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Achieving 'high quality' physical education: an intervention in a city school

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Introduction

High quality physical education (PE) should be an aspiration for all schools and is considered to be important for many reasons, not least because it may help young people to make informed lifestyle choices and encourage lifelong participation in physical activity (Kirk, 2005). Moreover, the introduction of the Physical Education School Sport and Club Links Strategy with the government's target of *"increasing the percentage of school children who spend a minimum of two hours a week on high quality physical education and school sport..."* (DfES & DCMS, 2004) has further highlighted the desire for and importance of participation in high quality physical activity and PE.

It was within this context that researchers at Loughborough University were approached by a local 11-18 city school and specialist sports college to guide them in their attainment of high quality PE. Following a preliminary meeting with the PE staff, it was agreed to conduct a research project on facilitating high quality teaching and learning in gymnastics. Gymnastics was chosen because it was an area where some teachers at the school lacked confidence and where existing planning and activities were considered to be relatively uninspiring. The project has now been extended to another activity area (athletics) with a view to identifying key principles that contribute to high quality across all areas. This article, however, focuses on the initial research.

The Project

The first task was to define what high quality PE meant in practice. The document *'High Quality PE and Sport for Young People'* (DfES & DCMS, 2004) was used to guide and inform this definition. This document describes what high quality in PE looks like, provides guidance on how schools can achieve it, and contains descriptions of ten outcomes of high quality.

Drawing on the above, an intervention to facilitate high quality teaching and learning was designed. In so doing, two main factors were considered. Firstly, the teachers' and pupils' views. This involved conducting teacher interviews and pupil focus groups to identify: how gymnastics was currently being taught; what support the teachers felt they needed; what the pupils wanted to learn and might enjoy. Secondly, the literature was reviewed. Thus, as well as the DfES & DCMS Guidance, PE teaching 'theories' were considered in terms of what constitutes high quality or effective teaching and learning, and how this might be achieved (e.g., see Hardy & Mawer, 1999; Silverman & Ennis, 1996). Taking into account the teachers' and pupils' views and the literature, units of work and associated learning activities were produced and implemented which incorporated a number of teaching strategies aimed at improving motivation, enjoyment and attainment in gymnastics.

The teaching materials were evaluated via analysis of the following sources of data: lesson observations and evaluations; pupil focus groups; teacher interviews; and journals. Comparisons were made between the teachers' and pupils' pre- and post-unit responses, and high quality outcomes were identified from the lesson observations. Based on this, the success of the units was established.

Findings

Some of the key findings were as follows:

Teachers

The units and learning activities were well received and staff found them to be well structured, user-friendly and flexible.

The units had a positive impact on the teachers' confidence, knowledge, content ideas, and teaching strategies and for some, on their attitude/enjoyment of gymnastics.

The teachers were able to facilitate high quality learning through their gymnastics teaching.

The teachers covered 'knowledge and understanding of fitness and health' within the units in a relatively narrow/limited way, referring sometimes only to warming up/cooling down.

Pupils

To varying degrees, the units had a positive impact on the pupils' attitudes and enjoyment of gymnastics. Pupils were able to identify a number of elements they enjoyed.

The girls were generally more positive about gymnastics than the boys.

Following the new units, the pupils were able to speak about gymnastics in a more informed way.

To varying degrees, the teachers felt that the units had a positive impact on the pupils' achievement of high quality outcomes. A number of outcomes (relating to performance, participation, enjoyment, commitment/attitude) were achieved by most pupils.

Overall, pupils did not feel the units involved them in much decision making or in different roles (though the teachers' reports contradict this).

Recommendations

From the above a number of recommendations were made to further facilitate the achievement of high quality PE. Perhaps those of most relevance here include:

1. To make some elements of the units more explicit to pupils. E.g., raise pupils' awareness as to when they are involved in decision making and different roles within lessons.
2. To pay more explicit attention to 'knowledge and understanding of fitness and health' and to recognise/adopt a broader interpretation of the associated knowledge base, moving beyond warming up/cooling down.

With regards to the latter recommendation (and finding), despite PE teachers identifying health within the curriculum as important (Armour & Yelling, 2004), few receive adequate training in the area. Consequently, there is limited understanding and systematic expression of health within PE and much variation in practice (Cale & Harris, 2005). It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the teachers neglected teaching it in any breadth/depth.

Summary

The findings highlight that the intervention has already had a positive impact in facilitating high quality teaching and learning and outcomes in gymnastics. By addressing the recommendations and extending the work to other areas, it is hoped to further identify and develop the principles that contribute to high quality PE.

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