



SPORTING CHANCES

It's certainly concise, but will the revised PE curriculum free teachers to plan for what their students really need, or leave them hopelessly lacking guidance? **Crispin Andrews** weighs the evidence...

A professional footballer training, a musician or dancer preparing for a show, a yachtsman on a round the world voyage. Different content; similar process. All have to apply their skills to the task at hand, becoming more confident and competent as they do so. Each needs to understand what they are trying to do and that what they do and what others do, affects the outcome.

On match day, the footballer uses his brain as well as his physical skills, applying a range of tactics and strategies to overcome opponents. Strikers find space to outwit opposition defenders and give team mates a safe passing option, or a gap to move into. Defenders deny space and work together to close down opponents scoring opportunities. Some players use more dubious,

theatrical strategies to trick the referee into awarding them free kicks and penalties.

During auditions, the dancer and musician are in direct competition with their peers, vying for a place on the show or in the band. They choose from the range of skills and ideas at their disposal to show themselves as ideal for the role at hand. The yachtsman might be competing against other yachts. He or she will definitely be taking on the ocean and the weather.

Kids go through these learning processes in physical education lessons. PE is not sport, nor is it creative movement, nor outdoor activity, but it does include concepts applicable to all three. The new PE curriculum gives schools the scope to deliver physical literacy through sport, dance or outdoor activity. But it doesn't insist that teachers use any one of them.

Your call

Released in draft form in February this year, the consultation period – during which the DFE takes comments and suggestions from interested parties, before unveiling the final document this September – ended on August 5th. From the beginning of school term 2013-14, government will suspend the existing curriculum. Schools have a year to trial and embed the new one before it becomes statutory in September 2014.

The current secondary PE curriculum takes up fifteen screenshots on the DFE website. The new curriculum is only three and a half pages. That's half a page introduction and half a page for each key stage.

Sue Wilkinson from the Association for PE and the advisory committee that helped the government come up with its new curriculum, likes how the new curriculum treats teachers as responsible professionals. "Teachers can now make choices and decisions based on their own professional judgement about what's best for their students," she says. "The curriculum provides an outline and teachers decide how best to deliver lessons."

Emma Ball, a senior lecturer in Physical Education at John Moores University in Liverpool, approves of the new curriculum's flexibility. "Teachers who want to, can be creative and innovative about what they deliver," she observes.

Ball, a former secondary PE teacher who leads the John Moores PE PGCE programme adds, though, that the curriculum is also restrictive in that it doesn't *insist* that schools do things differently. "Because it doesn't say things must be done in a certain way, people could carry on as before," she points out. "It all depends how people interpret it."

Words and movement

There's nothing much new in the document, just less of it. At key stage 3 it recommends that pupils should build on and embed the physical development and skills learned in key stages 1 and 2. That they should become more competent, confident and expert in their techniques and apply these techniques across different sports and physical activities.

Also at key stage 3, the new curriculum states that students should develop an understanding of what makes

a performance effective and how to apply these principles to their own and others' work. Government also wants schools to help young people understand and apply the long-term health benefits of physical activity.

At key stage four, as students reach, or approach, their final school years, the draft curriculum says that they should tackle more complex and demanding physical activities. Government wants schools to get 15 and 16 year olds involved in a range of personal fitness activities.

Give or take an occasional word, the programmes of study are identical at both key stages, and vague, allowing or enabling depending on which way you look at it. At key stage 3 pupils should be taught to use a 'range' of tactics and strategies to overcome opponents in direct competition through team and individual games. At key stage 4 it's a 'variety' of strategies.

The document also provides a list of possible sports through which teachers can deliver this programme of study. The list is made up of traditional sports: badminton, basketball, cricket, football, hockey, netball, rounders, rugby and tennis – a clear nod to the government's competitive sports agenda. So too the second POS, common across both key stages, which requires students to develop their technique and improve their performance in other competitive sports such as athletics and gymnastics.

Sue Wilkinson explains that these lists are recommendations, not requirements. "Teachers don't have to stick to traditional sports, they can use whatever activity they think best suits their students," she comments. "If you think parkour will do it, then that's fine, too."

Dance is part of the new curriculum. It has its own POS at key stage 3. At 4 it's latched on to the previous POS as part of 'other activities'. At both key stages, emphasis is on performing and preparing for performance.

At key stage 3, government wants students to take part in outdoor and adventurous activities that present intellectual and physical challenges. They want children developing team building skills and learning how to trust each other. At key stage four kids do exactly the same, except in a range of environments.

