

Article

Most People Hate Physical Education and Most Drop Out of Physical Activity: In Search of Credible Curriculum Alternatives

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Abstract: High quality Physical Education should instigate and support all learners to develop into a lifelong participant in a way which upkeeps their own health, fitness, and well-being. There are, however, an ever-increasing number of children who drop out of participating in physical activities at the earliest opportunity, leading to an increase in sedentary lifestyles and a rise in childhood obesity. It is evidence such as this which indicates Physical Education, specifically in England, is not currently appropriate for all and requires change. To attempt to make the subject a more positive experience for all and to inspire lifelong involvement, varying the curriculum and including alternative activities for pupils might tap into useful wider cultures. This paper discusses the emergence of alternative sports, the challenges and synergies of implementation, and focuses on what could work and why.

Keywords: physical education; alternative sports; curriculum; ultimate frisbee; parkour



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1. Introduction

Physical education (PE) is the considered, continuous learning that takes place in the school's timetabled curriculum and is an entitlement for all learners. The outcome for learners is to develop their physical, social, and cognitive competence, confidence, and motivation through, in, and about the physical [1]. High quality PE should instigate and support all learners to partake in physical activity (PA) or sport and to provide openings for everyone to develop into a lifelong participant in a way which upkeeps their own health, fitness, and well-being [2]. In England, there are, however, an ever-increasing number of children who drop out of participating in sport and PA at the earliest opportunity, leading to an increase in sedentary lifestyles and a rise in childhood obesity [3]. With young people's commitment or interest in PA or sport being profoundly shaped by their school experiences in PE [4–7], this necessitates that those teaching PE in schools, must endeavour to foster the innate predisposition that young people have for moving and place movement of any kind central to all lesson objectives. However, while the subject has the opportunity to form enduring, positive memories and to inspire lifelong involvement, clearly, it conversely also has the influence to do the complete opposite by fashioning young people who are inactive, lack self-confidence, and avoid PA at all costs [8,9]. It is evidence such as this which indicates PE is not currently appropriate for all and requires change [10].

Excellence in teaching, including PE, is frequently acknowledged to be the most significant influence for shaping attainment in schools [11,12], with the quality of PE lessons fundamentally being dictated by the choice of activities that have been selected. Activities need to be fun, engaging, and aid every learner in making progress, but this is not an easy task, taking into account the varying abilities and motivations of each and every child [13].

Evidence does suggest that those who teach PE are resistant to change; they continually participate in reproductive practices and tend to make limited changes to curricula

delivered in schools [14]. Moreover, Simmons and MacLean (2018) [15] suggest the curricula delivered are reliant on more proactive teachers to teach the required wider variety of activities [16]. However, this provides something of a challenge when teacher training focused research suggests that a high proportion of teachers' subject knowledge is developed prior to initial teacher training [17–19], and when they do start working in school, they are shaped by a practice which is already occurring [20]. Consequently, individuals are less likely to deviate from dominant cultures, which, within PE curricula in schools, is dominated by a “sporting model” ([21], p. 494).

The reality of this practice amounts to the repetitive learning of techniques associated with a core curriculum of sports dominated by traditional games, which are not reflective of pupils' needs or the wider movement culture outside of school. Pupils face consistently regurgitated content, focused upon the mastery of performance skills, more often than not abstracted from their movement contexts. The exploration and learning of activities are severely restricted by short lessons, limited curricula blocks of sports, and teacher-directed learning. Despite the intention to facilitate development in the performance of these sport techniques, pupil progression throughout their years at school remains very limited [21–24]. The primary aim of this version of sport culture is to engender pupils' love of sport, but worryingly, it merely guarantees the development of the physically able [25]. PE subsequently serves as inadequate preparation for pupils to pursue a healthy active lifestyle in adulthood [26].

In recent decades, academics within the PE research community have proposed something of a rethink in how to tackle these challenges, with models-based practice (MBP) being advocated as a possible solution [27]. The models referred to within MBP refer to what are most commonly called instructional models, which set out a particular way of delivering certain aspects of the Physical Education curriculum, e.g., games. Located primarily in secondary school settings, the most popular advocated within Physical Education literature have been Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), Sport Education, and Co-operative Learning (see Dyson, Griffin and Hastie, 2004, [28]). However, while these model-based approaches address historical pedagogical challenges within PE, they still use the same traditional vehicle of ‘games’. It must be considered that it is the very activities themselves, however, that may indeed be the problem, and it is to this focus that the paper now turns.

