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Physical education teacher perspectives of implementing a concept curriculum and their motivations for curriculum change

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ABSTRACT

This research explores teachers' perspectives on adopting a Concept Curriculum in Physical Education (PE) as an alternative approach to a prevailing performative skills-based model. The research aimed to identify teachers' motivations for change, the early impact on teaching and learning, and their future plans. An online qualitative survey, structured around a reflective model of questioning What, So What and Now What, was completed by 11 PE teachers who had implemented the Concept Curriculum for PE in their schools. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and presented as a playscript, a form of ethnodrama, to authentically capture teacher voice. Findings, discussed under the themes of Subject Transformation, Holistic Learning Experience, and Professional Matters, indicated that the Concept Curriculum repositioned PE from a performance-focused subject to one characterised by greater meaning, purpose, and inclusion. Teachers reported a personal sense of renewed purpose and noted significant positive shifts in students, including increased engagement, enjoyment and confidence, particularly among previously disengaged or 'lower-ability' students. To conclude, we argue that while the Concept Curriculum can offer a transformational model for PE in schools; however, several contextual challenges exist with implementation, including professional and personal attitudes of teachers, school logistics and the need for ongoing professional learning.

KEYWORDS

Physical education; concept curriculum; curriculum design; ethnodrama

Introduction

A performative, skills-based Physical Education (PE) curriculum model continues to be the prevailing approach adopted by schools in the UK, US and Australia (Kirk, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2012), although this is not universal. Recent curriculum developments, such as the Curriculum for Wales and Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, reflect a broader shift towards more holistic approaches that position physical competence

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alongside health, wellbeing and wider developmental outcomes (Education Scotland, 2017; Welsh Government, 2022). Many scholars highlight the benefits of such a curriculum, arguing that motor skill development can increase physical activity among children (Chen et al., 2017; Faigenbaum et al., 2015), provide social and emotional benefits (McKenzie et al., 1998), and offer a more straightforward framework for assessing student development (Kelly et al., 2004). This approach aims to develop pupils' physical competence and confidence through distinct activities (Bailey et al., 2009), typically centred on fitness or sport. A priority focus for this approach is on 'learning the skills and understanding required for participation in physical activities, knowledge of one's own body, and its range of and capacity for movement' (Bailey et al., 2009, p. 72).

However, advocates of the skills-based curriculum have faced criticism for being overly instrumental in their approach, delivering highly structured, teacher-led lessons governed by a universal goal of increasing physical activity through a linear conception of learning based on measurable outcomes (Olson et al., 2017). Critics warn that such a model risks creating a 'skill drill' culture, where individuals are ranked by ability against incremental benchmarks. This approach has been cautioned against as it can lead to disengagement and even marginalisation of less-skilled students (Quay & Peters, 2008). While consensus exists on the irrefutable health benefits of physical activity, including positive associations with mental and emotional wellbeing (Dhuli et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2022) and the intra/interpersonal processes that contribute to cognitive development (Girme et al., 2023; O'Connor et al., 2012), debate remains over how these benefits are best realised in PE. The social dimensions of physical activity, such as teamwork, empathy, communication and leadership, can also foster positive personal and social behavioural change (Bailey et al., 2009; Long & Sanderson, 2002; Opstoel et al., 2019). Consequently, the debate surrounding curriculum models is less about the value of physical activity and more about how physical activity is experienced by learners. There is growing concern that the prioritisation of competitive sport and an 'ethos of elitism' (Boyle et al., 2008, p. 6) has frustrated many PE teachers who continue to witness the negative impacts of performance-led curricula first-hand (Sullivan, 2021).

It is argued that competitive sport can disengage students from physical activity, with potential lifelong consequences (Eliasson & Johansson, 2021; Griggs & Fleet, 2021). Balancing performance optimisation and inclusive participation remains a persistent tension within PE departments. Jung et al. (2016) note that competitive school sport has dominated UK physical culture since the 1950s, further reinforced by the Labour government's 'A Sporting Future for All' strategy (DCMS, 2000) and the current English National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), both of which emphasise competition in the purpose of study and curriculum aims. Ennis (2017) argues that this pervasive discourse overshadows the broader role of physical activity across the child's lifecourse, a particularly concerning issue amid rising obesity (NHS Digital, 2021), chronic illness (The Health Foundation, 2023) and mental health challenges (British Medical Association, 2023). Notably, Sport England (2015) reported that only 10% of students identify as 'sports enthusiasts', further questioning its prominence as a central curriculum offer. As Whitehead (2010) cautions, negative experiences of PE can affect long-term engagement and undermine physical literacy, defined as 'the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take part in physical activities for life' (IPLA, 2017). Given strong evidence that regular physical activity supports

cardiovascular fitness, mental health, and learning, PE is uniquely positioned to nurture a lifelong joy of movement and physical activity (Griggs & Randall, 2025), but increasingly educators are asking whether their current curriculum design is fit for purpose in achieving these aims and are potentially looking for more effective and inclusive alternatives (Sullivan, 2021).

Conceptual learning in PE

A concept-based PE curriculum offers an alternative to the performance-focused model, replacing narrow, skills-oriented objectives with opportunities for all students to succeed (PE Scholar, 2022). Conceptual PE initially centred on teaching concepts, principles, self-management, and consumer skills to promote healthy lifestyles (Corbin, 2021). Introduced in US high schools in the late 1970s, with a health and fitness orientation, it has since evolved to encompass broader themes of personal growth, citizenship, movement, challenge and competition. This approach leverages PE's unique position within the curriculum to develop a wider set of life skills beyond technical performance or purely health-related goals.

