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# **Testing, training and tensions: A persistently disappointing picture of ‘health’ in secondary physical education?**

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## **Background**

Despite government attention to PE and school sport as important in helping young people to become independently active for life (e.g. Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), some consider that PE has not maximized its potential in this area (Cale & Harris, 2005; Trost, 2006), making this an important topic of study to better understand why this is. This particular study explored the micro-level of individual PE teachers’ philosophies, policies and practices with respect to the expression of health in secondary school PE curricula in England and Wales (see Harris & Leggett, 2013a, 2013b for further details of the study). At the time of the study, a ‘new’ version of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) had been introduced and, for the first time, this differed for state schools in England (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 1999) and Wales (Awdurdod Cwricwlwm Ac Asesu Cymry (ACAAC), 1999). Table 1 summarises the health-related requirements of the two NCPE and their overall approaches.

Insert Table 1

## **Approach**

A case study approach employing multiple methods and techniques allowed an in-depth focus on the complexity of teaching and learning in selected state secondary schools. A combination of reputational and convenience sampling was employed to select two Local Authorities, one in Wales and one in England. Five case study schools were selected, three from the Local Authority (LA) in England (E1, E2, E3) and two from the LA in Wales (W1, W2). Two mixed sex state secondary schools were selected from each LA, one with a PE department that was considered by the PE adviser in the LA to be 'forward thinking' in terms of health-related physical education (E2, W2), and the other with a department viewed as 'somewhat behind' in this area (E1, W1). A Specialist Sports College from the LA in England was also included because of the government's commitment at the time to the concept of specialist schools. Two separate visits were made to each school, each lasting two to three days, the first during the spring term and the second during the autumn term of 2001.

Documentation analysis was undertaken of formal health-related policies, schemes and units of work and associated pupil resources. In addition, all available PE staff at each school were interviewed. Observation of a 'Fitness' unit of work (comprising five lessons, one per week over five weeks) taught to a mixed sex class of 12-13 year olds was undertaken in one of the case study schools in England (E2). Data analysis involved the identification of emergent themes, following classification of significant data until all categories were saturated (Miles & Huberman, 2002). The study adhered to the University's ethical procedures.

## Findings

The study explored the expression of health in PE in five case study schools and identified two major themes: (1) 'fitness for life' and 'fitness for performance'; and (2) tensions between policy and practice.

(1) *'Fitness for life' and 'fitness for performance'*: The discourses expressed in the case study schools broadly reflected ideologies associated with promoting 'fitness for life' and/or 'fitness for performance' (see Table 2 for representations of these two discourses).

Insert Table 2

Table 3 summarises the basis of the expression of 'fitness for life' and 'fitness for performance' discourses evident in each of the case study schools and demonstrates that both discourses were expressed, to varying degrees, in all five schools.

Insert Table 3

(2) *Tensions between policy and practice*: The philosophy articulated by the teachers and expressed in policy documents in all the case study schools generally represented a 'fitness for life' discourse. Curiously, however, their practice (evidenced in terms of descriptions, and observations in one school, of health-related unit of works) generally reflected a 'fitness for performance' discourse, dominated by testing and training activities (e.g. fitness tests, circuits/weights). It was also found that teachers could find ways of expressing their favoured discourse in their teaching

of departmental schemes and units of work. For example, the content of the unit of work that was observed reflected a 'fitness for performance' discourse (evidenced by references to fitness testing, circuit training, fitness components, training principles and fitness programmes), however the teacher delivering it held a strong orientation towards a 'fitness for life' discourse and, in her teaching, she emphasised the need for pupils to increase routine, habitual activity in their lives and she included a broad range of activities (broader than that suggested in the departmental unit of work). This teacher admitted to not feeling 'comfortable' with the content of the fitness booklet (which accompanied the unit of work) and was aware that some of her colleagues (including the head of department) would have taught the unit of work differently. These findings point to potential tensions between teachers' personal philosophies and practices and between departmental policy and practice, and serves to demonstrate the diverse ways in which teachers constitute their role as health and physical educators.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study analysed the expression of health within PE at secondary school level and found that PE staff in all five case study schools expressed, to varying degrees, both 'fitness for life' and 'fitness for performance' discourses. These discourses were evidenced in NCPE documentation but had been recontextualised, that is to say, received, interpreted and reconfigured, within the secondary field of educational practice in schools. Indeed, even though the school policies and teacher rhetoric in all the schools expressed 'fitness for life' discourses centred on the promotion of active lifestyles, none of the teachers held a particularly holistic view of health, and 'fitness for performance' practices in the form of testing and training activities were

