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Physical Education is for Life (PEL) 2: Reframing the School Physical Education (PE) Curriculum as the ‘Connective Catalyst’

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

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Introduction

This series of articles is about ‘Physical Education is for Life’ (PEL). In the first article, two school scenarios were presented. The first scenario was based on a ‘fixed’ school in which the PE programme focussed on a limited range of specific physical activities, while the second scenario discussed a more ‘flexible’ school aligned with a PEL vision. This ‘flexible’ scenario was grounded in four complexity commonalities (becoming, lived time, self-organisation and boundaries) and recognised how children and young people engage in their own lifelong and life-wide PEL journey (Jess et al., 2023). This PEL vision subsequently acknowledged the personalised, unique and non-linear nature of each individual’s PEL journey across the lifespan. Building on this shift towards complexity thinking, we also presented the view that school PE should become the ‘connective catalyst’ for PEL. Subsequently, in the second and third articles of the series we focus on the ways in which school PE can become this ‘connective catalyst’. In this article, we discuss how a more integrated curriculum experience will act as the catalyst, or foundation, for all children’s and young people’s PEL journeys, while the third article will consider how this more integrated curriculum process will influence teachers’ practice in the future.

Simple to the Complex: Positioning PEL in the History of School PE

Historically, school PE has never been a fixed entity but is always evolving through a process of becoming. (see Figure 1).

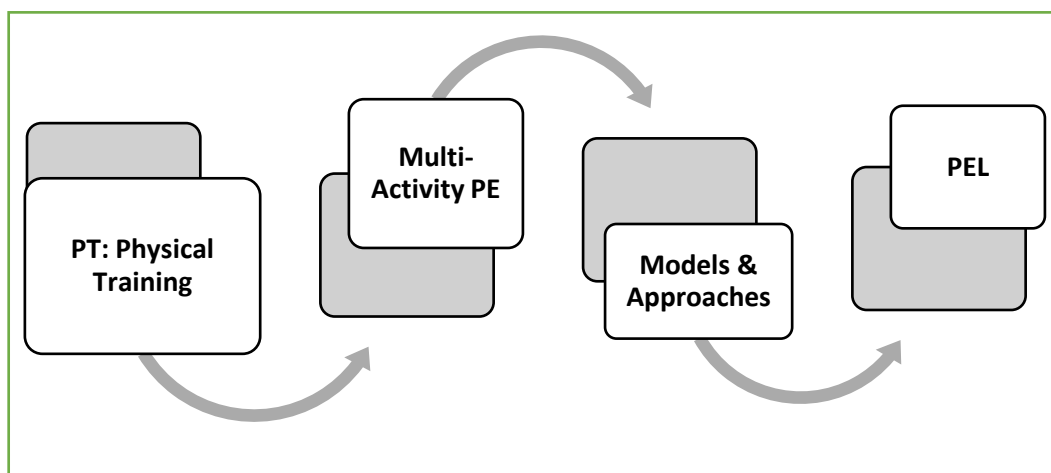


Figure 1: Becoming School PE: From the Simple to the Complex

In the late nineteenth century, PE was introduced into the school curriculum based on concerns about the physical health and fitness levels of the military. Physical Training (PT), as it was

then named, was dominated by Swedish or German gymnastics in which children copied movement sequences performed by teachers. It was a regimented and drill-like experience. After the Second World War, however, efforts were made to introduce a more educational rationale for PE. The multi-activity approach, copied from English public schools, began to dominate. More complex than PT, the multi-activity approach originally focused on blocks of team games but gradually included other activities like gymnastics, dance, aquatics, outdoor activities, athletics and fitness. Initially well-received, concerns were gradually raised about the educational value of the multi-activity approach (e.g. Kirk, 2010), largely because of its one-size-fits-all nature and its narrow focus on the physical domain. Subsequently, as we entered the twenty first century, the school PE curriculum began to extend its educational horizons with the introduction of various holistically oriented models and approaches e.g. Cooperative Learning; Sport Education; Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU); Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR); Physical Literacy; Meaningful PE; Developmentally Appropriate approaches and others. The appearance of these different models and approaches is consequently having a positive impact on the educational credentials of school PE and are now part of a rapidly expanding range of curriculum options (O'Connor & Jess, 2019). By themselves, however, these developments are unlikely to establish school PE as the 'connective catalyst' for PEL. While progress is undoubtedly being made, the next phase of development for school PE will be critical in shaping its future as the 'connective catalyst' for all children and young people's PEL journeys. As school PE seeks to embrace the multiple challenges of the contemporary world it will need to develop in ways that are more emergent, coherent and connected. PEL offers a significant opportunity for this future.