By exploring 'threshold concepts' that 'enable students to look at problems in completely new ways' (Chambers & Duffy, 2020, p. 26), a conceptually designed curriculum can foster positive self-identity by enhancing meaning and sustained engagement in physical activity (Ennis, 2017). PE's distinctive subject matter, learning environment and teacher–pupil relationships (McCuaig, 2012) create fertile ground for social and emotional learning (Capel & Leask, 2003). Within conceptual learning, these opportunities are situated in authentic environments, often involving peer interaction, skill application and game play (Chambers et al., 2020). As Kirk (2013) asserts, conceptual learning positions sport and physical activity as vehicles for conceptual understanding rather than as the final goal. This shift enables PE to teach life skills that are meaningful to students, while cultivating physical literacy through positive, inclusive experiences. Success criteria thus celebrate attitude and progress rather than performance and ability, reflecting research suggesting that positive PE experiences are shaped by challenge, social interaction, relevance and a sense of belonging (Beni et al., 2017).

Physical education concept curriculum framework (Sullivan, 2021)

The Physical Education (PE) Concept Curriculum offers a contemporary pedagogical framework designed to reorient the subject away from traditional, performance-dominated, and multi-sport models towards a highly inclusive, student-centred approach (Sullivan, 2021). Central to this framework is a philosophical shift wherein physical activity and sport function as the pedagogical vehicles for learning rather than the final instructional destinations (Sullivan, 2021). By intentionally mapping lessons to universal human and character concepts, such as resilience, empathy, and collaboration, the framework provides an equitable platform for achievement that engages learners independent of their current physical abilities (Sullivan, 2021).

In practice, students initially acquire a conceptual definition at the outset of a lesson, explicitly connect that concept to their physical experience during targeted, active

teachable moments, and ultimately transfer that understanding to external life contexts, including other academic subjects and personal environments (Sullivan, 2021).

This approach deliberately expands the traditional parameters by operationalising four key structural pillars aimed at ensuring students remain (1) **A**ctive for sustained periods, helping them (2) **B**uild positive relationships with exercise, developing physical (3) **C**ompetence, and encouraging them to (4) **D**evelop character (Sullivan, 2021). Consequently, student learning objectives and subsequent assessments are organised across a holistic 'Know, Show, Grow' matrix, which systematically aligns the cognitive, physical and affective domains to ensure comprehensive student development (Sullivan, 2021).

The aim of this paper is to present research exploring teachers' reflections on the adoption and implementation of a PE Concept Curriculum. Specifically, it investigates teachers' motivations for change, the early impact on teaching and learning, and their future plans for PE within their school contexts. Therefore, this research aims to answer the following research questions: Research Question 1: What are the motives that underpin curriculum change? And Research Question 2: To what extent did the adoption of the concept curriculum approach meet the curriculum change aims?

Methodological design and analysis

Consistent with research that is aimed at capturing individual experiences and insights from professionals who are placed across geographically dispersed contexts, we adopted an online qualitative survey to gather data. The online survey was disseminated via an online PE network/website and shared with teachers who had started to implement a concept curriculum approach to PE curriculum design. The survey was structured using the Rolfe et al. (2001) reflective model, which prompted three guiding questions: What? So what? and now what? This approach was designed to scaffold purposeful reflection with participants before, during, and after the implementation of the PE Concept Curriculum in their schools. As Young et al. (2022, p. 462) contend, this framework extends beyond a critique of technical rationality; it actively fosters debate and discussion, while also encouraging the formulation of proposals for future actions and iterations through both objective and imaginative discourse.

The survey instrument was developed using Google Forms, a web-based platform for creating surveys and digital forms. This tool had previously been used with participants during the PE Concept Curriculum training sessions, therefore ensuring familiarity of use. In total, 14 questions were asked to provide insight into:

- how the PE Concept Curriculum differs from current/previous provision
- how pupils and school professionals have responded to the change in curriculum
- how the school's PE offer has evolved as a result of a curriculum change
- intended next steps for PE in their school

Table 1 presents the survey structure, organised around Rolfe et al.'s (2001) three reflective questions.

Table 1. Survey structure, based upon Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model.

WHAT were you doing before the concept curriculum?
What was your previous curriculum intent/vision for PE?
How was your previous curriculum designed and structured?
What was working well and what was successful?
What was not working or needed improvement?
How did you find out about the concept curriculum
SO WHAT drew you to the concept curriculum?
What did you find appealing about the concept curriculum?
What did you hope the concept curriculum would achieve for your pupils/context?
How have your colleagues responded to the concept curriculum approach (Senior Leadership/Department/Colleagues)?
How have the pupils responded to a concept curriculum approach?
NOW WHAT is your PE offer like and what are your next steps?
How does your curriculum differ now?
What is working well?
What improvements are still required/what are your next steps?
What support do you require to continue to enhance your PE offer?

Recruitment and participants

A convenience sampling approach was adopted to identify participants for the data collection phase. All teachers who subscribed to PE Scholar's Concept Curriculum were invited to take part in the research. Invitations were sent out via email individually to each participant, with a survey link attached to the email. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the lead and last author's institution. Prior to data collection, written consent was obtained from all participants. In total, 11 participants agreed to take part and completed the online survey; this included three male and eight female participants. Eight participants were located in England, two in Thailand and one in Wales (see Table 2).

Methodological approach

For over two decades, scholars in the fields of sport, exercise and PE have used narrative inquiry to present their data in creative and engaging ways. Approaches have included the use of poetry, drama, fictional narratives and autobiographical accounts (Cassidy et al., 2015; McMahon et al., 2017; Mcveagh et al., 2020; Rinehart, 2010; Sparkes & Part-

Table 2. Participant overview.

