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Redefining School Physical Education for the 21st Century

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Physical Education is for Life (Part 1): Redefining School Physical Education for the 21st Century

Mike Jess, Jeanne Keay, Paul McMillan, Nicola Carse, Kristy Howells & David Cooke

Introduction

This series of articles focuses on a lifelong and life-wide vision for physical education (PE) called 'Physical Education is for Life'¹ (PEL). Based on ideas from complexity thinking, PEL makes the case that school PE should actively seek to become the 'connective catalyst' that sets the foundation for the lifelong and life-wide PE journeys of all children and young people. In this first article, we set up the series by sharing two hypothetical school PE scenarios: a multi-activity scenario at 'Fixed' High School and a PEL scenario at 'Flexible' High School. While we focus these scenarios on secondary (high) schools, the issues raised are equally relevant to the early years and primary school setting. Importantly, these scenarios are the backdrop for the discussions that follow throughout the series as they raise issues and challenges for those PE stakeholders, particularly teachers, who seek to make the transition towards a 'Physical Education is for Life' vision. In addition, this first article also presents an overview of the key complexity thinking concepts, or commonalities, that underpin this refocussing of school PE.

Scenario 1: PE at 'Fixed' High School

At 'Fixed' High School, PE has remained unchanged for over a decade. While the PE on offer may have met the needs of many at some point in the past, the fixed nature of learning experiences has inevitably led to a gradual disconnection from students over time. This approach to PE is based on the machine-like thinking that has long dominated education in many schools. In this approach, students are physically educated by experiencing a series of activity 'blocks', usually focussed on specific games or sports. This is often called 'PE-as-Sport-Technique'. The activities of the PE curriculum at 'Fixed' High School have primarily been selected because they have historically been part of the curriculum or because they are the activities that the school's teams play against other schools. In addition, some activities are included based on the interest of the PE teachers or because of the available facilities and equipment. During these 6-8 week 'blocks', each class is presented with the knowledge and skills specific to one physical activity with the expectation each student will learn the content 'covered' in the 'block'. In this context, PE is straightforward because each teacher is viewed as a technician whose role is to deliver the content of each activity to the whole class. From a lifelong perspective, the assumption is that these activity 'samples' prepare each young person to regularly take part in physical activity when they leave school.

Scenario 2: PE at 'Flexible' High School

At 'Flexible' High School, the approach to school PE aligns closely with a PEL vision. PEL is an inclusive and outward looking approach to school PE aiming to lay the foundations for the lifelong and life-wide PE journeys of all students. Central to PEL is the recognition that each student's PE journey does not only take place in school PE lessons but also evolves in

¹ 'Physical Education for Life' (PEL) is a project being developed jointly by the Universities of Edinburgh, Leeds Beckett and Canterbury Christ Church.

other life-wide spaces across the school, home and community contexts. In addition, 'Flexible' High School recognises that each young person's PE journey does not begin at secondary school but is a developmental process unfolding across the lifespan. Each young person therefore arrives at 'Flexible' High School with different abilities and histories.

Over the last decade, PE at 'Flexible' High School has shifted beyond the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to focus on a more integrated and inclusive PEL approach. This shift has been a gradual and often messy process that has required teachers to interact with many other PE stakeholders across and beyond the school e.g. other teachers, school leadership, community practitioners, teacher educators and local authority officers. Initial efforts to adopt a more PEL focused approach have revolved around four interrelated activities (see Figure 1).