Reframing School PE as the 'Connective Catalyst' for PEL

Underpinned by the complexity commonalities discussed in the previous article and focussing on the lifelong and life-wide journeys of each child and young person, PEL re-aligns the nature of school PE. PEL creates a context in which school PE can build on contemporary developments, unlock the subject's educational potential and gradually extend school PE beyond its limited role as only being viewed as a school subject. Most importantly, as presented in Table 1, school PE now has the potential to become the 'connective catalyst' for PEL.

Table 1: Re-framing School PE as the 'Connective Catalyst' for PEL

1. School PE is the only place where all children and young people are guaranteed at least 12 years of regular PEL learning experiences.
2. School PE can set the holistic foundations for all children and young people's lifelong and life-wide PEL journeys.
3. School PE can act as the hub to connect all children and young people's life-wide experiences across school, home and community.
4. School PE can acknowledge each child and young person chooses to take part in physical activity and sport for different reasons.
5. School PE can help to develop positive collaborative relationships with the many stakeholders who support children and young people's PEL journeys across school, home and in the community.

By regularly working with every child and young person, supporting the development of their holistic foundations for PEL, focussing on their reasons for being physically active and working collaboratively with multiple PEL stakeholders, there is a compelling case that school PE has the potential to become the ‘connective catalyst’ for PEL. However, to genuinely become this ‘connective catalyst’, school PE will not only need to create a more integrated curriculum experience across the school years but also re-orient PE teachers’ practices within and beyond the classroom. Subsequently, while this article focuses on re-framing the PE curriculum, the next article will concentrate on the re-orientation of teachers’ practices.

Celia’s PEL Journey: Setting the Scene for the Curriculum Re-Framing Process

We begin our discussion about the curriculum reframing process by presenting the hypothetical PEL journey of Celia. Celia’s journey from the age of one until her early 20’s will act as the foundation for a discussion about the ways that the school PE curriculum can be reframed to act as the ‘connective catalyst’ for PEL. While examining Celia’s PEL journey helps to explain the need for a reformed PE curriculum, every child’s individual journey could be used for this task.

Celia’s PEL Journey

Pre-school

From the age of one, Celia participated in various movement-related activities. Some activities were formal classes with a specific focus e.g. swimming, while others were informal and play related. She walked regularly with her family and spent time at the play park with her grandparents. From age 3, Celia attended nursery and was regularly offered physical play opportunities in the indoor and outdoor spaces. At this point, Celia enjoyed physical activity and it was a regular feature of her life.

Primary School Years

At primary school, Celia was timetabled for twice-weekly PE classes. While she enjoyed PE during this time, Celia’s experiences were varied, particularly because she had a different class teacher each year. One of her early years teachers was particularly interested in PE and regularly focussed on children’s basic movement competence and offered the class opportunities to talk about their physical activity experiences. In addition, one of her upper primary teachers was interested in football and coached the school football team. Celia received considerable exposure to football during this year, regularly attended extra-curricular practices and occasionally played for the school team. However, her other teachers were less interested in PE. PE lessons were sometimes cancelled at short notice and usually focussed on fun and ‘letting off steam’. Occasionally, sport development officers came into school to present a series of lessons on specific activities e.g. rugby. However, apart from football, Celia did not attend any school-based extra-curricular physical activities during her primary years. Outside school, Celia attended a gymnastics club at least once per week and managed to gain various certificates. She also attended swimming lessons for 3 years and went to the swimming pool regularly with her parents. She tried other activity clubs but usually attended for a few weeks and then chose to stop. Throughout these years, Celia still walked and cycled with her family, but, by the end of primary school, this happened less because she spent more time with her friends. Throughout her primary years, Celia still enjoyed being physically active but, as she entered secondary school, she was becoming a bit less active.