Participant	Gender	Age phase	Type of school	Location	What is your role within the school?
A	F	Primary	State School	England	PE lead/Class Teacher
B	F	Middle school (year 5–8)	State School	England	Head of PE
C	F	Secondary	Independent School	England	Director of Sport, Health & Outdoor Education
D	F	Secondary	State School	England	Head of Department
E	F	Secondary	State School	England	Head of PE
F	M	Secondary	State School	England	Head of PE
G	F	Secondary	State School	England	Assistant Principal
H	M	Secondary	State School	Wales	Director of Sport and Wellbeing
I	F	Secondary/Post 16	State School	England	HOD PE/Associate Assistant Principal
J	M	EYFS, Primary & Secondary	Independent International School	Thailand	PE Teacher
K	F	EYFS, Primary and Secondary	Independent International School	Thailand	Whole School PE Teacher

ington, 2003). A narrative approach was chosen for this current study as a way to explore teachers' experiences and reveal personal perspectives on delivering a Concept Curriculum within their schools. We employed Creative Analytical Practices (CAP), specifically using ethnodrama, a written form of CAP, to present the findings in line with other scholars. CAP is understood to be an overarching term used to represent different kinds of writing, as well as alternative kinds of arts-based and performance research practices (Richardson, 2000). In essence, and importantly for the purpose of this paper, it ensures that the autoethnographic approach of this research, and the complexity of lived experience, is brought to the fore (McMahon et al., 2017). Specifically, CAP presented a creative way of using the written form to communicate the complexity of curriculum experience with a wide-ranging audience, including teaching professionals. For instance, McMahon et al. (2017) used ethnodrama to explore elite swimmers' self-presentation, integrating visual media, direct quotes, and autoethnographic data. Similarly, McVeagh et al. (2020) drew upon a playscript narrative to depict primary PE teachers' experiences of implementing an outsourced curriculum in primary schools. Smith (2017) explains that drawing upon the quotes, thoughts, stories and practices into a theatrical script has the capacity to enhance the richness of the data collected and analysed. We adapted techniques from these studies to develop our own script writing, which captured the participants' perspectives and experiences on implementing the Concept Curriculum through the context of a professional development workshop. The interpretative power of the playscript as a concept transverses several areas of the paper simultaneously. Firstly, it provides an authentic account of the teachers' experiences, utilising their voice directly and in a genuine way. Secondly, it offers a form of storytelling to engage a diverse readership, notably a professional audience. Finally, the structure of a playscript illustrates how professional development can be used to facilitate discussion around curriculum change.

Data analysis

A detailed analysis of the data was undertaken prior to scriptwriting. Owing to its flexibility within qualitative research and its emphasis on researcher reflexivity and creative theoretical engagement, Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyse patterns (themes) within the data (Ahmed et al., 2025; Pearson et al., 2025). This process informed the development of key ideas, dialogue excerpts, and character construction for the playscript.

The analysis of the data was shaped by four broad phases. In the first phase, two coders engaged in an iterative and collaborative process of data familiarisation and coding. First, they reviewed the raw data independently to generate initial codes vertically within individual questions (see Table 3) and then horizontally across questions (see Table 4), meeting after each review with movement between the raw data, codes and themes.

In the second phase, emerging themes were collaboratively refined and cross-checked against the dataset. The third phase involved the agreed codes and themes being reviewed by additional researchers with the research team to ensure coherence and authenticity. The themes that emerged from the coding process were brought together to create three mega themes and informed the three acts within the playscript (see Table 5). Direct quotes from the survey were woven into scenes, ensuring an authentic portrayal.

Table 3. Initial vertical coding by individual question.

Question	Codes	Example data segments	Overarching theme
1	Traditional sports; motor skills; physical fitness; physical development; physical activity; physical literacy; uncertainty (despite a clear focus on the physical)	'For students to develop a positive relationship with physical activity and see physical activity as an enjoyable activity that they can be successful at'. (J) 'There was not one in place. We were muddling along doing a more traditional skills based curriculum. We had SOW from a variety of schools and there was no cohesion to what we delivered'. (D)	Physical as a primary focus
2	Facilities/logistics; traditional sporting model; Head of department/subject leader	"Traditional sports. Skill centered. PE timetable revolving around the most able pupils extra curricular success." (B) 'Previously I had picked up a traditional sport-based, competitive curriculum – teaching techniques, strategies etc' (H)	A historical replicable process
3	(High) ability; engagement; enjoyment; progress; teaching and learning (quality); extra curricular; breadth and balance	'Balance of breadth and depth was good, excellent teaching & learning, challenge within lessons, teachers incorporating personal character development within lessons'. (C) 'Participation in lessons was high, very few students opting out' (I) 'Uptake in extra curricular sports was high. Students enjoy participating in physical activity in school'. (K)	Success for the most able
4	Meaningful and value; (Un)Inclusive High physical ability; assessment; repetition; achievement	'Keeping children motivated and having a sense of pride in PE lessons'. (A) 'The majority of pupils saw PE as a place where the most successful pupils get rewarded and they were just spare parts'. (B)	Questioning purpose
5	Social Media; Internet; PE organisations; Individual people; books	'Heard about it from another school' (E) 'Through a friend and also reading around it on social media' (H)	Networks
6	Holistic; PE for all children; educational value; personal philosophy; Ofsted/SLT; developed by practitioners; student motivation; adaptability	'The element that all children can be successful in the PE lesson at all times'. (A) 'I am also a big believer that PE is physical EDUCATION and there is an E in PE, so the know addressed that for me also'. (B) 'The holistic nature'. (G)	Addressing a need
7	Meaning/purpose; engagement; PE lessons; extracurricular; connects to the wider school; transferable skills; positive relationship with activity; achievement; a different PE experience	'The "sporty ones" were able to challenge their characters and prepare them better for sporting pressure in their future, ultimately making them more equipped and better performers'. (C) 'More success in PE lessons for more students (not just skills focused). More positive experiences with physical activity for more students, promoting life long participation'. (G)	An effective curriculum
8	Positive SLT; department colleagues; everyone; Ofsted; slow start; change; misunderstanding; reluctance; evidence informed; collaborative; empowering	Positive response on the whole. Some teachers struggled to link the concept to the activity, even though I took barriers away like not being descriptive about when you had to include that concept within the unit – they struggled with this (C) 'The department was sceptical at first, but willing to try. The fear of the unknown and a different approach made them nervous'. (D) 'Department took a year to buy-in to this new curriculum. Whole department is now on board. SLT are fully supportive'. (E)	Journey of cultivating change