common. These practices, which are associated with the body-as-machine and with outcome and instrumental forms of assessment, may have been influenced by wider discourses impacting upon education associated with a performance culture (Ball, 2003) in which schools are expected to measure aspects of young people's performances.

Although previous research has revealed the dominance of a sporting ideology amongst PE teachers' philosophies (Green, 2002), most of the teachers in this study articulated a 'fitness for life' philosophy (albeit to varying degrees) which could suggest that PE teachers' philosophies are shifting. This may be due to the increasing prominence of fitness for life and lifestyle discourse in government documentation, the mass media and in recontextualised forms accessed by teachers, resulting in teachers' view of their role altering, from producers of competent sports performers towards promoters of active lifestyles. However, whilst teachers' philosophies may be changing, this study suggests that there have been little more than surface level changes to practices as discourses associated with 'fitness for performance', rather than 'fitness for life' were evidenced in the practical context.

Although schools from both England and Wales were involved in the study to permit examination of possible differences in policy and practice as a result of separate national curricula from 1999, it was found that there was little or no difference in health-related policy and practice in PE in the schools from the two countries. In addition, schools were selected from each LA based on whether the PE department was considered by the LA PE adviser to be 'forward thinking' or 'somewhat behind' in terms of their approach to health-related PE. However, few

differences were detected between these categories of schools. The only significant difference in terms of the expression of health in PE between the specialist sports college in England and the non-specialist schools was that the former was the only school which did not have discrete units of work associated with the area, although intended to introduce them in future years.

The main methodological limitations of the study were that data were obtained from only five schools and thus cannot be considered representative of state secondary schools in the two respective countries, and the study relied heavily on interview data which offered an account of what teachers say they think and do which may contrast with their actual thoughts and behaviours. The observational data helped in this respect but was limited to only one of the five schools. Within the parameters of these limitations, the study increased awareness of the expression of health in secondary school PE curricula which helps to better understand and address the complex tensions between health-related policies and practices in schools.

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	<b>Health-Related Aspects of National Curriculum for Physical Education in England</b>	<b>Health-Related Aspects of National Curriculum for Physical Education in Wales</b>
Overall approach	The development of pupils' 'knowledge and understanding of fitness and health' was included as a permeating 'strand' of the NCPE for all age groups.	'Health-related exercise' (HRE) was included as a distinct and compulsory area of activity. Schools were required to teach HRE and four areas of activity to 11-14 year old pupils and to teach HRE and two practical activities (one of which was 'exercise activities') to 14-16 year old pupils.
11-14 year olds were required to learn:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how to prepare for and recover from activity;</li> <li>• the effects of activities on specific aspects of fitness;</li> <li>• the benefits of regular exercise and good hygiene;</li> <li>• how to go about getting involved in activities that are good for their personal and social health and well being.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the short and long-term effects of exercise on physical, social and psychological health;</li> <li>• good posture;</li> <li>• taking responsibility for planning and executing warm-up and cool-down routines;</li> <li>• training to improve fitness and performance;</li> <li>• activity's role in healthy weight management;</li> <li>• activity opportunities;</li> <li>• ways of incorporating exercise into lifestyles.</li> </ul>
14-16 year olds were	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how preparation, training and fitness relate to and affect performance;</li> <li>• how to design and carry out activity and training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan, perform and evaluate their own HRE programme meeting personal needs and preferences over an extended period of time;</li> </ul>