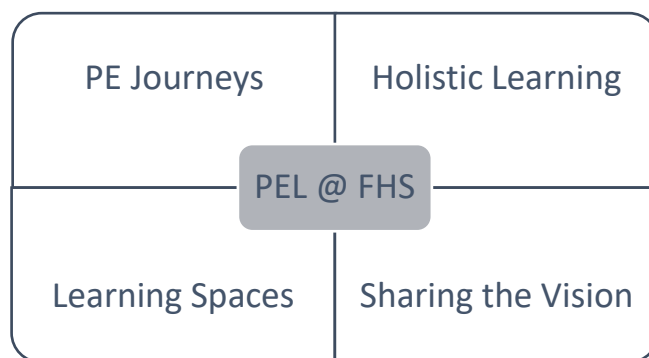


Figure 1: The 4 Interrelated PEL Activities @'Flexible' High School

Teachers set out to shift their teaching from a whole class focus on specific physical activities towards an approach that concentrated on students' lifelong and life-wide **PE journeys**. While PE lessons remained contextualized around specific physical activities, teachers gradually began to re-design the PE experience by focusing on students' evolving mix of **holistic learning** (i.e. physical, cognitive, social and emotional). Fundamental and specialized movement skills; physical activity habits; physical activity knowledge and understanding; decision-making skills; cooperative and collaborative skills; and emotional and motivational learning all began to frame the PE experience and lay the foundations for a lifelong PE journey. Moving beyond top-down and linear teaching approaches, the teachers began to create **learning spaces** that were more interactive and meaningful and where students were able to work collaboratively to negotiate the nature of their school-based and life-wide PE experiences. Within these learning spaces, the teachers were able to help students investigate their life-wide opportunities, try out different physical experiences, recognise the influence of developmental, environmental, societal and cultural changes and engage in other PE journey-related issues. However, creating learning spaces that allowed the students to more effectively share their 'voices' has proved to be quite a complex process and remains a work in progress. As such, while the PE experience at 'Flexible' High School has gradually changed, the transition to a PEL approach is proving to be a non-linear and often messy process that will take many years to come to fruition.

Nevertheless, as the teachers have become more engaged in PEL, they have made efforts to re-position school PE as a 'connective catalyst' for student's lifelong and life-wide PE journeys. They regularly share the PEL vision with their students and with the other PE stakeholders across the high school, local primary schools and local community; involving

others in the PE experience. Closer links have been forged with the primary schools, the support assistants across the high school and with community clubs. For example, one of these clubs, parkour, has been involved in efforts to co-construct the PE experience across school lessons, extra-curricular clubs and community-based activity. While it is unclear how the enactment of the PEL vision will unfold in the future, 'Flexible' High School has made significant progress in developing PE as a 'connective catalyst' by working more closely with different PE stakeholders and making efforts to lay positive foundations for all students' lifelong and life-wide PE journeys.

By presenting these different PE scenarios, we raise important issues and challenges for all PE stakeholders about the nature of school, life-wide and lifelong PE for all students now and in the future. However, before we discuss these issues in future articles, we conclude this first article by presenting an overarching complexity thinking framework that informs the PEL vision.

Complexity Thinking and PEL

The complexity thinking framework we now present not only informs the PEL development at 'Flexible' High School but also raises issues about the multi-activity approach at 'Fixed' High School. Based on four interrelated 'commonalities' (see Fig. 2), the framework acts in an overarching manner to inform our understanding of the unfolding journeys of all PE stakeholders and also of the subject area itself. As such, these commonalities work together to frame PEL as a '*self-organising process of becoming that takes place within lived time and within boundaries*' (Jess, Howells & McMillan, 2023, p. 2). To explain how the framework informs PEL, we first explain how the becoming and lived time commonalities work together to create the non-linear trajectory of each PE journey before discussing how the relationship between self-organisation and boundaries works to shape the nature of these journeys. While we use the lifelong and life-wide PE journeys of students at 'Flexible' High School to exemplify the implications of these commonalities, future articles will focus on the implications for other PE stakeholders across and beyond the school setting.

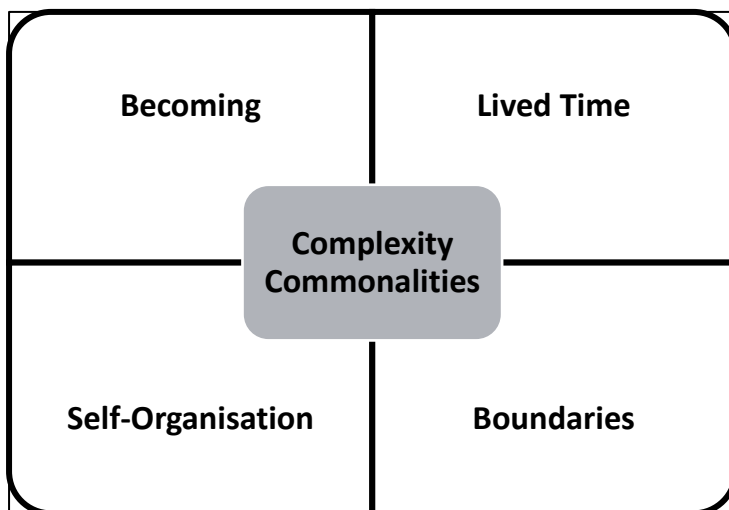


Figure 2: The Four Interrelated Complexity 'Commonalities' (from Jess, Howells & McMillan, 2023)