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued

Question	Codes	Example data segments	Overarching theme
9	Engagement; participation; enjoyment; positive; not noticed; didn't understand it; behaviour change	'Children enjoy the diversity of the curriculum and want to participate'. (A) 'To some extent they have not noticed – they are still active and doing PE. They know that we question in a different way'. (D) 'Students seem more motivated and enjoy receiving feedback that extends beyond their physical performance' (J) "THEY LOVE IT! ! ! ! I have had some of my best lessons delivering with this approach'. (K)	No longer for the few
10	More inclusive; improved physical literacy; structure and organisation; content; assessment enjoyment; engagement; autonomy	'More students are accessing extra-curricular activities which include a spectrum of abilities'. (E) 'Our curriculum is now geared towards our learners' 'Staff are now provided with a space, the activity and the way it is delivered varies but it is no longer a competitive sports based curriculum' (K)	Coherence
11	Assessment; delivery; teaching; confidence; engagement; character; value and status; achievement; coherence; diversity	'Students who had low confidence in PE before now show better confidence and engagement'. (B) 'Subject is now considered the best in the school. The importance of the subject has improved' (D) 'Our curriculum now offers diversity, creates links with lifelong activity, is not performance obsessed' (H)	Subject legitimacy
12	Logistics; finance; timetabling; assessment progression and transition; subject knowledge; monitoring; teaching; professional development	'Lesson observations to ensure quality first teaching' (A) 'We need to look at assessment within the subject' (D) 'I think there are still some members of the department who must look to embed the approach further. I think this is integral for consistency across the school'. (K)	The long term
13	Assessment; building a community; networking; professional development; hearing from others; mentoring; supervision; improved facilities; funding; leadership pathways	'Having someone I can ask questions to and run idea by is so valuable' (B) 'Collaborating with other schools who are running this curriculum to see how it is being implemented in their schools'. (E) 'I aim looking for further funding and CPD opportunities' (H)	Growing and building the concept curriculum

Table 4. Horizontal coding across questions.

Horizontal theme	Supporting vertical codes
Physical Domain	Sport, physical literacy, physical activity, fitness, motor skills, positive relationship, physical
Assessment and achievement	Assessment, achievement, success, evidence, monitoring
Logistics	Facilities, adaptability, structure, organisations, delivery, teaching, finance
Curriculum	Content, breadth and balance, curriculum progression, transition, repetition, diversity
Inclusions	All children, high ability, more inclusive
Professional matters	Collaboration, empowerment, autonomy, confidence, network, community, leadership, CPD, mentoring and supervision, teaching and learning, coherence
Whole school matters	Educational value, wider school, Ofsted, SLT, transferable skills, value and status
Individual matters (teacher of child)	Philosophy, behaviour change, slow start, different experience, professional role, students
Engagement and Enjoyment	Enjoyment, engagement, motivation, participation, meaning, purpose,
Holistic experience	Positive relationship with PA, beyond the physical holistic, improved physical literacy, character of the individual

Table 5. Mega themes informing the playscript structure.

Mega theme	Supporting codes
Subject transformation: Moving from a replicable and historical curriculum, too when that is connected to the wider school curriculum and had improved value and legitimacy	Addressing a need; purpose; journey of cultivating change; historical/replicable; growing and building; subject legitimacy; curriculum; coherence; effective curriculum; assessment; whole school matters; individual matters; the long term
Holistic learning experience Moves from being a primarily physically focused curriculum experience to one that incorporates thinking about the whole person, leading to greater engagement for more children	Physical; holistic; inclusion; no longer for the few; success for the able; individual matters
Professional matters Building a community of professionals and schools who learn and support from each other	Professional matters; networks; individual matters; logistics

The final phase aimed to validate the playscript and enhance member reflection. The playscript was shared with two current practicing PE teachers, who provided their feedback on its authenticity as a professional dialogue. Their insights were incorporated to deepen the ethnodrama's richness (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Further edits for clarity and flow were made at this stage, such as changing tenses, adding stage directions, and anonymizing names, while retaining participant voices as faithfully as possible.

Findings – the playscript

The playscript features six composite characters (one tutor and five teachers) who are engaged in professional dialogue situated in the context of a Concept Curriculum workshop. The playscript has been divided into three Acts, each forming a distinctive part of the workshop and incorporate Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model.

Act 1: Workshop introduction and delegate welcome (What)

Act 2: WHY implement a concept curriculum? (So What)

Act 3: NOW WHAT and next steps (Now What)

Underlined text within the playscript denotes direct quotations from the data and the original voice of the participants.

Act one: workshop introduction and delegate welcome

Scene 1: Setting the scene

Mel: Good morning everyone, and welcome to the first of two PE Concept Curriculum workshops. My name is Mel Sully, and I will be your tutor. These workshops are about creating space for professional dialogue, and for you to explore whether the Concept Curriculum could be a good fit for your school.

Let's begin with a few introductions around your tables.

[*Each table spends 10 minutes introducing themselves–who they are, what school they are from and their motivation for being at the workshop. The table nearest Mel, is made up of teachers, subject leaders and senior leaders.*

Alex is the first to speak.]