The wording is often vague, suggesting differences, without making things different. Whilst years seven, eight and nine should *analyse* their performances compared to previous efforts and demonstrate an improvement to achieve their personal best; years ten and eleven *evaluate* their performance.





Special measures

Emma Ball thinks more thought needs to be put into how teachers will assess the new curriculum. She is concerned that the government's desire for stats that show progress will encourage teachers to assess improvements in performance rather than monitor the long term effect of PE on individuals' lives.

Sue Wilkinson is pleased that government is going back to trusting teachers' judgements, and is doing away with 'levels' as a basis for assessment. "PE teachers have been complaining for some time that senior leadership teams put them under pressure to produce detailed, half-termly assessments with levels and sub-levels that showed progress," she explains. "They were expected to assess like maths and science teachers; 99% of PE teachers we've spoken to are glad that levels have gone."

Across all key stages, the curriculum talks about inspiring pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport and physically demanding activities. It makes statements about young people being physically confident, and how sport builds character and helps embed values such as fairness and respect.

"It sounds a bit like how Grammar Schools used to do things," Emma Ball says. "Exercise affects the human brain. I'd like to see the impact of physical education on the individual as the driving force for PE teaching."

The draft curriculum also repeats government's frequently expressed desire that schools should help kids should do competitive sport and outside school through community links or sports clubs. That they want key stage 4 students to 'continue' taking part, shows an awareness that kids tend to drop out of sport and physical activity in their mid to late teens. That they expect schools to get better at extra-curricular sport, despite dismantling the school sport partnership infrastructure during the 2010 public spending review, is the clearest indication that this government wants self sufficient schools.

Joined up thinking?

For the last two years, secondary schools have had funding to release a PE teacher from their own teaching timetable, one day per week, to organise sport. This teacher either spent their time in his or her own school or, if the head and the PE department were so inclined, in local primaries. The money wasn't ring-fenced, though. If the head teacher wanted to use it to refurbish changing rooms or employ an extra music teacher, that could be done.

Earlier this year, the government announced its new £150m primary school sport initiative in March. This actually is ring fenced money, given directly to primary schools, which has to be spent on sport.

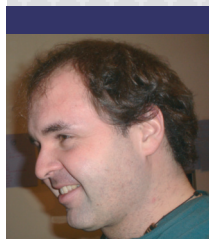
Secondary PE departments have long complained that primary schools don't adequately prepare children for the secondary school curriculum. When school sport coordinators worked with feeder primaries, the PE department had a presence in those schools and could help introduce activities that would help children with the transition from primary to secondary PE. Without school sport coordinators, there are concerns as to whether primary schools have enough expertise, or facilities, to make the most of the new government money. Also, that some head teachers will turn to private coaching companies for a quick fix; firms that will run PE lessons for two years, and then disappear when the money runs out. "If this happens, a school will be back to square one in two years time," warns John Steele, chief executive of school sport charity, the Youth Sport Trust. "We're looking for schools to develop their own capacity to deliver PE and sport."

Chris Willetts, director of the Tower Hamlets Youth Sport Foundation, believes that primaries will still need help from secondary schools, particularly in the early stages. "Some primaries have had no support for two years, since the school sport partnerships went, and will be starting from scratch, again," he states. "History tells us that you need some sort of infrastructure to make this work. When schools were left to their own devices in the past, often, nothing much happened."

Willetts is also concerned that the new arrangements will cause a divide between primary and secondary schools, with each looking at their own provision and how to pay for it, rather than thinking of designing the best possible physical activity experience for children.

The new PE document enables schools to build their own curriculum and extra curricular programme, based on the national curriculum's minimum requirements. Emma Ball worries, though, that academies don't have to follow it and that teachers who are so inclined, can get away with delivering something pretty ordinary, with just a few tweaks of their planning document to make things appear different. She fears that as a result, children in some schools may lose out. "Without clear and detailed expectations, PE teachers are more beholden to the culture of their school," she asserts. "A teacher with innovative or creative ideas could easily be told, 'we don't do things like that here,' if his or her head of department or senior leadership has a different agenda."

In other words, whether the new PE curriculum sets teachers free or brings about a postcode lottery, where the attitudes of individual department heads and senior leaders determine the type and quality of children's physical education experience, remains to be seen.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CRISPIN ANDREWS IS A FREELANCE WRITER. HE USED TO TEACH AND COACH CRICKET AND FOOTBALL, BUT DOESN'T DRINK TEA AND COFFEE OR WEAR TIES, AND HAS NEVER OWNED A JACKET WITH ELBOW PATCHES.

