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Re-thinking sports and physical activity participation strategies

Inspired by the Sport Under Pressure conference at the University of Birmingham and with evidence from a physical literacy seminar at the University of Bedford, Joe Coach makes a plea for less isolated treatment of symptoms and more joined-up action to tackle root causes.

“Insanity is doing the same things over and over again, and expecting different results.” Albert Einstein

Following the recent article under the Joe Coach banner [*TLR, May 2011*] chronicling lessons learned at Birmingham University’s recent Sport Under Pressure conference, I was determined to investigate some solutions to one of the key sporting issues facing us today, our inability, as a nation, to change our current patterns and inequities in sports and physical activity participation. Despite efforts by Sport England and many related sports organisations and their leaders over recent years, we seem to be trapped in a cycle where sport and physical activity participation has flat-lined and is reflective of our socio-economic inequalities.

At the Birmingham event it was argued by one eminent speaker that Sport England’s current sports participation targets were unrealistic and their approach was doomed to fail. Furthermore, in a recent and at times controversial paper entitled *More Than A Game* the Centre for Social Justice suggested that “instead of highlighting under-performance by individual NGBs, Sport England and the Government would do well to consider the overall value of the strategy adopted in 2009, and to question whether they made the right decision. It may be simply that NGBs are not the best possible partners to deliver a mass participation agenda.”

When examining this crucial issue, we need to stand back from the usual blame game that tends to dominate the sector and to fundamentally look at the processes that underpin participation in sport and physical activity. We need to consider radically different solutions. These solutions first require a common understanding of the distinction between the symptoms and the root causes of the current sport and physical activity participation patterns. Then using this common understanding as a cornerstone for policy-making and strategic developments, there needs to be a radically different approach which is outlined in a six-point plan for transforming engagement in sport and physical activity in a post 2012 world at the end of this article.

When trying to better understand and diagnose our present-day sport and physical activity participation challenge, I decided that I needed to consult a few experts on this matter, hence my attendance at a recent international physical literacy conference at the University of Bedford. The conference was billed as a get-together of eminent researchers and practitioners involved in physical literacy, a topic which has seen significant growth and interest in recent years. The goal of the conference was to share best practice, to plan ahead focusing on common issues, to foster the development of people with a commitment to physical literacy, and to promote the understanding and application of the concept more widely. As at all good conferences there was a session at the beginning to clarify terminology and meaning so that all delegates were on the same page. A short (albeit rather academic) definition of physical literacy was accepted, namely “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the life course as appropriate to each individual’s endowment”. My interpretation of this in layman’s terms is: the things we do and encourage to ensure that people are equipped to follow a path of lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity.

There then followed two days of keynote speakers and themed workshops which were high quality in terms of both hardcore knowledge and varied

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presentation and learning styles. The key learning point was confirmation of what many teachers and coaches know from experience, namely that there is strong evidence that the seeds of participation are sown at a very early age. While many coaches identify the skill-hungry years of key stage 2 (8 to 12 years) as crucial for encouraging the development of basic sport skills, it has been shown through various studies that problems with motor skill development can be traced back even further to the early years (0 to 7 years).

Several keynote speakers and workshop leaders demonstrated that if various key reflex movements are not encouraged in the early years this can lead to motor skill and confidence problems in later childhood and adolescence, which then has a major knock-on effect into adulthood. Studies were outlined that showed how children's poorly developed early years' physical development (for example, reflexes, posture, balance, visual perception and auditory processing) had an important bearing not only on future motor skill development and participation in physical activity but also on specific learning difficulties, behavioural or emotional conditions and obesity problems.

In one UK study it was demonstrated that 48% of children in the 4 to 5 years age group had evidence of "traces of residual primitive reflexes". This result was compared to other international studies and in Germany, for example it was shown that 50% had noticeable traces and in 22% of the sample strong traces existed in the same age group. These findings of immature motor development were correlated to various other patterns such as low educational attainment, behavioural problems such as ADHD and to early signs of obesity. Furthermore, various studies from both Germany and America demonstrated that assessing neuro-motor development and implementing appropriate intervention programmes in the early years led to significant improvements from physical development, behavioural and learning perspectives. The key message was that children need to be given enough time for free play movement, play and exploration, social interaction including singing and reading where parents and significant others are actively engaged with the children. One really challenging message was that while young children need free play time, the development of these key foundation reflexes and underpinning motor skills does not just happen naturally and requires the input from a skilled practitioner (such as a play leader or nursery teacher or in later childhood years primary school teacher or physical activity practitioner) to encourage appropriate challenges and movement activities within a conducive learning environment.

Other similar messages and potential solutions to the challenge of current participation patterns were offered from various keynote presentations and workshops involving speakers from USA and Canada. In Canada a physical literacy movement has grown out of a collaboration and partnership between education, health and sport. While it was evident that there were still many challenges to be addressed, the Canadian contingent at the conference demonstrated very effectively how they were promoting the message of children's entitlement to be physical literate. They outlined the resources and training which has been developed for parents, teacher and coaches for use in activity programme for ages 0 to 6 years (Active Start) and ages 6 to 9 years (Fundamentals,) and what support is being accessed via national and provincial government departments. Most striking was the effect that the focus on physical literacy has had on physical education in Canada where the concept is increasingly impacting upon the PE curriculum. Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada are promoting high-quality, daily physical activity and improving the training for teachers in elementary schools through development of new courses and resources. It is salutary to note that the Fundamental Movement Skills series created by PHE has received financial assistance from Sport Canada.