Alex: Hi everyone, I'm Alex. I am the Director of Sport, Health and Wellbeing at an International British School. We teach across the 5–16 age range. I have come over especially from Thailand for this workshop. I'm really excited to be here.

Sofia: Hi everyone. My name is Sofia, I am a Year 6 teacher and PE Subject leader in Manchester. I am new to subject leadership and I am hoping to learn more about the Concept Curriculum.

Dan: Good morning, my name is Dan. I'm Head of PE at Old School in London. It's really nice to meet you all.

Carys: Hi there, I'm Carys. I am the Director of Sport and Wellbeing for a secondary and post-16 school in South Wales. I have been tasked with implementing a new PE curriculum that will align with the new health and wellbeing curriculum in Wales. Any ideas and support will be most welcome!

[*The other delegates around the table give a reassuring smile towards Carys, appreciating the challenge she has ahead of her.*]

Tom: Yeah, hello everyone, my name is Tom. I have been teaching for what feels like a very long time, but just love PE. I am an Assistant Principal in my school which is a middle through to secondary school, but I have managed to keep hold of PE subject leadership. I really want to inspire a new approach to the curriculum in our school and I believe PE could lead the way on this.

[*After about 10 minutes, Mel intervenes and breaks up the conversations around the tables. She is keen to move them on to the first activity.*]

Act two: why implement a concept curriculum?

Scene 1

[*Mel stands at the front of the room to address all delegates, allowing the groups to settle from their introductions.*]

Mel: In this first session, I want us to focus on *why* we're here. This is about going beyond thinking about a new curriculum model, and to ask deeper questions about your current curriculum provision. Think about the *purpose* behind the need for change in your school.

[*There is a thoughtful silence. Alex raises their hand.*]

Alex: Ok, well for me, it starts with purpose. I want students to recognise why PE is important, and to know why it matters. I would love our students to develop a positive relationship with physical activity and see physical activity as an enjoyable activity that they can be successful at. Too often I finish a lesson thinking, did they enjoy that, did it mean anything?

[*Nodding along, Sofia raises her hand. Mel signals for her to share her thoughts.*]

Sofia: Yeah, that really resonates with me too. In my school, when I ask the students why we do a certain activity, many just shrug. I think the majority see PE as a place where the most successful get rewarded and they are just spare parts. They don't think they are good at PE. We keep seeing the same kids at clubs too. I really want to change that culture so all students see that PE can be for them, not just the 'sporty', but that means we as a school need to change something.

[*Dan, speaks up in support of his colleagues.*]

Dan: Exactly the same for me too. In my school, we offer what some would call a 'traditional sporting model'. It is a historical model that has been in place for many years and one that I took over once I became Head of PE. It needs to change! Our curriculum is split into 8 week blocks with students focusing on a different unit each term.

[*Carys joins the discussion*]

Carys: In Wales, we have a new curriculum. We're being challenged to think about meeting learners' future needs. We have all bought into this as an idea but we are not sure how to go about it. I am hoping the Concept Curriculum will offer a different approach that will let us go beyond traditional sport, teaching of skills, and being just competitive, and to think about how PE can be more balanced in all areas of a child's life and learning.

Mel: [nodding] That's the heart of it, giving PE purpose so we can help our students make connections between *what* they learn in lessons and *how* it supports them in life beyond the lesson.

[*Mel turns towards a large sheet of paper and writes the following words down:*

- *Meaning*
- *Purpose*
- *Engagement*
- *For all*
- *More than sport*
- *Not just the physical*
- *Student led*

Mel turns back to the group.]

Mel: I hope I have captured your thoughts accurately on this sheet of paper, about *why* you are here. I'll give you a bit more time to talk about this on your tables. Will 10 minutes be enough?

[*Everyone nods*]

Scene 2

[*Tom's table continues their discussion, as Mel has guided.*]

Tom: You know, one of the biggest realisations for me in coming here today was that our approach wasn't in line with our curriculum intent. We talk a lot about lifelong participation and positive experiences, but most of our lessons just focus on developing skills in sporting activities that we have taught for years. Generations! Our assessment wasn't meaningful to students, and parents either,

Alex: You know, when I first heard about the Concept Curriculum, I hoped it would be a breath of fresh air for both the department team and our students. Something that would make students see PE in a whole new light. The disengaged would engage, and see the benefit of the subject, as opposed to a fixed mindset of it being just for the sporty and most able.

Sofia: (*smiling*, *nodding*) That's it, Alex. I feel the same. I've got children who dread PE days, they've already decided it's not for them.

Dan: I think that is what excites me. It is the idea of motivating and engaging students more. I've seen too many lessons where students are apathetic and just going through the motions. If this approach can have a positive effect on their motivation, they are moving more, feeling more success, that could be a real game changer.

Sofia: *(nods again)* I hope it will empower teachers and students. If students feel a sense of achievement even if they haven't accomplished the skill or performance, they can still flourish.

Alex: Exactly. That sense of success can boost self-perception of competence; make them feel like they can achieve something – anything! I've always said, if we can increase our club numbers and see more variety of abilities at clubs, that would show we're reaching more students.

Carys: I completely agree. And that can link to whole-school impact too. If students understand the transferable skills they're developing in PE, they can apply that mindset elsewhere: in teamwork, resilience, self-awareness.

[The group pauses for a moment. There's a sense of shared understanding–quiet, but powerful.]

Carys: I think that's it, isn't it? That's the 'why'. It's not just about changing what we teach, but how PE and physical activity makes all our students feel.

Tom: (nods firmly) And how it feels for us too. To teach with purpose again.

[Mel walks past their table, listening in, clearly pleased by the depth of discussion. She nods approvingly before moving on to the next group. The room is brought back together.]

Mel: Alright, let's come back together and share some of these discussions.

