believed that PE "is or, at the very least, can be a crucial vehicle for enhancing young people's engagement with physically active recreation in their leisure and, in the longer run, over the life-course." However, he goes on to note that the current research around this topic is ambiguous, and that seeing the relationship as causational is too simplistic, with many other elements impacting PA participation in addition to PE experiences. He does, however, state that to maximize the potential of PE to influence future PA habits, there needs to be better alignment of curricula with the changing interests of young people, noting the substantial growth of lifestyle and informal sports such as cycling, swimming and health-related exercise. These lifestyle activities have not only experienced the most substantial growth in participation among young people, but also remain the types of activities with the most regular participants [48]. This is certainly worthy of note in the future design of PE programmes that have not traditionally embraced some of these activities.

The themes discussed above have been echoed by many other scholars across the globe. For example, Tinning and Fitzclarence [17] presented the view that PE could be described as a subject in 'crisis', and that children are bored and disaffected in lessons. This was recently supported by Petrie [18] and Sullivan [19], who argued that PE is still being presented in very traditional ways and is progressively narrowing its focus on traditional sports, but

its future should not be constrained by outdated or traditional practices. The slow (or in some cases nonexistent) pace of change has been attributed to several factors, such as policy [49] and teacher workload [50], but perhaps the most notable is the socialisation of PE teachers [51]. The recruitment and shaping of young professionals are heavily influenced by their own educational experiences and their professional socialization in their early careers. This is often shaped by the experienced teachers they work alongside, leading to inherited practices and often a washout effect of the more innovative thinking which was gained during training.

Trying to better understand the relationship between school-based PE and lifelong (or the intention for lifelong) PA is something worthy of further exploration. Engström [9] did just that, illustrating whether differences in sports experiences during childhood and adolescence are reflected in exercise habits in middle age. Having collected initial data in 1968 from school children, he later followed this up with a contact on six separate occasions, with the main data being drawn from a questionnaire in 2007 (there was a 77% response rate to the questionnaires at this stage), 39 years after the original data collection. The results indicated that sport habitus, as reflected in school, PE grades, through attitudes towards physical exertion and attitudes to the subject of PE, also proved to have a significant association with later exercise habits. Whilst there may have been some shifts in society and education during this long period, the notion that childhood experiences can be a significant influence on future PA habits across a long period is worthy of note.

In more recent work, Ladwig and colleagues [52] analyzed the PE experiences of over 1000 adults through an online survey comparing their experiences in PE with current PA habits. The results indicated that PE memories from childhood and adolescence have a small-to-moderate association with attitudes, intentions, and time spent being sedentary as an adult. Interestingly, negative experiences were often found to be more powerful and impactful, with key themes around embarrassment, lack of enjoyment and anxiety coming to the fore. On a more positive note, enjoyment and feelings of competence were associated with more positive memories, and also a greater likelihood to engage in PA as an adult. Whilst the sample was relatively small compared to the population of the USA (it was considered representative), the findings here help demonstrate at least some relationship between PE experiences in youth and PA habits in adulthood.

Regarding the current state of PE practices, Kirk [53,54] presented a somewhat scathing review, noting that, far from being relevant to the 21st century, PE today (physical education-as-sport-techniques) has been scarcely relevant for the previous 30 years. In his 2010 work, he presented three possible futures: more of the same, radical reform or extinction. Whilst more of the same may appear to be the easy option, it would be unwise based on the evidence presented thus far, i.e., that PE in its current form is not leading to the widespread uptake of PA among young people in their own time or beyond the school years. Therefore, it seems logical that some kind of reform of current practice is necessary if we are to reliase the ambition of PE laying the foundations for a physically active life.

Currently, there seems to be a clash between PE and the place of PA in young people's lives beyond school. In an attempt to resolve this, we may need to rethink the nature of school PE and, in line with Tinning and Fitzclarence [17], consider the possibilities for a postmodern curriculum in PE.

4. Meaningful Experiences and Lifestyle Sports

One body of work that has come to the fore in recent times is centred on meaningful experiences (ME) in youth sport and PE [55–59]. The authors build on the work of Kretchmar [60], defining "meaningful" as something that holds personal significance or value to the participant; they propose that by providing experiences seen as being more meaningful, participants are more likely to pursue PA in their own time and throughout life [55]. Highlighting the work of Teixeira, et al. [61], they conclude that those who commit to lifelong PA tend to do so for the intrinsic motivational benefits of participation (such as personal meaningfulness, challenge, satisfaction, and joy). In their original review of the

literature [55], they identified the common features that contribute to a ME in PE and youth sport, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Features of Meaningful Experiences in Youth Sport and Physical Education.

Feature	Description
Social interaction	Interaction with others including friends, peers and teachers was identified as contributing to a meaningful experience. In contrast feelings of isolation or being left out contributed to a lack of meaning.
Fun	A perception of fun appears to be an important motivating factor for many young people. Perceptions of fun for different groups vary so practitioners need to understand how this concept is perceived in a given context. Challenge and avoidance of boredom, as well pupil-centred pedagogies appear to have a positive impact on the notion of fun.
Challenge	Engagement in activities that provided an appropriate challenge for participants was noted as another important component of a meaningful experience. Task difficulty is key to appropriate challenge allowing pupils to complete tasks that are optimally challenging (e.g., requires effort, concentration, skill) is an important factor here.
Competition	For some participants, an element of competition can be a motivating factor whilst for others it is not. PE teachers should carefully consider how competition is presented. Competition might not be for everyone or appropriate at all times. Allowing some choice in this area is perhaps key.
Motor Competence	Participants' experiences in PE were more positive when students' perceptions of their motor competence were high. Pitching activities at the right level and utilising praise and encouragement and creating a supportive social climate were identified as important.
Personally relevant learning	Participants can recognize the importance of what they were learning and could make explicit connections between their current PE and sport experiences and future aspects of daily living outside of the school or community. An element of choice helped to increase feelings of personal relevance