Secondary School Years

In secondary school, Celia’s relationship with physical activity began to change. Her PE experience was different because her PE teacher was no longer her regular class teacher, and the classes focussed on the movement skills needed for specific activities. Celia enjoyed the challenge of these new activities. She particularly enjoyed her dance lessons and started to attend the school dance club.

However, she found the gymnastics lessons too easy and was disappointed that girls were not offered football. As she moved through school, she became less motivated for PE, mainly because getting changed for the class became embarrassing and most of her friends didn't enjoy PE. Towards the end of her school years, Celia did not enrol for any examined PE courses and her timetable offered few opportunities to take part in PE-related activities. Outside school, none of her friendship group attended the gymnastics club and Celia gradually withdrew from the club. This was not because she didn't like gymnastics, but because the social experience became less enjoyable. Increasingly, Celia did less physical activity with her family or friends, although she regularly walked 1.5 miles to school every day with her two best friends. However, Celia became very involved in dance, both from a performance and support perspective. After one dance performance at a school event, Celia and a few of her friends were invited to join a local dance club. Celia particularly enjoyed the dance club and became increasingly involved in their different activities, locally and across the country. When she left school to go to university, Celia was not only a competent dancer but also helped the dance teachers with the young children who attended the club.

Early Post School Years

When Celia left school to attend university, she stayed in her hometown and, initially, remained heavily involved in the Dance Club. During this time, she also joined the university gym to make sure she stayed fit. However, by the end of her second year, Celia stopped all her dance-related activity to focus on her university studies and the related social activities, although she did continue to attend the university gym to stay fit and keep control of her weight.

Celia's PEL journey is an important starting point to discuss the reframing of the school PE curriculum because it highlights how her PEL journey, as with most other young people, was a process of chance. There was little connection between her school PE experiences and her life-wide PEL choices, except perhaps her initial dance classes in PE. Significantly, her school PE experiences were not focussed on creating a foundation for her lifelong PEL journey but more on fun or movement performance. The decisions she made about her PEL journey could therefore be considered 'pot luck'. We do not suggest her decision-making was poor, but that it was based on a series of unrelated and opportunistic events. To become the 'connective catalyst' for PEL, we now argue that efforts will need to be made to deliberately re-frame the school PE curriculum as the 'connective catalyst' for PEL.

Re-Framing the School PE Curriculum as the 'Connective Catalyst' for PEL

Building on Celia's PEL journey, we begin our discussion about the curriculum re-framing process by focussing on three interrelated elements: lifelong dimensions, holistic foundations and life-wide journeys (see Figure 2). By using the lifelong physical activity dimensions as the overarching framing device to re-define the nature of the school PE experience, we create a novel curriculum experience that re-shapes the range of physical activity possibilities, focuses on children and young people's reasons for participation, highlights the importance of deep-rooted holistic foundations and also captures the dynamic and non-linear nature of each PEL journey.

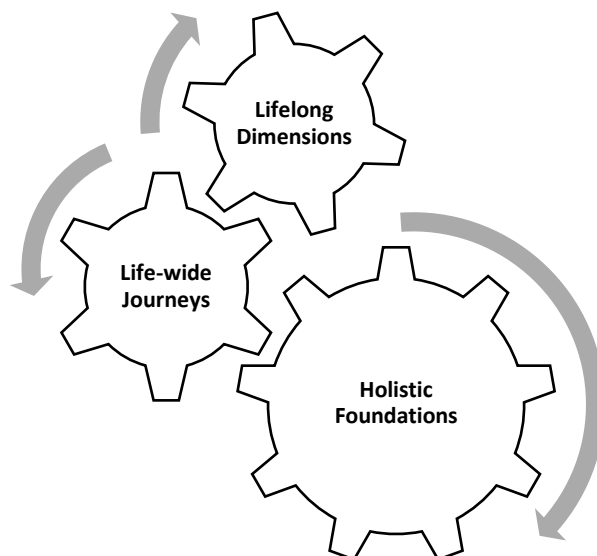


Figure 2: The School PE Curriculum as the ‘Connective Catalyst’ for PEL

Recognising the Lifelong Dimensions of PEL

From a PEL perspective, as portrayed in Celia’s example, it is important to recognise that each PEL journey involves a range of different physical activities, entails some degree of choice and is a non-linear process. Five lifelong physical activity dimensions are presented to capture this dynamic process: recreation, health, performance, functional and socially-responsive (See Table 2).