[*Delegates continue to share their thoughts. A sense of coherence and agreement is starting to emerge. Discussions continue for the next 10 minutes. Mel concludes this part of the session.*]

Mel: You've all captured the essence of your 'why' beautifully. This shift isn't just about a new framework, you have talked about reclaiming the purpose of PE once more.

A curriculum that helps students find meaning in physical activity.

That develops confidence, and connection.

That values every learner, not just the most able.

[*The session continues with Mel outlining the Concept Curriculum in more detail. The morning concludes with teachers feeling inspired.*

Delegates return back to their own school environments, fire in their bellies ready for change. For some, thoughts about how to implement the change becomes more challenging.

Some delegates use the resources and readings Mel gave them to create an example curriculum and model lessons to help other colleagues feel more comfortable with the change. Some delegates use the time away to test the new curriculum and gain student voice to support their case for assessment change with SLT.

Delegates return at the end of the academic year to share how it is going].

Act three: now what and next steps

Scene 1

[*Alex, Tom, Dan, Carys, and Sofia reunite. Coffee cups steam as they settle easily back easily into conversation. Mel stands nearby, smiling and excited to hear how the year has gone. She welcomes everyone back.*]

Mel: Welcome back, everyone. Can you believe it's been almost 6 months since we last were together. Since then you've been leading curriculum change in your schools, trialling and embedding the Concept Curriculum. I am really excited to hear how it has gone.

[Mel sits down poised and eager to hear from the group. Alex, once again, speaks first.]

Alex: Well, I'll be honest, the department was sceptical at first, but willing to try. The fear of the unknown made them nervous I think. They thought it was just going to create extra work. But now … we're in our third term of delivery, and honestly, it's crazy looking back. how we used to deliver PE. I know we still have some way to go, but I am really pleased so far.

Sofia: (nodding) My colleagues had a slow start too, especially those who had been teaching longer. They struggled at first to see how the 'concepts' linked to the activities. But once they saw it in practice, they couldn't deny the positive impact it's having on students.

Tom: That's exactly what happened in my school. There was a bit of a tug-of-war at the start. Some were reluctant to move away from a competitive-sport-centred curriculum, especially because it feeds into our co-curricular programme. But over time, we have all come to realise that this approach doesn't replace competition, it redefines student success.

Carys: Yes, I get that! Staff were initially very supportive, and now, they're excited about how it creates opportunities to embed the new curriculum for Wales. We've even started talks about exploring this curriculum in our Trust primary schools too, so we can roll this out much wider.

Dan: My experience was similar. Because of my passion and drive to embed the Concept Curriculum, it had fantastic buy-in. The whole department is now on board. Even SLT are fully supportive. They've acknowledged the benefit already. Ofsted appreciated what we were trying to achieve too.

Mel: That's incredible. It sounds like the shift hasn't been just structural, but cultural. What about the students? How have they responded?

[A pause. They all smile knowingly, this is the part they're most proud of]

Sofia: Honestly, the students have embraced it. At first, some were so used to coming into a lesson expecting drills and games. But as we've developed new routines and explained the relevance of the concept within the subject, they've started to understand the bigger picture.

Carys: We've had such positive feedback too, from small group discussions to whole-year surveys. There's been a strong positive response to this new direction in learning.

Tom: I've seen the same thing. Some students who used to dislike PE are now smiling, happy, and engaging. We've got so many more middle learners and lower-ability pupils enjoying PE. And the higher-ability ones are just as engaged – they still get their skill development and gameplay, but now they're also linking soft skills to real-life situations.

Dan: I've noticed quieter students becoming more vocal in discussions. They can articulate what the lesson focus is and how it's applied. That's a huge shift. It's not just 'we're doing netball today', it's 'we're exploring conflict resolution through netball'.

Carys: And what's beautiful is that children enjoy the diversity of the curriculum. They've *f* ully bought into the narratives. It's become a common language across lessons.

[*Everyone is upbeat. There's a sense of satisfaction, not of completion, but of some collective meaningful progress*]

Mel: It sounds like the Concept Curriculum hasn't just changed how you teach, it's changed how your schools see PE. From scepticism to buy-in, from drills to dialogue, from participation to purpose.

Scene 2

[Mel glances at the large sheet of paper from their first gathering six months ago. The words'Meaning', 'Purpose', 'Engagement', 'Forall'faintly visible despite the paper being now very worn]

Mel: You've brought these words to life.

[*A moment of quiet accomplishment fills the room.*

Mel gestures to the next presentation slide, with the question posed,'How does your curriculum differ now?'Mel asks everyone to take 5 minutes to think carefully about their response before sharing it with others around the table.

Carys speaks]

Carys: You know, we wouldn't have got to where we are now without the Concept Curriculum. It's completely changed how we think about what PE is for.

Alex: I think we have changed much more in what we structurally do. We focus on a block of invasion games rather than a set sport, and rotate teaching spaces every few weeks so students experience different sports within the same theme. Each year group now has a half-term concept, and students are no longer set based on ability. It's made lessons much more inclusive.

Sofia: From my perspective, our curriculum is now geared towards our learners. The concepts are relevant to the year group and the issues they face. Children and teachers are developing their knowledge and confidence, and students' enjoyment is increasing.

[*They continue their reflections. Mel interrupts the chatter for a short break.*

When they return back from coffee, Mel directs everyone towards individual reflection time. Each person is asked to write 3 bullet points on what is going well.]

Alex writes:

- All of it!
- Assessment is much more holistic
- Pupils are more engaged and achieving more; the subject's importance has improved across the school.

Sofia writes:

- Students who had low confidence now show better confidence and engagement.
- Excellent participation
- Everyone is using the same language for learning

Carys writes:

- PE is now considered one of the best in the school.
- Our curriculum now offers diversity and creates links with lifelong activity, It is not performance obsessed
- Students have moved away from 'I'm no good at PE' to 'I enjoy PE', 'That lesson was fun'.