To attempt to make PE a more positive experience for all and to inspire lifelong involvement, varying the curriculum and including alternative activities for pupils might tap into wider cultures. This paper discusses the emergence of alternative sports, the challenges and synergies of implementation, and focuses on what could work and why. It also proposes that school PE curricula are, in theory, at least flexible enough to incorporate newer forms of physical activity. To begin, the landscape on which this discussion sits must first be considered.

2. Setting the PE (and Sport) Landscape

Teachers of PE are challenged with a number of pedagogical, policy, and subject decisions that can make teaching and learning in the subject ‘complex’ [13]. Further to the curriculum requirements of PE, teachers are often tasked with servicing multiple agendas of promoting lifelong physical activity, developing sporting practices and habits, and improving the health and well-being of young people across the school day [1,29–31]. There are many differing ideas about what exactly the value, purpose, and what activities would best suit learners in PE, which can often lead to confusion over the purpose of physical education, sport, and physical activity among teachers and school leaders [1,4,5]. This is further confused when the terms physical activity, sport, and PE are habitually used by those teaching PE, but they are frequently unable to differentiate between them [32]. This leads to a number of challenging, reflective questions for those looking in and those who deliver PE. For example, is it the subject's responsibility to encourage learners to try a variety of activities? Conceivably, is it simply to develop and (importantly) to maintain

and encourage a physically active lifestyle, or does its value lie in its capability to cultivate character traits? Is it to inspire a level of teamwork or competitiveness? In a modern world, should PE's aim move more towards improving mental health [7,33–38].

Indeed, questions such as these and the question of the 'value' of the subject in part instigated the transformation from a 'traditional' games-dominated PE curriculum to one which is more academically rigorous [39,40]. Recent changes in curricula, in part, have had the aim to prevent the subject status being marginalised and to initiate authentic, educational worth in a heavily contested period for curriculum space [7,41,42]. The latest iteration of the National Curriculum for PE in England [43,44] has veered towards the dynamic hybrid of both recognising the cultural value of sport in addition to the educational nature and worth of the activities that make up PE, arguably creating dissonance over both the value and purpose and creating a lack of consensus over what activities should be taught [7].

Instigating sustainable PA and fashioning behavioural change in young people is equally challenging and multifaceted. Teachers, and, in particular, PE teachers, are increasingly tasked with encouraging PA within the school day and also outside of school. School children frequently remain sedentary on average between 4 and 5 h per day, and schools are an ideal setting to increase the PA levels of children and reduce sedentary behaviours [45,46]. Traditional approaches to tackling these issues have been aiming to increase the number of PE lessons and providing additional opportunities for extra-curricular sport [47]. Endorsing a whole-school method to PA is a prevalent procedure of government policy, intending to tackle escalating societal trepidations over young people's health. PA supporters have long called for an increase in children's physical activity levels in school, suggesting that any time spent taking part in physical activity would benefit health and may also even contribute to their overall academic performance [48]. Lately, more school-based PA programs in the UK have focussed on the promotion of "active miles," using approaches such as the Daily Mile [49] and the Golden Mile [50]. These initiatives are aimed to have children complete a mile of running (or walking) around the school grounds each day. There is limited evidence to suggest that they will increase lifelong participation, with both positive and negatives of implementation still remaining to be fully established [50]. Improving PA rates amongst children is repeatedly targeted and well documented in various health strategies around the globe because of an increasing Western "obesity epidemic" [51]. In England, the National Health Service (2018, [52]) established that 20% of children aged 10–11 years old were classed as obese with rising levels for children across the primary school years. Despite the various initiatives, however, there is currently limited research into their value and the forcing of activity upon children may well only serve to have the same impact that other types of PA have yielded. If the aim is to promote physical activity within the school and eventually throughout the child's lifespan, then perhaps the answer can be found in variety and alternatives. The notion that giving children the chance to take part in many different activities in the hope that they will find something they enjoy is something of an ideal [52,53]. There is evidence to suggest the sampling of different physical activities, or sporting activities, is linked to a longer sporting career and has positive implications for long-term PA involvement [52,53]. Just how different could and should PE become, though, and what alternatives are on offer?