Table 2: The Lifelong Physical Activity Dimensions (adapted from Penney & Jess, 2004)

Dimension	The Why of Each Dimension
Recreational physical activity (RPA)	as a leisure/fun pursuit, which, for many, is a socially-orientated activity
Health-related physical activity (HRPA)	concerned with fitness, well-being and/or rehabilitation
Performance-related physical activity (PRPA)	concerned with self-improvement and/or success in performance environments
Functional physical activity (FPA)	in response to demands of everyday life at work, in the community and at home
Socially-responsive physical activity (SRPA)	proactively supporting lifelong and life-wide physical activity opportunities

Moving beyond the long-dominant performance focus of school PE, these lifelong dimensions have significant implications for the curriculum. By including all forms of physical activity within the lifelong dimensions, the physical activities deemed to be of educational value is extensive and extends the range of activities that may be legitimately included in the PE curriculum. For example, while formal sports will remain part of the curriculum, as a framing device, the lifelong dimensions introduce many health-related, recreational and functional activities that include walking, skateboarding, cycling, active travel and others. In this way, Celia's examples highlight the range of formal and informal activities that were features of her PEL journey. It is particularly important to acknowledge that each child and young person will have different reasons for the physical activity choices they make, although, for some, these choices will be more limited than those available to Celia. By focussing on the why of physical activity participation, each physical activity can be associated with various lifelong dimensions. In one class, young people may take part in an activity like swimming for performance, health or recreational reasons. In addition, some will change the reason for taking part in an activity as time passes e.g. from a performance focus to health, recreational or even functional, while others will take part in more than one activity for different reasons, e.g. as a performance swimmer, health-related runner and a recreational cyclist. Further, as life-wide opportunities increase, many young people will also engage in an activity for socially-responsive reasons by taking on different support roles e.g. referee, teacher, coach or administrator. Again, Celia's story highlights the decisions she made in terms of the different activities she took part in but also the changing reasons for her participation. This shift to the why of physical activity participation raises important challenges for the school PE curriculum, particularly those with a narrow focus on formal physical activities. In particular, it raises questions about the performance sport focus of the national award-based courses that currently dominate during the later years of secondary school.

Developing Holistic Foundations for PEL

While all activities related to the lifelong dimensions involve a physical element, they also include a range of holistic demands that are cognitive, social and/or emotional (see Figure 3). For example, when reflecting on Celia's ever-changing lifelong and life-wide physical activity engagement, while we recognise the importance of her physical development, we also acknowledge her cognitive decision-making, social interactions and emotional responses towards the different contexts she meets. The influence of these four holistic domains on the nature of each PEL journey cannot be overstated.