required to learn:	<p>programmes that have specific purposes;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the importance of exercise and activity to personal, social and mental health and well being;</li> <li>how to monitor and develop their own training, exercise and activity programmes in and out of school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>apply the key principles of exercise programming and training;</li> <li>know how to overcome constraints to being active;</li> <li>appreciate the risks involved with a sedentary lifestyle and with excessive forms and amounts of exercise.</li> </ul>
Emphasis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dual emphasis on the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles (signified by concepts associated with participation, independence, preferences and everyday life activities) and the development of performance-related fitness (evident through references to fitness, training and effects on performance).</li> <li>For the first time, some flexibility was introduced in terms of the provision of competitive games for older pupils, stating that they should be 'compulsory' for 5 to 14 year olds and 'provided' for 14-16 year olds.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dual emphasis on the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles (signified by concepts associated with participation, independence, preferences and everyday life activities) and the development of performance-related fitness (evident through references to fitness, training and effects on performance).</li> <li>However, arguably, greater emphasis on 'active lifestyles' and 'health and well-being' than on 'fitness'.</li> </ul>

**Table I: Summary of Health-Related Aspects of National Curriculum for Physical Education in England (DfEE/QCA, 1999) and in Wales (ACCAC, 1999)**



	<b>'Fitness for Life'</b>	<b>'Fitness for Performance'</b>
Source	Draws upon wider discourses from primary and public health	Draws upon wider discourses from sports science and biomedicine
Representations of Discourse	<p>Is represented by reference to most or all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the role of physical activity in maintaining/enhancing health</li> <li>• a desire for pupils to be fit enough to undertake and enjoy every day activities</li> <li>• the promotion of active lifestyles</li> <li>• a focus on participation</li> <li>• a broad PE curriculum, including lifetime activities</li> <li>• allowing older pupils (14-16 year olds) to choose their activities</li> <li>• helping pupils to become increasingly independent in terms of being active, both at school and beyond</li> </ul>	<p>Is represented by reference to most or all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the role of physical activity in increasing/developing fitness</li> <li>• a desire for pupils to be fit for sports</li> <li>• an emphasis on improving sports performance</li> <li>• a limited PE curriculum, dominated by competitive games and fitness-related activities</li> <li>• an emphasis on fitness testing and/or training/conditioning activities linked to sporting performance</li> <li>• a focus on fitness components and their association with performance in specific sports</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a focus on recreational activities in extra-curricular programmes</li> <li>• activity monitoring associated with recommended levels of physical activity for young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pupils designing sports-related training programmes based on fitness components and training principles.</li> </ul>
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**Table 2: Representations of 'Fitness for Life' and 'Fitness for Performance' Discourses of Health in Physical Education**

Case Study School	'Fitness for Life'	'Fitness for Performance'
<p>E1 (England)</p> <p>3 PE teachers, (2 FT, 1 PT) interviewed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Philosophy: desire for pupils to be fit enough to lead active, healthy lifestyles and to be active post school</li> <li>Options-based curriculum for 14-16 year olds</li> <li>Recreational approach to extra-curricular programme</li> <li>Developing community links with sports clubs including 'starter' sessions in gyms/clubs</li> <li>Interest in increasing proportion of pupils who are active after they have left school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Health-related fitness' (also referred to as 'health-related exercise' and 'HRE and Outdoor Ed' and 'Fitness') units of work (12-14 years; mixed sex; 6-10 weeks) centred on fitness testing and training activities (e.g. continuous, interval training); plus associated cross-country units of work</li> <li>Circuit-training and fitness options for 14-16 year olds</li> <li>'Health' permeated through activities in terms of types of fitness and warming up (particularly through athletics in the girls' curriculum and through games in the boys' curriculum)</li> </ul>
<p>E2 (England)</p> <p>4 FT PE teachers interviewed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Philosophy: desire for pupils to do their best and to continue participation post school</li> <li>Development of pupil independence (e.g. designing/performing own warm ups)</li> <li>Broad PE curriculum to provide activities suitable for all pupils</li> <li>Extensive extra-curricular programme including recreational activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Fitness' (also referred to as 'health-related fitness') unit of work (12-13 years; mixed sex; 6 weeks) centred on understanding the importance of improving fitness via circuits and testing; plus associated cross-country running units of work for 12-14 year olds</li> <li>Warm ups and training permeated through activities (athletics in particular), especially for 14-16 year olds</li> <li>Older pupils involved in designing training programmes based on fitness components</li> <li>Pupils' poor performance in competition beyond local level was considered to relate to lack of training</li> <li>Elite performance and competitive sport prioritised</li> </ul>