[Mel breaks the quiet focus, and moves the presentation slide on one. This time, delegates are asked to write another list, but this time focusing on next steps and actionable targets.]



Figure 1. Word wall depicting responses to teachers' ongoing support needs

Dan writes:

- Upper school. We are not as consistent in delivering the concepts with the older year groups.
- We sometimes revert back to our old way of teaching; further embedding needed.
- The DNA. How it differs from 11year olds through to 16year olds, ensuring curriculum continuity.

Tom writes:

- Co-develop our assessment, particularly assessment for learning and learner self-reflections.
- Balancing practical and conceptual work.
- Consistency across the department to embed the approach further

Scene 3

[The morning workshop draws to a close. Mel starts to wrap up the session by focussing on ongoing support. She places large sheets of paper on each table and asks the delegates to write down what type of support they need going forward.] (*Figure 1)*
[Everyone smiles, appreciating Mel's gesture]

[*After 20 minutes of discussion, a large word wall is captured to reflect everyone's responses. Mel presents the word wall to the group.*]

Mel: I think everyone can be incredibly proud of the journey they have been on this year. I wasn't sure what we would hear today, but it is inspiring to hear changes are starting to take place.

The wordwall reflects ongoing challenges with curriculum implementation. We will continue to work with you over the coming months to support you with these. Curriculum implementation is a task that is never quite complete!

Mel: Thank you for all your dedication, contribution and collaboration over these sessions. I will look forward to seeing what your next curriculum chapter will be.

End.

Discussion

This research aimed to identify the reasons, motivation, and early impact of the Concept Curriculum on students, teachers, and school settings. Specifically, Research Question 1 aimed to uncover the motives that underpin curriculum change? And Research Question 2 aimed to explore to what extent did the adoption of concept curriculum approach meet the curriculum change aims? Drawing from the findings, three discussion points are presented, shaped by overarching themes emerging from the playscript. Each theme is presented as a motive for curriculum change and then discussed in relation to how a concept curriculum approach could meet demand for change.

Subject transformation

Teachers' adoption of the Concept Curriculum represented a process of subject transformation, resonating with the broader discourse that calls for PE to move beyond the performative, skills-based model that has long dominated practice (Kirk, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2012). Teachers described their existing curricula as 'repetitive', 'traditional', and 'logistics-led', reflecting concerns that such approaches perpetuate a performance-driven curriculum at the expense of inclusion and engagement (Olson et al., 2017; Quay & Peters, 2008). There was a desire to bridge the gap between curriculum intentions, which are often centred on lifelong participation and wellbeing, but the reality is usually about elitist, ability-based experiences (Boyle et al., 2008). Sullivan (2021) argues that the dominance of competitive, performance-led PE has limited its relevance to most learners. In contrast, the Concept Curriculum emphasised meaning and purpose, repositioning PE as a subject contributing to personal and social outcomes as well as physical ones (Bailey et al., 2009; Long & Sanderson, 2002). Teachers described feeling 'reinvigorated', 'teaching with renewed purpose' and 'authenticity'. These comments are significant as they highlight a previous dissonance or disconnection between teaching philosophy and practical delivery. The concept curriculum served as a vehicle to reconnect teachers with their personal teaching philosophy and curriculum design, leading to a better sense of coherence. Subject transformation was understood not as a single change but as an ongoing process of curriculum evolution that is continually refined to strengthen assessment, learning progression and inter-school alignment.

Holistic learning experience

A second theme highlighted how the Concept Curriculum fostered a more holistic learning experience, extending PE beyond the physical to encompass cognitive, social, and emotional domains. Teachers increasingly recognised PE's potential to nurture confidence, collaboration, and self-awareness, qualities that transcend physical competence.

This supports what Beni et al. (2017) synthesise as meaningful PE experiences that emerge when learning is relevant, enjoyable, and socially connected, integrating both skill and emotional engagement. Teachers also described how the Concept Curriculum made PE more accessible to all students, shifting it from a subject 'for the sporty few' to one 'for all'. Framing learning around shared concepts, such as teamwork, resilience, or communication, enabled students to experience success in multiple dimensions, enhancing motivation and perceived competence (Ekkekakis et al., 2018). This holistic orientation prompted teachers to reconsider assessment. Many moved away from performance-based grading towards approaches capturing emotional, cognitive, and personal growth, echoing Hay and Penney's (2012) advocacy for authentic assessment, valuing reflection and contextual understanding. Such assessment practices also represent a practical enactment of physical literacy principles (Durden-Myers et al., 2018; Wilkie et al., In Press), as teachers focused on nurturing young people's relationships with physical activity rather than solely measuring competence.

Professional matters

The third theme, professional matters, highlights the importance of teacher agency, collaboration, and dialogue in sustaining curriculum change. Implementing the Concept Curriculum for these schools revealed a strong desire for 'networking' and for a professional learning 'community of people delivering the concept curriculum to share best practice' within and across schools, in spaces where teachers could share experiences, co-construct understanding, and build confidence in conceptual approaches. Professional learning thus extended beyond individual practice to departmental and networked collaboration, consistent with a view of learning as a social process (Reed et al.'s, 2010).

However, teachers voiced concerns regarding workload, logistics, and gaining colleagues' 'buy-in', challenges that often hinder innovation (Macaulay & Cree, 1999). As the process evolved, initial anxieties gave way to optimism and empowerment. The shared language coded as 'personal enthusiasm', 'growth', and 'support' reflected an emerging professional identity valuing a conceptual curriculum approach. This aligns with Sullivan's (2021) assertion that conceptual learning transforms both teacher practice and subject culture by shifting focus from performance to purpose. Leadership and institutional support were also pivotal. Teachers reported growing endorsement from senior leaders and inspectors, who recognised the Concept Curriculum's contribution to students' spiritual, moral, and cultural development. Such institutional validation suggests that PE gains legitimacy within the broader curriculum when its educational potential is explicitly articulated.

