

AN ANALYSIS OF REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AS AN INTERVENTION FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE IN STUDENTS ATTENDING ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL PROVISION IN ENGLAND

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Abstract

This research investigates the growing number of students that are being excluded or marginalised from secondary education (1, 2). It considers the 'gaps' in their learning and how specialist educators can address these and support them accessing full time education again, through programmes of physical activity. The following categories were identified: how the sessions were structured, and what benefits were obtained by the pupils during these sessions. Sessions were seen to have a positive impact on pupil behavioural patterns/decision making. This included evidence that sessions supported pupils to develop increased self-esteem and self-regulation. This outcome showed the potential to enable pupils to engage more deeply in their application of meta-cognition (3). This was achieved through: experiential learning in physically active settings; through a therapeutic approach; and making sequential improvements in pupil learning behaviours. Recommendations include teachers taking a growth mindset when supporting pupils, a greater focus on positive outcomes, and students leading in their own learning. Teachers were able to include different activities that supported the needs of the individual pupil, reflecting on therapeutic models of physical activity (4), and the impact of learning to learn for vulnerable young people.

Keywords: Ethnographic Therapeutic Intervention Self-Regulation

Introduction

Societal and class divides have always been prevalent but have been magnified through liberal capitalism and neoliberalism in today's educational backdrop. This has led to what Winlow & Hall (5) term 'social redundancy' for some of the public or community. School exclusion figures for England remain high, Alabbad (6) considers these as rising exponentially and discusses how permanent exclusion from school can have significant effects for pupils that find themselves removed or separated from their first-choice setting. Increasingly more subtle forms of exclusion from mainstream lessons and removal from class can impact vulnerable young people in the system, causing long term negativity for pupil self-identity and the relationships they hold with teachers and educational settings (1). This can be termed the 'inclusion illusion' (7), and suggests that longer term disconnects from subject specialists and mainstream lessons can widen gaps in learning from those in most need. This study aims to analyse intervention methods found in education, showing how marginalised groups can be reconnected with education, learning and the establishment as a whole (8). In particular this study analyses the provision of inclusive and restorative systems by specialist providers and the use of programmes of physical activity to support learning and act as an intervention strategy for individual behaviours.

In most cases pupils gain skills of resilience, become inquisitive and develop self-regulation in learning behaviours. Here pupils develop positive interaction with the education setting and protagonists within it (9). Positive interactions lead pupils to develop meta-cognitive strategies, taking increasing ownership of their learning and making a positive contribution to the educational setting. This study aimed to find out if the skills or attributes of introspection and empathy can be taught or imbedded in individuals finding it difficult to access mainstream education who were at risk from exclusion and marginalisation from educational settings. The study analyses the impact of physical activity on these young people and their relationship with education and educational settings, considering topics like 'learning to learn' and overall mental health (10). The objectives were 1) how educators provide for such groups or individuals, 2) the benefits regular physical activity has for secondary aged school pupils, and 3) provide recommendations for future practice.

Review of Literature

A little over 10 years ago Michael Gove and the Conservative government made a number of reforms to the teaching profession and education as a whole (11). In a drive to raise standards schools in England were to be held progressively accountable for academic performance, even if it meant reducing time spent on the more creative subjects like drama, music and physical education. This contradicts many research findings and the well held view that taking part in active learning supports cognition overall (12). For example, cognitive behaviour therapy often seeks to use physical representation of emotions and physical activity in itself as treatment for young people suffering from depression or anxiety (13). This is further supported by the recent publication of a UK government 'green paper' by the Department for Education (14) that highlights the importance of suitable settings for pupils diagnosed with special educational needs; including those with social / emotional and mental health conditions.

There is unanimous agreement from media, teaching unions, government policy makers and researchers that pupil behaviour and behaviour management is a key factor in considering pupil progress and school performance (15, 16). As Machin (17) identifies, exclusion rates remain at high levels and it appears that a minority of pupils within schools are marginalised as a result. This consequentially results in either significant short-term risk for those vulnerable young people or, if poor decision making is not addressed, long term societal problems with reoffending. Pattison (18) explains the need for a more inclusive approach to demonstrate what later research describes as a proactive model of behaviour support (2). Other curriculum areas have used more 'active' methods to help learning and they have worked, driving motivation and enthusiasm among secondary aged school pupils, emotions that suppress any need to behave in a negative manner. This may be perceived as a more inclusive representation of teaching methodology and supports access to learning for many pupils who find more formal systems difficult to work productively in.