Case Study School	'Fitness for Life'	'Fitness for Performance'
<p>E3 (England) Specialist Sports College</p> <p>3 FT PE teachers interviewed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Philosophy: to generate an interest in lifelong participation</li> <li>PE staff emphasise the benefits of exercise to pupils to promote active lifestyles</li> <li>Pupils encouraged to be active outside of school and post school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Health-related fitness' (also referred to as 'health-related exercise') units of work planned for following year for 11-14 years, centred on components of fitness and fitness training via fitness testing, circuits (for boys) and running activities (orienteering for girls and cross-country for boys)</li> <li>In current year, 'fitness' was permeated in terms of the importance of training and knowledge about the components of fitness, mostly through games and athletics lessons, plus 6 week 'Personal Exercise Programme' unit of work introduced for 14-15 year olds focusing on designing and undertaking a fitness programme</li> <li>Strong reputation for success in local competitions and nationally in some sports (e.g. tennis); emphasis on competitive sporting success</li> </ul>
<p>W1 (Wales)</p> <p>2 FT PE teachers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Philosophy: desire for pupils to maximise their potential and be active post school; 'healthy body, healthy mind'</li> <li>Pupils encouraged to be independently active</li> <li>Issue of 'body image' referred to in girls' PE curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Health-related fitness' (also referred to as 'health-related education', 'fitness' and 'conditioning') units of work for every year group (11-14 years; mixed sex; 2 x 6 weeks; streamed groups based on performance in 1 kilometre time trial during first HRE unit of work) centred on aerobic exercise such as running (for 11-14 year olds) and circuits (for 14-16 year olds), plus fitness testing for</li> </ul>

		<p>all ages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circuit and weight training units for 14-16 year olds</li> <li>• Importance of warming up and development of fitness components (stamina, strength, suppleness, skill, speed) and conditioning to sports performance, permeated through PE activities (especially athletics, gymnastics and also swimming)</li> <li>• Emphasis on training to improve fitness and sports performance</li> <li>• Strong tradition in extra-curricular rugby and growing success in soccer</li> </ul>
<p>W2 (Wales)</p> <p>3 PE teachers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philosophy: desire for pupils to be active post school for physical/social development and to be aware of future participation opportunities</li> <li>• Concerns expressed about sedentary lifestyles and pupils' future health</li> <li>• Desire to teach pupils the importance of exercise to quality of life and life expectancy</li> <li>• Extra-curricular programme includes 'fun' activities such as roller hockey and mixed football (but recent reduction in lunch time to 45 minutes has had 'devastating' negative effect on lunchtime participation)</li> <li>• The school's Personal and Social Education programme included the topics of 'the importance of exercise/fitness' and 'how pupils use their leisure time'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Health-related fitness' (also referred to as 'health-related exercise' and 'fitness') units of work (11-13 years; mixed and single sex groups; 6 weeks) centred on fitness testing and training activities (e.g. circuits, weight training, relays) to improve sports performance</li> <li>• HRF permeated through other PE lessons, mostly in the form of warm ups (in girls' PE lessons) and fitness components such as speed and agility in games (in boys' PE lessons)</li> <li>• Fitness tests and circuits also utilised to cope with large numbers in limited indoor facilities during inclement weather</li> <li>• Strong reputation for extra-curricular success in netball and rugby</li> </ul>

**Table 3: Discourses of Health in PE Curricula in Case Study Schools (Key: FT: full-time; PT: part-time)**