3. The Emergence of Alternative Sports

The identification and academic study of alternative sporting activities is often credited to the work of Nancy Midol (see Midol 1993) [54] who first classified a group of activities using the term 'whiz' sports). Midol and Broyer (1995, p. 210, [55]) suggest that for such activities, "the culture is extremely different from the official one promoted by sporting institutions. The whiz sport culture is championed by avant-garde groups that challenge the unconscious defences of the existing order through which . . . society has defined itself for the last two centuries. These groups have dared to practice transgressive behaviours and create new values." Whilst Midol developed her thinking based upon the experiences

of French culture, in North America, the term 'alternative' became increasingly used to describe such departures [56,57].

Over the last two decades, there has emerged a body of academic literature examining the phenomenon of what has been variously termed, 'extreme, alternative, lifestyle, whiz, action, panic, post modern, post industrial and new sport' ([58], p. 2). Examples of such literature include studies of skateboarding [59,60], snowboarding [61,62], windsurfing [63], surfing [64], parkour [65–67], and ultimate frisbee [68–71]. While the adequacy of what is the most appropriate term with which to define such activities, commonalities indicate that they encompass a range of activities that broadly fail to fit into traditional conceptions of Western achievement sport [62,72]. The 'alternative' nature of these activities often refers to how such sports present a challenge to the traditional way of doing and understanding sport [73]. For the purpose of clarity alone, the phrase 'alternative sports' is the chosen term for this paper.

In-depth analysis within qualitative research, often in the form of sporting ethnographies [74], has revealed the complex meanings and importance that these activities represent for their devotees (see Rinehart and Sydnor, 2003 [56,71]), "for whom participation becomes a whole way of life, one that may be sustained from youth to retirement" ([7], p. 112). Findings indicate that they possess "characteristics that are different from the traditional rule bound, competitive and masculinised dominant sport cultures" ([75], p. 3), and many celebrate an artistic or flamboyant quality to their play [72].

Participation surveys across both North America and Europe reveal a specific trend within wider movement culture towards alternative sports (see Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2017; [75–78]). Such activities have "diffused around the world at a phenomenal rate and far faster than established sports" ([79], p. 9) [and] "have experienced unprecedented growth both in participation and in their increased visibility across public and private space" ([78], p. 113). Findings across Western Europe and North America indicate that alternative sports are "increasingly central to the physical activity and cultural lifestyles of young people" ([76], p. 110). For many, they have already both challenged and replaced traditional team sports [79–81].

4. PE and Alternative Sports—Challenges and the Synergies

The traditions and cultures within which alternative sports are found, whereby "participation in unstructured, unsupervised, peer-oriented activities' has been associated with poor adjustment" ([81], p. 197), has not helped their adoption in educational settings. Mass media has only furthered this distrust [82–84], with young people involved in activities such as parkour and skateboarding being labelled as public nuisances and sometimes even criminalised by law [85].

There are some clear pedagogical challenges and questions to the implementation of alternative sports. After all, what role should a teacher adopt in a culture that does not have a teacher? How can a teacher be expected to teach something they do not know about themselves? There are also logistical concerns. Alternative sports cannot always be easily resourced and could be potentially costly. They are also frequently considered dangerous and too risky for a class to participate in [86].

Yet examples of practices have indicated the potential that alternative sports have within the physical education curriculum (see Jones 2011 [87], lisahunter 2011 [88], lisahunter 2015 [89]), particularly to engage children with little interest in competitive sport [90]. Negative outcomes associated with those who dislike the traditional diet of competitive team games, for example, are less likely to be reported [90], especially if the true focus is on participation and if the pressure of performing well for the rest of the team is removed [81]. The nature of alternative sports removes this potentially stressful element as the competitive element is generally within the individual, beating his or her last performance, rather than someone else's [16]. While everyone has the potential to learn, success is largely dependent on the level of commitment and perseverance [90]. Yet while there are "no externally imposed barriers for bodily movement in these contexts, and that those involved feel able

to choose their own level of ambition . . . there is no room for idleness. Whatever level of skill participants involved strive to reach, they have to work for it" ([90], p. 2002). For these sometimes hard to reach pupils, alternative sports not only contribute to increased physical activity participation, but they may also support the development of competence, confidence, character, caring, and compassion and thus lead to thriving [81].