Alternative methods of teaching and learning have been used over the years in different guises (19, 20, 21, 22). The barriers to entry for many students include trauma, mental health conditions and undiagnosed Special Educational Needs. There are a number of examples of educational organisations using programmes of physical activity to engage, motivate and support socially excluded learners in accessing education. They are reliant on a number of factors such as: staffing, their physical environment, financial backing or constraints, the nature of the students attending and transport implications. Building on previous work this study suggests that regular physical activity can help young people feel better, take part in positive experiences and start the meta-cognitive journey needed for learning.

Methodology

This current study aimed to investigate how educators implemented courses of regular physical activity to support learning in schools for pupils that are finding mainstream secondary education challenging. It sought to discover if physical activity could be used as an intervention for behaviour change. The key objectives were:

- Analysing the structure of programmes of physical activity.
- Studying the benefits of the programmes.
- Identifying best practice and providing recommendations for planning these programmes.

The research took an ethnographic approach as it was essential to study the protagonists in their environment and consider the reasons of why and how they ran their programmes in the way they did (23). The methods were selected to collect knowledge and experiences through semi structured interviews from a range of people, in this case a secondary school senior leader, a programme leader for an inclusion unit within a mainstream secondary school, and a programme leader from a specialist external setting for pupils who have been or are at risk of permanent exclusion from secondary school. The research sites were alternative provision and consisted of: a small group setting that provided an alternative solution to full classes but that was contained within a mainstream school; a pupil referral settings completely separate to mainstream schools that provided education for pupils who were all either permanently excluded from secondary school or at risk of permanent exclusion (24). The ultimate aim for these settings is to prepare these pupils to go back into a mainstream setting or, at the very least, prepare them for learning in education or training settings post-secondary school age. Data were analysed using thematic analyses to interpret the voices of teachers who worked with these vulnerable young people in programmes of physical activity. The intention of this ethnographic research was to apply findings from current professional practice to generate recommendations for further programmes of physical activity that support pupils removed from mainstream secondary school settings.

Findings

The secondary school in question was state funded, mixed gender intake, with a specialism as a sports college and the number on roll was more than 1200, the 'referral' unit existed as part of a multi academy trust and group of schools in the South of England. It provided education for students ranging in age from 5 to 16 years old. The teachers in the investigation are Teacher A (a physical activity programme leader and behavioural support coach within a mainstream setting), Teacher B (a programme leader providing physical activity sessions for excluded pupils within a specialist pupil referral unit) and Teacher C (a member of leadership team for the mainstream school).

Using Physical Activity as Therapy

The schools in this research repeatedly used the word therapy when discussing the qualities of their physical activity programmes. Research supports this concept as Sweeney (25) suggests the physical process of exercising improves mood and releases endorphins that help relieve stress and help the individual feel better. The structure of these type of sessions follow an informal discussion about challenges facing the referred pupil as he or she takes part in physical activity, Teacher B stated that physical activity:

‘Offers the chance to learn, where pupils have had a poor experience of school it can help restore their trust in the system’.

Teachers added that the sessions should be held on a regular basis, three or more times a week in order to get the most benefits from them.

Physical Activity helps pupils build relationships

Relationships were built and supported by strong foundations allowing marginalised pupils the opportunity to feel more included in the process of education. All three members of staff highlighted the need to tailor the sessions to meet the 'needs of the individual' (26), one went further and discussed the need for sessions to engage and support specifically those pupils with attachment disorders. Teachers allowed the important 'soft skills' of communication to be used during a 1:1 physical activity session, modelling behaviour and reciprocating through each session. Teacher B remarked, 'I am offering the chance to learn to learn for them'. Also, teachers structured activities so there was a necessity for mutual trust set against a perceived risk or danger for both, a reliance or guardianship under pressure. This was done in a variety of ways, for example belaying for each other on an indoor climbing wall or supporting during weight training were physical manifestation of the trust working under scrutiny. Teachers reiterated the need for this physicality in learning and it suggests there is an amount of embodied cognition for the learners as they continue on their journey.

Physical Activity helps with pupil mental health

For many pupils attending specialist provision and for those at risk of temporary or permanent exclusion from school their mental health may not be as regulated and well balanced as that of other pupils (27). Many are considered as requiring special educational needs for Social, Emotional and Mental Health reasons (28). Teachers in this study fully understood this and adapted their sessions accordingly, perhaps the best example coming from teacher B in the pupil referral unit.