In addition to the features detailed in Table 1, meaningful experiences are enhanced by the use of two key pedagogical principles [59]. The first of these is the use of democratic approaches that value the voice of the pupil, offer inclusivity and allow connections to be made between what happens in the PE environment and the outside world. Elements of choice and autonomy are central here. The second principle is the use of goal setting and reflection as key elements to enhance meaningfulness; this allows pupils to set themselves motivating and relevant challenges and to have the opportunity to reflect on what makes their experiences personally meaningful. The features above, alongside the pedagogical principles, are naturally inherent in many lifestyle activities.

One area that is key to enhancing meaningfulness, and therefore, to increase the likelihood that long-term motivation will be developed, is designing curricula that align with the changing interests of youth today [62–66]. Addressing the concern that current curricula lack relevance to many young people, it is worth looking at society more broadly in order to see where young people's interests are growing [12,67]. Several scholars have recently highlighted the notion that traditional sports are not for all, they never have been and they never will be [62–65,68,69]; therefore, in the words of Kirk [53,54], it could be argued that PE requires some sort of "radical reform" to bring it into the twenty-first century.

One area of activity that has seen exponential growth in recent years has been in lifestyle or alternative activities; these have been highlighted as one of the mega-trends of the twenty-first century [67–74]. Examples of activities that have emerged in this category over recent times include parkour, skate sports, various forms of cycling as well other outdoor pursuits such as paddle boarding and rock climbing. In their analysis of the features of some of these activities, Gilchrist and Wheaton [48,73] highlighted how they move away from traditional sport discourses and have been characterized by their rejection of the 'achievement sport' culture. The activities in this genre typically demonstrate high levels of commitment and time, are largely about participation (not spectating) and attract participants from increasingly diverse backgrounds (populations which current provisions within PE curricula are ineffective at captivating). There are usually strong links to a lifestyle, subcultures and identity that further support ongoing commitment to the activities, often associated with a robust social element with a focus on individual mastery over social comparison [67–74]. With the characteristics highlighted above, along with the growing popularity of these activities, there is a sound argument that they should begin to feature more prominently with PE, with the potential to promote better levels of ongoing engagement than many traditional sports [62–65,68,69]. Linking to the features of meaningful experiences in PE and youth sports [55], it is clear that for many young people, lifestyle activities are personally relevant, provide an appropriate level of challenge, have strong social elements, require good levels of motor competence and are viewed as fun. The fact that many of the activities under the lifestyle umbrella reject formal competition often adds to their appeal, as we know that competition can be an element of PE curricula that disengages many young people [75–77], particularly those not classed as "sporty".

The implementation of more diverse activities in PE has been seen in several small-scale studies [78–82], and has included activities such as parkour, cycling, zumba and outdoor pursuits (including watersports, climbing and navigation). The findings from these studies have consistently been positive in terms of pupil engagement, enjoyment and most notably, intention to participate in the future, often with the added benefit of reaching pupils who are typically uninterested in traditional sports. The ability of such activities to engage hard to reach groups was noted in McNamee and Timken's study [81], where teachers highlighted that the uniqueness of activities helped to "even the playing field", with the potential to "break the monotony," elicit a "boost of energy" and allow less competitive children "have their chance to shine".

Vasily et al. [82] implemented a unit of cycling-based activities with two groups of 10–11-year-olds over two years in an international school based in Saudi Arabia. He was aiming to use the features and pedagogical principles of meaningful PE to shape the unit delivery. Data were gathered from the teacher (who was the lead author) through interviews and analyses of blog post reflections, teaching resources, and tweets related to the unit. Whist noting the challenges of implementing pedagogical change, such as the difference between intended and enacted practice and maintaining the fidelity of the approach, positive findings were evident, with several students seeking to transfer practice from PE into their own time through recreational and extracurricular cycling. What was interesting was that one of the features of meaningful PE came to the fore, the element of challenge, and finding "just right challenge". Several areas enabled meaningful approaches to be enacted, i.e., the notion of meaningful PE aligning with the teacher's philosophy, particularly, in terms of embracing students' points of view in the unit design. Another area that allowed the approach to succeed was a school culture that embraced student autonomy, as well as the physical nature of the site that enabled plenty of options for a cycling unit. Whilst the research showed positive outcomes, it is, of course, very small scale and context-dependent, and there was also no control group for comparison. Whilst elements of pupil responses were included through teacher observations and reflections, no data were directly collected from the children.

What has become clear in research to date is that aligning the pedagogies associated with learning these activities in the real world with how they are taught in PE is crucially

important to provide a realistic experience and maximize the transition from PE to self-motivated PA. Recent research suggested that learning in these activities is largely informal, self-regulated and indivudalistic [83–85], with less reliance on coaches and teachers. With this in mind, the pedagogic approaches outlined in the meaningful PE literature (goal setting, democratic appracohes and reflection) provide a suitable framework to apply to PE settings for the integration of these type of activities.

In conclusion by combining culturally relevant activities such as lifestyle sports with a complimentary pedagogical approach (informed by meaningful experiences), there is huge potential for PE to take a positive step forward and better serve the needs of the youth of today. This could represent a small step toward encouraging more young people to enjoy and value being physically active, and to gain many of the wide-ranging benefits that are associated with this.

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