Becoming and Lived Time

Unlike the fixed view that children and young people learn in a linear, time-constrained manner, the process of becoming highlights how learning is continuously developed in a non-linear manner as their past, present and future consistently merge in a lived time unity. PE journeys are therefore always involved in a process of becoming that starts at birth and continues throughout life. PE therefore does not only take place in a school PE lesson, but also in the multiple spaces across each child and young person's life. Critically, it is in these life-wide spaces that choices are made to be active for reasons related to health, appearance, recreation, enjoyment, socialisation or performance. Alternatively, individuals may choose to be inactive. Recognising the importance of these life-wide choices is a central feature of PEL at 'Flexible' High School and highlights the need to re-orient school PE towards the why of PE and less on the what.

Directly linked to this becoming process, lived time has a significant influence on young people's PE journeys. Lived time differs from linear time, the 'taken for granted' view of time as fixed quantitative units, because it represents a qualitative and emergent process in which past, present and future constantly merge in a lived time unity. To understand the influence of lived time on young people's PE journeys, we first consider the relationship between past and present before adding the implications of future time. For each young person, their genetic development and holistic experiences from their past all have the potential to influence their present. Therefore, while each student may share some similarities in the present, their past histories will always bring some difference. For example, in the same class, one 12-year-old student may have a high level of movement competence, regularly take part in different activities and enjoy the social element of these activities, while another 12-year-old may have limited movement competence, lack confidence in physical activity situations and be inactive outside school. These differences highlight how each young person's past has the potential to create very different starting points in the present. In addition, what happens in each future period adds more difference and uncertainty to the lived time unity. Crucially, the present is not a fixed entity but is constantly being recreated when events from the future merge with the original present to create a new present. Therefore, past merges with present and future merges with the original present to influence the new present.

Future events therefore have a significant influence on each PE journey because what happens may be predictable and consolidate previous learning or it may be unpredictable and lead to a very different new present. For example, the same PE lesson may have limited influence on one student's PE journey, while impacting significantly on the future direction of another student's journey. Future time is therefore indivisible from past and present and, over time, will have a major influence on the non-linear nature of each young person's PE journey. As we now discuss, the final two commonalities, self-organisation and boundaries, align with this becoming in lived time process and deepen our understanding of those factors that influence the non-linear nature of young people's PE journeys.

Self-organisation and Boundaries

The self-organisation and boundaries commonalities, together, play a significant role in each young person's PE journey. While PE at 'Fixed' High School is focussed on sameness and certainty, PEL at 'Flexible' High School recognises that students are different from each other because of their diverse histories and because they have the capacity to self-organise in lived time. This self-organising ability means each young person can engage in 'rich' holistic interactions at a personal level, with others and with non-human elements. In a school or life-

wide PE context, these ‘rich’ self-organising interactions involve a mix of physical, cognitive, social and emotional behaviours as each young person seeks to influence or react to different movement situations. Consequently, ‘rich’ interactions can lead to multiple responses that may be ordered, structured, adaptive, creative or emotionally-charged. Over time, this self-organising ability helps each young person shape the nature of their PE journey, both in a positive and negative manner. However, acknowledging the importance of self-organisation raises questions about the best ways to support each young person as they develop the knowledge and skills needed to become independent, proactive and adaptive self-organisers who can positively shape their lifelong and life-wide PE journeys.

From this perspective, helping students develop their holistic foundations is a key feature of the PE journey. Holistic foundations are represented by the ‘rich’ mix of movement skills, physical activity habits, physical activity knowledge, decision-making skills, social skills and emotional behaviours that come together to influence young people’s PE experiences and journeys. Holistic foundations are not a set of fixed ‘building blocks’ but are flexible and dynamic aspects of PE that evolve and develop as conditions change and as young people move through their school years. Critically, these holistic foundations are central to each young person’s self-organising abilities because they help them apply and transfer their learning across different physical activities in school and life-wide contexts. At ‘Flexible’ High School, as holistic learning has become a focus of the PE experience, ideas from developmentally appropriate practices, physical literacy, meaningful PE, health-related pedagogies, models-based practices and other such developments have been integrated to help enact the PEL vision. However, as we note above, as this self-organising process unfolds over time, and holistic foundations become deeply rooted, self-organisation does not happen in an ‘anything goes’ manner but is constantly taking place within boundaries.

