

The call to make PE core within Initial Teacher Education.

A response to the House of Lords Committee report.

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There is much debate around the phrase ‘core’ and what makes ‘core PE’ and Harris (2018) sets out the case for it for us all on behalf of the Physical Education Expert Group of AfPE. This article therefore does not focus on the discussion of what makes up core PE, but the purpose of this, is to call for ITE to make PE core, let’s make the shift. It presents the case through a short analysis of the recent House of Lords national plan for recreation committee report (2021) which calls upon the Government for a new *national plan for sport, health and wellbeing*.

For clarification purposes, to understand how the phrase core PE is used within the report, I draw upon and use Baroness Morris of Yardley’s (who is a member of the Committee) explanation of core. She defined it as being a main part of the national curriculum. She recognised that PE currently isn’t valued within schools and she states that the report wants to see this changed. She suggested it was important to make sure that all children have a good experience in school of PE, to help with life-long (and life-wide) participation, to help build confidence, to enable all to return to sport and physical activity in later life. She also proposed that PE would help support the health and wellbeing of our children. PE can’t do this without being a core and valued subject with the curriculum. Therefore many of the recommendations within the report focused around the teaching of PE within schools and ultimately then the impact on the teaching of PE within ITE.

Within the report (Lords’ Committee, 2021), there is a call for “PE to be a core subject with greater emphasis on physical literacy and making PE and school sport a fun, enjoyable and inclusive experience” (p.5). This would help increase the value of PE which often does not get the recognition it deserves (p.50), and examples were offered in the report of how PE is taken away from pupils for those needing extra maths, or the hall being used for everything from exams to nativity plays. The number of lost hours of PE within the last 10 years was drawn out and highlighted to be 53,000 hours of lost time (p.50). There seemed to be a sense of urgency within the report and the need to prevent PE being eroded any more to help the next generation with their physical literacy, health and wellbeing. The report also proposed that an increase in value of PE to be a core subject would help alleviate a lack of funding, time, resources and specialists PE teachers in primary schools (p.51) suggesting that the need for children to be physically literate and physically well had to start from primary, but the House of Lords’ strongly calls to the Department of Education to designate PE as a core subject across “all key stages to ensure it then receives adequate time and resources” (p.55). However, I would suggest that this call needs to go one step further whenever core PE is discussed within schools, it should automatically include the call upon initial teacher education to also make PE core.

It almost presents a like a chicken and egg situation though, between ITE and schools, and questions who makes PE core first. You could question, why have we not done this already, if we all agree that PE is important, valuable and key, who are those who are disagreeing?..... Let’s all jump, let’s all go together. One setting can’t be having core PE without the other, we all need to go together, to all be the advocates and it is time to shout loudly. To go as one as perhaps the momentum and tide is beginning to turn and the shift is about to happen (I hope).

The report does note (interestingly in bold) and suggests that it is disappointed and alarmed to hear that primary school teachers only have a few hours of training, but this isn't new information! This is something that most of us within ITE have been saying for years. In fact the All Party Parliamentary Fit and Healthy Childhood Group, called to the Government to listen on these very aspects in their report on primary physical education and sport premium in 2019. The Lords' Committee (2021) recommends that the "Government must work with ITE to ensure adequate time is allocated in teacher training courses to build knowledge and confidence in the delivery of PE and to assess trainee teachers' understanding of physical literacy" (p.55). They want all those who are going to teach PE, to be able to do it with confidence and with the skills they need to do it effectively. It is recognised that more time is needed within ITE to enable this to happen. It is also proposed that guidance is needed to be provided to schools "to support the participation of young disabled people" (p.55), but this should be extended also to ensuring ITE helps ready our next generation of teachers to support disabled children and young adults.

The later element is particularly important in tackling inequalities, especially in light of the Active Lives Survey and the research from the Activity Alliance. The Alliance (2020) points out that disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive as non-disabled people, and the pandemic has meant that disabled people continue to be less active as well as attitudes and motivations to be active have fallen, during and following the pandemic. Over half (53%) of disabled people want to be more active after the pandemic, but the worry about leaving the house to be active, or exercising close to others, are the key barriers.

The Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People's Survey (2021) also shows that existing inequalities have widened and that there has been most noticeably a drop in the understanding of children and young people with a disability or long term health condition, in terms of understanding why exercise and sports are good for them, decreasing by 4.6% from 2019-20 to 2020-21. The survey found that children who are active do better at school in terms of achievement and attainment, but they also reported that there are 94,000 fewer active children and young people in 2021-21 compared to pre pandemic 2018-2019 and drops in levels of enjoyment and confidence being reported. Enjoyment is one of the key aspects that the Lords' Committee felt could be reengaged by having PE as a core subject.

As has been highlighted the call for core PE is not new and I'm sure must frustrate previous advocates that they haven't been listened too, which is why I propose, we need to push again, and push together, whilst the Lords' Committee are asking the Government to listen and to action the plan. Perhaps one proactive and pragmatic way to help the tide change is to share (again) with our Heads of ITE the evidence and the recent reports, such as the Lords' Committee, to allow us to shape the potential expected standards for the delivery of PE and school sport, that the report suggest that the Department of Education should establish (p.104). If the Government is going to work with ITE then this is our moment to help shape the future and make sure our Heads of ITE fully understand why PE needs to be valued and why it needs to be a core part of the curriculum, across all age phases. Therefore, we all need to take responsibility as ITE providers to make the case to our own institutions, so when Head of ITE meet across the country core PE is on their agenda, rather than just ours. We can't do this in isolation, we need to jump on the momentum that is currently being developed by and through the Lords' Committee report (2021), now's our chance.

Let's do it. Let's make the push, let's make the call for core PE within ITE and core within schools.