Finally, teachers' collective reflection that curriculum implementation is 'never quite complete' epitomises a mindset of ongoing professional learning. The shift from viewing curriculum as fixed and replicable to seeing it as dynamic and evolving reflects a broader redefinition of professional growth. While evidence of whole-school cultural change remains tentative at this stage, the desire for professional learning communities, increased departmental collaboration, and an emerging professional identity among teachers indicated that the Concept Curriculum created a culture of reflective practice in which teachers continually refined their pedagogy and curriculum design, embedding PE more firmly within the wider educational mission of the school.

Conclusion

This study has provided teacher insights into implementing curriculum change in PE through Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model of *What, So What, Now What.* Presented as an ethnodrama, the findings provide insight into both the motives underpinning curriculum change and the extent to which the Concept Curriculum met teachers' intended aims for change. Teachers' motivations for curriculum change were based largely on dissatisfaction with performance-focused PE. This approach was considered repetitive, exclusive and misaligned with broader goals. Instead, teachers sought a curriculum approach that reflected PE's potential for meaningful and lifelong engagement with physical activity. Findings also indicate that the Concept Curriculum met many of the teachers' intended aims during the early stages, with reports of increased student engagement and inclusive learning experiences, and a greater focus on cognitive and social development. Combined, these experiences refreshed the professional identity and purpose of PE departments, with teachers better articulating their renewed vision to the school leadership and community.

Motives underpinning curriculum change (Research Question 1)

In response to the first research question, the findings indicate that the primary motive underpinning curriculum change is a collective desire for comprehensive subject transformation. This transformation is driven by an explicit need to move physical education (PE) beyond the dominant, performative, and skills-based models that have historically dictated traditional practice (Kirk, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2012). Educators in this study characterised their legacy curricula as repetitive, traditional, and logistics-led, reflecting widespread concerns that conventional approaches inadvertently perpetuate a performance-driven culture at the expense of student inclusion and engagement (Quay & Peters, 2008). Furthermore, the impetus for change stems from a critical imperative to bridge the persistent gap between ideal curriculum intentions, which typically centre on fostering lifelong participation and wellbeing, and the stark reality of elitist, ability-based student experiences (Boyle et al., 2008). Because traditional, competitive, and performance-led PE has historically limited relevance to the majority of learners (Sullivan, 2021), the underlying motivation for curriculum change is rooted in making the subject fundamentally more inclusive and meaningful.

Efficacy of the concept curriculum approach (Research Question 2)

Regarding the second research question, the adoption of the Concept Curriculum approach met the overarching aims of curriculum change to a significant extent by successfully shifting the core focus of the subject and revitalising the teaching experience. By prioritising meaning and purpose, the implementation of this approach effectively repositioned PE as a holistic discipline capable of contributing to vital personal and social outcomes alongside traditional physical development (Bailey et al., 2009; Long & Sanderson, 2002). Beyond structural and pedagogical adjustments, this curriculum change profoundly impacted educators on a professional and affective level. Teachers reported feeling a renewed sense of 'authenticity' in their practice, describing themselves as 'reinvigorated' and noting that they were 'teaching with renewed purpose'. These initial

outcomes demonstrate that the Concept Curriculum successfully addressed the systemic demand for change by transforming both the delivery of the subject and the professional fulfilment of those teaching it.

Despite these positive outcomes, teachers were also pragmatic about the professional challenges that curriculum implementation entails. Far from being a straightforward process, issues such as logistics, whole-school alignment, and ongoing professional learning were key considerations throughout the change process, becoming a defining feature of the 'what now' phase once initial adaptations were made. The study further highlighted that the process of curriculum change became particularly complex when teachers' long-held beliefs felt challenged. Professional development and sustained leadership support emerged as critical factors for supporting colleagues and influencing the future success of a new curriculum.

This study is limited by its small sample size (n = 11). As curriculum review and implementation are highly context-specific, the findings may not be assumed to be generalisable beyond this group. The data, collected through a questionnaire, provide only a snapshot of teachers' perspectives at a single point in time and do not capture the ongoing and evolving nature of curriculum change, particularly within a landscape where further developments may be imminent. It is also worth noting that individuals' responses are shaped by their individual circumstances such as time, space, workload and the influence of Senior Leadership Teams (SLT).

The study is also based on self-reported perspectives, reflecting individual interpretations rather than observed practice and therefore cannot fully represent the enactment in different settings. The use of a creative analytical approach introduced challenges in maintaining authenticity while managing and communicating a complex process to both scholarly and professional audiences. Finally, this study does not address the longer-term impact of curriculum implementation but offers instead a partial and time-bound insight into practice.

Overall, this study demonstrated that the Concept Curriculum offered teachers an alternative model of curriculum delivery, transforming PE from a historical, performance-focused subject into one characterised by greater meaning, coherence, inclusion for more learners and empowerment for teachers. Although the study was contextualised within 11 unique school settings, and thus offers limited generalisability, the Concept Curriculum was shown to be effective in repositioning PE's legitimacy in a diverse set of schools, helping the wider school community recognise its educational value beyond the gymnasium and beyond the school gates. Therefore, the Concept Curriculum offers much promise; however, its implementation depends on the need for schools to first understand the reasons why curriculum change is needed, what change might look like and who will be the advocate for change at a subject and school level. Further ethnographic and longitudinal research into the implementation of the Concept Curriculum within adoptee schools is required. This would create a more nuanced understanding of case-specific contexts and complexities around curriculum implementation, and provide insight into the Concept Curriculum's longer-term efficacy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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