Boundaries have a significant role to play in young people’s PE journeys because they are everywhere and, are holistically framed by physical, cognitive, social and emotional behaviours. Traditionally viewed as rigid and divisive, fixed boundaries have long shaped the nature of the dominant multi-activity PE approach at ‘Fixed’ High School. At ‘Fixed’ High School, PE simply ‘covers’ activity-specific movement technique, cognitive content and social and emotional behaviours within each ‘block’ and there is an expectation that all students will learn the same content in the same way. This narrowly bounded approach limits students’ self-organising opportunities and often excludes those who do not learn in this way or who have already learned the content being presented. However, recent thinking suggests that many boundaries are flexible and, as a result, can help to support the learning process. Consequently, the PE teachers at ‘Flexible’ High School view boundaries as both fixed and flexible, which means that those boundaries with more malleable lines can be used to create ‘*spaces with potential for learning*’ (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 3). Creating boundary spaces has become increasingly important at ‘Flexible’ High School because these spaces allow the ‘rich’ interactions to take place that will support the development of students’ holistic foundations. ‘Flexible’ High School has moved PE beyond rigid, limiting boundaries and the teachers now work with students to create the boundary spaces that will help support the development of the self-organising skills and holistic foundations that make a significant contribution to the students’ PE journeys.

In addition, with many life-wide opportunities now available to the students, the teachers have recognised that considerable work is needed to build robust relationships with those working in these multiple life-wide spaces. They are, however, conscious that the PE visions of these life-wide stakeholders will often be different. For example, some life-wide activities function within narrow and rigid boundaries because of strict entry and development criteria e.g.

meeting age-related times in swimming events, while other activities have more flexible boundaries because of the focus on participation. Furthermore, some activities even take place in informal spaces where young people have few, if any, boundaries to negotiate. As such, as the teachers continue to share the PEL vision with different stakeholders, they recognise, as with their students, that each stakeholder's starting point will be quite different, ranging from the identification of talented performers, activity specific competition, participation, enjoyment and more. Therefore, as we note earlier in the article, PE at 'Flexible' High School is gradually shifting towards a complexity-informed PEL approach that views this lifelong and life-wide experience as a '*self-organising process of becoming that takes place within lived time and within boundaries*' (Jess, Howells & McMillan, 2023, p. 2).

Conclusion

In this first article, we have set the foundations for this series on 'Physical Education is for Life' (PEL) by sharing two different school PE scenarios: one fixed and one flexible. These scenarios are an important starting point because they highlight the potential to redefine school PE in the 21st Century in an ever-changing, complex world. Specifically, the futures looking scenario at 'Flexible' High School presents a vision of school PE as it transitions from the more traditional multi-activity approach and seeks to become the 'connective catalyst' for the lifelong and life-wide PE journeys of all young people. These efforts to redefine and reframe school PE as the 'connective catalyst' for PEL come at a particularly important time: important because the ambitious 'Get Active' Strategy, recently launched by the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, makes no mention of the significant contribution that school PE can (and should) play in achieving their long-term targets. Underpinning this PEL approach, we present a complexity thinking commonalities framework that informs the different ways that young people's PE journeys unfold in a process of becoming in lived time. In lived time, we highlight how each young person's journey involves a non-linear process because it is founded on a complex and evolving mix of personal histories, current starting points, learning contexts and reactions to future events. In addition, we discuss how each young person's capacity to self-organise within boundaries adds to the non-linear and emergent nature of their PE journeys. Critically, we argue that it is a mix of fixed and flexible boundaries that help to create the boundary or learning spaces in which 'rich' self-organising interactions can take place to help young people develop the holistic foundations that shape their PE journeys. It is with this background in mind that the future papers in this series will examine the implications that this shift to complexity will have for the different stakeholders in school, community and other contexts who seek to contribute to the PEL vision.

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