5. Examples of What Could Work and Why

In September 2013, the National Curriculum faced another change where attainment targets and statutory assessment arrangements were removed at key stages 3 and 4 for all subjects. While this allowed schools more academic freedom, in PE, the changes permitted extra autonomy, focusing more on covering a wider variety of physical activities, the capability to use strategies, tactics, and being effective in competition [16]. Therefore, using a greater variety of activities helps meet the requirements of curriculum whilst simultaneously supporting the subject's lifelong agenda and allows learners to construct their own choices and potential future engagement [91,92]. Two serious 'alternative' considerations that well neatly fit into these new orders are parkour and ultimate frisbee and will be explained in turn.

6. What Is Parkour?

Parkour, which is frequently (and incorrectly) referred to as free running, originated in the 1980s in France. The term 'parkour' originates from the words 'route' and 'course'. It has undergone rapid expansion all around the world [66,93–96]. It is usually a non-competitive activity where participants move spontaneously through and over whatever landscape appears in front of them, utilising the body's natural aptitude to either run, jump, climb, or complete quadrupedal movement [97,98]. Quadrupedal movement is the use all four limbs for walking or running, and if completed effectively, it should result in a smooth, graceful movement over the ground, allowing for quick changes in direction. Parkour requires its performers (frequently referred to as Traceurs) to convey differing obstacles comprising of different textures, surfaces, inclinations, sizes, and angles in the most effective and effortless way [99].

With the control of their own bodyweight through the differing plans of movement with ease [100]. Parkour centres on improving the necessary qualities needed for these movements, which encompass balance, cardiovascular fitness, strength, agility, coordination, creativity, and decision making [68,96,101]. Furthermore, parkour actively facilitates self-improvement in both a physical and mental capacity, with the participant actively striving to stretch their own ability. It has the goal of allowing them to be completely functional and allows far-reaching emancipation with the aim of developing self-confidence, independence, determination, and the capacity to make one's own decisions effectively, at the same time as inspiring creative movement, understanding of risk, modesty, respect for the environment and for each other, and discovery learning [86].

As a vigorous, varied, and aesthetic form of self-exploration, parkour is arguably an activity that schools should consider to meet their needs and those of the National Curriculum for Physical Education. In contrast to many other physical activities or sports, in that the training and skill development by the participant is undertaken by experimentation and self-discovery, rather than teacher or coach leading [66,96,97]. Furthermore, an attractive feature of parkour is the practicing of uploading videos, frequently referred to as samplers, which is an opportunity to publish their unique accomplishments on various social media platforms, which is particularly popular with a teenage audience. Leveraging online networks has the conceivable effect of facilitating engagement given the capacity to disseminate virally whilst simultaneously assisting collective support [102,103], different to conventional methods of communicating and moving with other people and places in society. Additionally, parkour allows natural differentiation as learners are able to set their own goals in what they are trying to achieve. For example, this could simply be the distance jumped or the complexity of a move, which in turn not only tests an individual's physical

ability but also one's mental ability in actually assuming the challenge. Enthusiasts of parkour make some bold claims, which include that it will make you:

Stronger, faster, fitter and more agile than you ever thought possible. It'll give you increased coordination, functional movement skills and problem-solving tools that will cross over into every other aspect of your life [102].

Using one's social environment to develop skills through exploration and develop individuals that are flexible, all-around performers allows for many of the attributes of contemporary approaches to learning skills. Contemporary pedagogical methods endeavour to promote various aspects, including physical health and mental health, whilst also striving to allow individuals to achieve their own athletic potential [103].

Parkour can be seen as a contrast to ordinary ways of moving and interacting with people and places in modern society. Arguably, Parkour could be part of inspiring a high-quality national physical education curriculum, allowing pupils to succeed and excel. Providing opportunities to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness, whilst achieving developing competence in a broad range of physical activities akin to traditional gymnastic movement and could help young people continue to lead physically active healthy lifestyles [104]. Furthermore, on a practical level, parkour is a low-cost activity, and limited equipment would be required for schools to participate in [68].