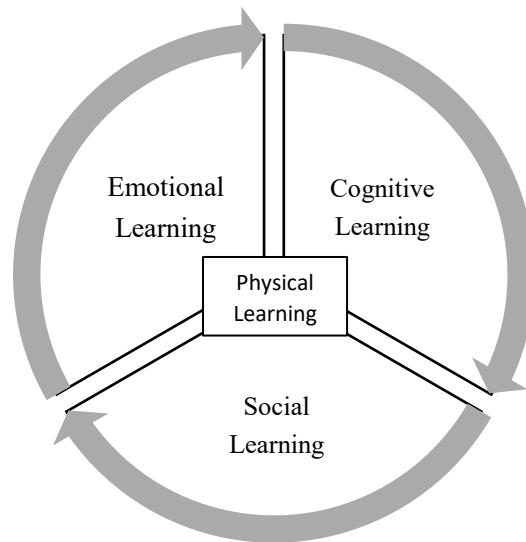


Figure 3: The Interrelated Holistic Foundations supporting PEL Journeys

Framed within the lifelong dimensions, a focus on holistic learning, as opposed to specific physical activities, acts as the ‘connective catalyst’ for each child and young person’s PEL journey. With at least 12 years of guaranteed school PE, this shift in curriculum focus offers a significant opportunity to support each child and young person as they develop the combination of physical, cognitive, social and emotional learning that acts as the foundation for their PEL journeys. This holistic foundation, as noted in the previous article, includes a mix of fundamental movement skills; physical activity habits; physical activity knowledge and understanding; decision-making skills; cooperative and collaborative skills; resilience, motivation, enjoyment and more. Significantly, each child and young person’s holistic foundation constantly evolves and changes as each discrete holistic element develops at a different rate and as their contexts change. Focussing on this holistic mix therefore means that school PE must deliberately seek to support the development of an adaptive and creative foundation for PEL. Adaptability and creativity are so important because they will help young people apply their holistic foundation across a range of physical activities and also respond to their ever-changing life circumstances. These foundations are therefore not a set of fixed ‘building blocks’ but an evolving combination of holistic learning that will never be exactly the same for each child or young person.

However, with the school PE long focussing on the performance-related aspects of specific physical activities, identifying and designing the graduated holistic learning that will become the focus of the PE curriculum in primary and secondary schools represents a significant challenge. Fortunately, progress is being made across the PE sector with recent developments consistently recognising the holistic nature of the subject area. For example, the different models and approaches noted above all make a holistic contribution to the learning experiences of children and young people. Nevertheless, while progress is being made, we take the view that the school PE curriculum needs to be reframed to ensure that all children and young people engage in regular learning experiences that deliberately focus on the deep holistic learning that will set a solid foundation for their current and future PEL journeys.

Supporting Life-wide PEL Journeys

While holistic learning will bring structure and some degree of similarity to the school PE experience, the curriculum also needs to acknowledge, accommodate and support each child and young person's unique PEL journey. Because the personal histories, holistic foundations and life-wide choices and opportunities of each child and young person are different, every PEL journey is different. Throughout their time at school, children and young people should therefore be supported to acknowledge and embrace this diversity. In this vein, Celia would have benefitted considerably from being offered regular opportunities to investigate her life-wide experiences, reflect on the nature of her school PEL journey, track the relationship between her developing holistic foundations and PEL journey, try out different physical experiences, recognise the influence of her developmental changes, plan novel life-wide experiences and engage in other PE journey-related issues. As we discuss in the next article, moving holistic learning and PEL journeys to the centre of the school PE curriculum will not only have a significant impact on teachers' pedagogy but also on the nature of the relationships they develop with the many life-wide stakeholders involved in each child and young person's PEL journey.

Conclusion

In this article, focussing on lifelong dimensions, holistic foundations and life-wide PEL journeys, we have presented a reframed view of a more integrated school PE curriculum as the 'connective catalyst' for PEL. However, for this reframed curriculum to be enacted in the future, important questions are raised for the PE profession, and, in particular, for PE teachers. In the next article, we therefore turn our attention to the practice of primary and secondary teachers. From a teaching perspective, we consider how local contexts will influence the nature of each school's PE curriculum and the adaptive, inclusive and creative approach to teaching that underpins a PEL-related curriculum. In addition, from a life-wide perspective, we will discuss the importance of collaborative working relationships with key stakeholders in efforts to create connections between school PE and the local community.

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Authors

Dr Mike Jess is Senior Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh.

Professor Jeanne Keay is Emeritus Professor at Leeds Beckett University and Chair of the Association for Physical Education.

Dr David Cooke is Director of the Bachelor of Arts in Physical Education and Outdoor Education at Leeds Beckett University.

Dr Kristy Howells is Reader in Sport Pedagogy and Physical Education at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Dr Nicola Carse is Deputy Director of the Institute of Sport, Physical Education and Health Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

Dr Paul McMillan is Programme Director of the Master of Arts in Physical Education at the University of Edinburgh.