'It's all about teaching the individual, progress does not follow a linear pattern, you have to fill in the gaps from their prior learning and knowledge overall'.

The teacher went on to describe how he used Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to help young people feel better able to access learning. Supporting them with the simplest of requests first if needed, feeding them if necessary, listening to them and providing constant positive feedback. Finally taking note of their physiological, safety and social needs before accelerating onto learning. This also suggests that the pupils considered most at risk may require very different teaching techniques to their mainstream counterparts. The traditional routes and measures of progress might be more aspirational or targeted over time rather than routinely used to plan activities. This research suggests a much more nuanced outlook to learning from the staff that is reflective of the sometimes-unpredictable nature of the pupils. Presenting session content to reflect the learner need or requirement rather than asking the learner to adjust to the content was of key importance, therefore adaptability seemed crucial.

Physical Activity builds self-esteem

Physical activity relies on correct planning of the sessions, considering ability levels, experience and other personal and environmental factors (29). These planned sessions came from many different activity areas such as resistance training, cardiovascular exercise, countryside walks, Outdoor and Adventurous Activities, racquet sports, boxing and cricket. Teacher A described at length how he uses a positive psychology model to set targets for the pupils and then achieve the targets using a combination of physical activity and 'life coaching' (30).

'as a father type of figure, I see the pupils feel hopeless, Physical Activity gives them success...there is a pupil-parent-school dissonance...they need to find their character strengths and build self-awareness'

'The PERMA model gets pupils to reflect and feel positive about themselves'

This style of positive psychology promoted through physical activity sessions gave the pupils an opportunity to show what they can do, because they felt that often in lessons they did not get the chance to do this and association was given to what they knowledge or skills they lacked or were

unable to perform. Teacher C discussed the same topic and added salient advice by suggesting pupils found most positive experiences by taking part in individual / non-competitive formats, often using specialist coaches where necessary. In this instance the coach delivered the specialist content and the pupils had the teacher encouraging / working alongside, providing a missing inner positive dialogue delivered from an external source or intervention. Through time this could be reduced but the teachers said the dialogue supported these learners with a new task in particular, also offering the opportunity to reflect on how they learned best during the lesson.

Physical Activity allows access to learning

Allowing pupils to access sessions at their own pace and working individually as well as in groups was important, this experiential learning was referred to by Teacher B and they go further by suggesting physical activity sessions at specialist provision could be learner led, removing the authority figure from the classroom. This type of approach still fulfilled safety and professional requirements but did not take the pupil through a preordained journey where the teacher gave various instructions. The Education Endowment Foundation (31) suggests this kind of approach will leverage learning through a process of metacognition. Pupils can access different levels of knowledge and taxation at their own pace and representative of their knowledge and ability, a constructivist method of learning. Teacher C identified this approach as staff understanding the academic and therapeutic needs of the pupil and pitching learning commensurately. It also highlights that the dialogue between staff and pupils becomes less centred on behaviour and more about their learning, which shifts the dynamic entirely, both vested interests now discuss progress rather than focusing on anything negative.

Conclusions

The research indicates that teachers should use a growth mindset and focus on positive pupil outcomes rather than specific areas of under-performance. Where possible they should use positive psychology methods to support learning, for example the PERMA model described by Teacher A. They can consider a wide range of sports, beginning with non-competitive individual activities and work upwards to more challenging situations. Where possible using qualified coaches to deliver and teaching staff to 'walk' the pupil through their learning. The following benefits of these programmes were actively observed:

- i. Participation in exercise and physically active learning helped engage vulnerable pupils back into learning in general. Providing access to other subjects and activities in education as a whole encouraged learners to go through a process of metacognition.
- ii. Over a course of time physically active sessions improved pupil behaviour and decision making as they become increasingly comfortable with rules, structure and self-regulation.
- iii. Regular participation in physically active learning sessions may have encouraged pupils to access higher and executive functioning skills, for example application of working memory and impulse control (32), in turn reducing more unitary thought processes that support poor behaviour.

This method of learning was identified as supporting vulnerable young people through a combination of experiential and constructive learning. It provided a sense of imbrication for the learner and a journey of embodied cognition that yields positive results. The staff were unanimous in view of the benefits regular physically active learning had for disadvantaged or marginalised secondary school pupils.

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