7. What Is Ultimate Frisbee?

Known simply as 'Ultimate' to participants (and referred to as such from here forward) "is a fast paced, non-contact, mixed team sport played with a flying disc (or Frisbee), which marries features of a number of invasion games, such as American football and netball, into a simple, yet demanding game" (Griggs, 2011, p. 98, [69]). Believed to have first been played in the UK at the University of Warwick in the late 1970s, the sport spread gradually across other UK higher education institutions before graduates formed fledgling city-based clubs [105]. Today, the actual number of active participants in the UK has recently been estimated at 57,000 [106].

As a high-intensity team game, Ultimate is well placed to contribute to the aims of the National Curriculum for Physical Education as it offers a breadth of experience and equipment, sustains physical activity for a period of time, and is competitive in nature. What is more, at its core is its ethos of the 'Spirit of The Game', which delivers on an aspect of the stated 'Purpose of Physical Education', which is to "build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect" (DfE, 2014, p. 260, [107]). The official rules of Ultimate actually start with statements making such points, covered in 1.1 to 1.4 of the WFDF 2021 Rulebook [107].

"Ultimate is a non-contact, self-officiated sport. All players are responsible for administering and adhering to the rules. Ultimate relies upon a Spirit of the Game that places the responsibility for fair play on every player . . . It is trusted that no player will intentionally break the rules; thus there are no harsh penalties for inadvertent breaches, but rather a method for resuming play in a manner which simulates what would most likely have occurred had there been no breach. . . . Highly competitive play is encouraged, but should never sacrifice the mutual respect between players, adherence to the agreed-upon rules of the game, player safety or the basic joy of play" (WFDF, 2021 [3,107]).

In sociological terms this approach has been expressed as 'cooperative competition', whereby the structure may be competitive, but the people playing within the structure are co-operative [108,109]. Many of these practices are operationalised and reinforced by the resolution of disputes when, for example, fouls occur. It is thought that, as a consequence of active engagement engaged in self-referring practices, players enter a social contract [110] in which they are mutually obliged to follow the rules rather than look to a referee or umpire [111]. This moral obligation to 'fairness' is challenged in many other sports, but it appears to be a very powerful theme in shaping the culture of Ultimate [69].

Notions of gendered discourses located in PE and sporting practices are well documented (see Theberge, 2000 [111]; Stride et al., 2018 [112]). A central theme of establishing and maintaining the masculinity–sport axis is an empowerment that results from emphasising the importance of team sports based on strength and speed such as football and rugby, which are prevalent in secondary school PE [113]. This typically excludes females and results in well-established separatist policies of single sex activities and competition—with girls typically playing games such as netball and NOT with boys [114].

Ultimate has historically been mixed and, as discussed earlier, serves as an attraction for both men and women for the purposes of socialising and as a locus for perhaps a less aggressive form of performed masculinity that differs from masculinities in traditional sport [115], not least because they have evolved on sites which do not exemplify this form [116]. One advantage of both ultimate frisbee and parkour is that both activities can allow mixing genders and additionally have limited physical contact amongst the participants, which can allow an easier implementation and overcome some of the issues.

8. Conclusions

History shows that PE cultures have been slow to change and continue to be dominated by reproductive practices and behaviours. Specific activities such as games remain vehicles for much of what is liked and disliked by pupils and thus activity choice should be a serious consideration for all those that deliver PE. The rejection of physical activities by young people which are often first sampled within PE is a sobering fact. The adoption of more alternative activities in Western cultures by young people in their own free time poses questions as to whether there is something to be learned by their attraction. To make such a move will, of course, challenge the resourcing and flexibility of schools and, in some cases, the identity and value of the staff themselves.

However, with more open and flexible curriculum opportunities available, activities such as parkour and ultimate frisbee appear to represent choices which are located close to existing provision but make positive steps to the appeal that alternative sports possess. If, as Penney et al. (2009, p. 438, [117]) suggests, these newer forms of activity “present important ground for an exponential personal development of students”, then they should be considered worthy of serious consideration by PE practitioners.

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