



Research and analysis

Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report

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Applies to England

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primary teachers felt confident teaching PE, with 15% reporting that they are not confident.^[footnote 11] Despite 10 years of PE and sport premium funding, and the first of the 5 key areas of improvement being ‘increased confidence, knowledge and skills of all staff in teaching PE and sport’, some of the changes in policy have not had the widespread intended impact.^[footnote 12]

Knowledge in PE (for a glossary of key terms see Appendix A)

In this report we refer to 3 conceptually distinct but functionally connected forms of knowledge that allow pupils to make progress towards the aims of the national curriculum in PE. These are not terms that Ofsted expects pupils or staff to use during inspections. These forms of knowledge are:

- motor competence – knowledge of the range of movements that become increasingly specific to sport and physical activity
- rules, strategies and tactics – knowledge of the conventions of participation in different sports and physical activities
- healthy participation – knowledge of safe and effective participation

Main findings

Many schools visited have enough time in the timetable to teach a broad and ambitious PE curriculum. Most primary schools teach PE for 2 hours per week. Around half of secondary schools teach PE for 2 hours per week for both key stage 3 and key stage 4.

A small number of the schools have clearly defined the broad and overarching aims of their curriculum and broken them down into a clear progression of the knowledge pupils need to learn.

In the schools where the curriculum is stronger, the most appropriate physical activities and sports to teach are prioritised. These activities are selected because they enable pupils to learn essential subject-

specific knowledge to meet clearly defined, ambitious end points of the curriculum.

In nearly half of the primary schools, children in Reception are well supported by knowledgeable adults to develop safe, efficient and effective movement quickly.

Verbal explanations given by staff in lessons are often clear and precise. In most schools, they use subject-specific vocabulary and question pupils effectively to check their understanding. Pupils' verbal recall is strong for areas of the curriculum that are taught more clearly, and key content is revisited.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are supported to achieve well in PE in just over half of the schools. In these schools this is because:

- the curriculum end points are clearly defined and ambitious for all
- staff (including teaching assistants (TAs) and unqualified staff teaching PE) are well trained and supported to implement specific strategies for pupils with SEND
- staff have clear, specific and actionable information to support them in meeting the pupils' needs in a PE setting.

Many pupils we spoke with have a broad understanding of health, particularly the social and mental health benefits associated with participating in physical activity. They spoke confidently about what they have been taught in personal, social and health education (PSHE) and science lessons to help them to develop a clear understanding of health.

In a small number of schools, assessment in PE is well designed. Assessment objectives are clearly defined and aligned carefully to what has been identified as knowledge that is important for pupils to have and to put into practice.

All the secondary schools teach PE- or sport-related qualifications at key stage 4 and/or key stage 5. In all these schools, the exam specification informs the curriculum. The knowledge to be taught is set out clearly and precisely, and sequenced carefully to give pupils opportunities to revisit and secure prior learning. Teachers give pupils high-quality explanations with relevant real-life examples. This means that the planning and teaching of PE qualifications are stronger than the teaching of compulsory PE at key stage 4.

Many curriculums across both primary and secondary schools are intended to give pupils experience of a wide range of sports or physical activities. However, it is not always clear how what is being taught or the order of teaching in the curriculum are supporting all pupils to know more and do more in PE. As a result, many curriculums lack coherence.

The average time spent on one 'topic' or activity in each year is 5 hours. This means that, for many pupils, the curriculum design does not give them the time they need to build knowledge and develop relative fluency before moving on to a new activity that requires prior learning.

Many schools do not match the ambition of the national curriculum. In two thirds of the schools, dance is not taught to all pupils, or the dance content being taught is not well organised. Furthermore, in three quarters of schools, outdoor adventurous activities (OAA) are either not taught effectively or not taught at all. In comparison, nearly every curriculum includes football to support the teaching of attack and defence. In schools where the curriculum does not match the ambition of the national curriculum, this narrows pupils' experience of PE.

Pupils' swimming and water safety attainment in primary schools is mixed. In many schools this is due in part to the cost of transport and access to swimming pools, and in part to the challenges schools have faced because of COVID-19. However, in many schools, the evaluation of the swimming and water safety element of the curriculum is limited, and many schools do not make full use of the PE and sport premium, which can be used to fund top-up swimming lessons, where needed.

Across both primary and secondary schools, most pupils are actively participating in lessons. However, the quality of what they are doing is variable. Where it is weaker, pupils lack the foundational knowledge needed for the next stage of the curriculum or to participate meaningfully in competitive elements of PE lessons. Significant gaps in motor competence are not identified and addressed quickly in many primary schools, particularly fundamental movement skills (FMS).

A small number of pupils in both primary and secondary schools routinely miss PE lessons so that they can receive support in other areas of the curriculum. For example, some practise reading in key stage 1 or complete work from other subjects in key stage 4. In addition, the amount of time allocated to PE in the timetable significantly reduces in key stage 4.

In most of the secondary schools, the compulsory key stage 4 PE curriculum lacks rigour, balance and depth. It rarely matches the ambition of the national curriculum. The important knowledge to be taught is not always clearly identified, and teaching is not supporting all pupils to make progress in compulsory PE.

In some schools there is a strategic approach to developing staff's subject knowledge, and how to teach it, through continuing professional development (CPD). In these schools, staff receive effective training in teaching the planned curriculum.

Extracurricular provision is broad and ambitious across primary and secondary schools. All pupils have opportunities to experience different activities and also get better at what they are learning in PE. However, over half of the schools do not monitor attendance at extra-curricular clubs and activities. This means that it is not always clear whether their extracurricular programme is inclusive for all.

Discussion of the findings

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