In a similar vein a presentation from the USA was highlighted. In Ohio a 12-week intervention is available to local communities where motor skill deficiencies and other related problems are identified within children. Studies have identified various cycles of poverty in local, deprived communities where lifestyle patterns are clearly correlated with lack of exercise, poor health, nutrition and sleep. Statistics reveal that when gross motor tests are carried out there is a very high proportion of children below the 25% percentile for the developmental norms for their particular age.

The 12-week intervention programme, promoted as "SKIPP into an Active Future", involves one hour of vigorous movement activity which has elements of both semi-structured motor skill learning and free play as well as education for both parent and child around the benefits of physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. An evaluation of this programme has showed statistically significant improvements in gross motor skill development compared to groups who were

not exposed to the SKIPP programme and also general improvements in general health, behaviour and educational attainment. The key to the success of this scheme unsurprisingly appeared to hinge on the quality of the practitioners delivering the programme who seemed (in our world) to display the best attributes of a nursery teacher, playgroup leader, health visitor or tumble tots coach.

Linked to the SKIPP programme was a discussion around “sensitive periods of learning” (or what in sports coaching is often referred to as “windows of opportunity”) which stretched across a number of workshops and discussion groups. Research commissioned by Sport England back in 2002 highlighted the importance of developing reflexive, rudimentary and fundamental movement skills in the early years of childhood as vital for both subsequent skilled performance in sport and general lifelong participation in physical activity. This is such a vital period because during their early years children are more receptive to learning these types of motor and movement skills which is why, in coaching, we refer to these as the “skill-hungry years”.

This is not to say that it is impossible to learn new skills when older; it is just that if a child has a well-developed bank of underpinning generic movement skills (skipping, throwing, catching, twisting, turning) he or she will find it a lot easier to develop the more advanced and specialised skills required by various sports and physical activities (such as football skills, tennis skills, athletics skills). Those of you who are sport-specific coaches will understand the different challenges we all face when confronted with a physically literate child with good all-round motor skills compared to someone who lacks basic motor skills and self-confidence.

Other research was presented to show that those with well developed motor skills during childhood tended to follow what was termed a “spiral of engagement” which resulted in a positive self-image. Unsurprisingly, these are the children who are seen as the “sporty types” and will tend to have sound motor skills that will enable them to pick up a variety of different sports and activities as suit them throughout their life cycle. Conversely, children with poorly developed motor skills will tend to shy away from physical challenges that are perceived to be beyond their capabilities and will form a negative self-image towards the end of childhood. They will see themselves as not being competent or confident at sporting activities. Unsurprisingly, these are the children who will tend to be inactive and drop out of sport and physical activity as they experience motivational issue and struggle with skill-learning sequences and knock-on self-confidence perceptions. Interestingly, recognised models and theories around motor skill learning refer to the transition through the “sport skill proficiency barrier” between approximately 7 and 11 years of age as being a key factor, which I think a lot of frontline coaches can relate to in their everyday experiences.

Indeed a positive development addressing this ‘proficiency barrier’ issue was highlighted in one of the workshops where the various initiatives from the world of coaching both in Canada and the UK (notably Coaching Children Curriculum using the 5 Cs philosophy in UK and PHE Canada Fundamental Movement Skills Resource series) were outlined. These approaches involve a move away from coaches teaching sport-specific skills and an increasing focus on the development of children’s general movement skills. In one of the workshops, led by Sportscoach UK, the rationale for this was clearly explained. Research shows that bypassing fundamental movement skills development by concentrating on early specialisation in one sport can undermine a child’s engagement in physical activity and sport. Of course many teachers and coaches will remember the importance of developing ‘foundation sport skills’ (for the more cynical of you out there we used to call this primary physical education!) before moving on to ‘participation’ in a sport and for a few progressing to ‘performance’ and ‘excellence’. The key message here, however, was that a narrow focus on adult forms of sport and early specialisation in childhood without a solid foundation in a broad range of underpinning movement skills was likely to be detrimental to subsequent stages of skills acquisition. This in turn can impact upon drop out in that activity and is also likely to limit opportunities to partake in other physical activities due the narrow, one-sided nature of their repertoire of motor skills.

Driving home after this interesting and informative conference, I reflected on a number of things. I started to realise that, despite all the great work that goes on in sport coaching (largely led by a vast army of volunteer coaches), we – by which I mean all the relevant stakeholders who impact upon the participation agenda and are trying to change participation trends for the better – were tackling the problem from the totally wrong perspective. Getting to grips with the

current participation challenge cannot just be about trying to turn around post-16 young people who are disaffected with sport and physical activity, although schemes like this must happen.

We need measures to address the root causes of the problem at a much younger age. I started to think that if we are to properly address the issue in this country some radical thinking together with long-term planning and joint action is urgently required. With the soft legacy for the 2012 Olympics still all a bit up in the air, here is Joe Coach's six-point plan for the future.

1. Advocacy and collaborative working

Learning from our overseas friends, the education, play, health and sport sectors need to start working together and advocating children's entitlement to physical literacy. Many key organisations such as the Association of Physical Education ("Learning to Move and Moving to Learn") and Play England ("Right to Play") have strap lines and slogans that need to be joined up into a coherent campaign to educate policy-makers about the vital importance and benefits of the population being physically literate.

It is clear that developing children's physical literacy is a much bigger priority in the Wales and Northern Ireland with an active involvement of their respective sport councils. If we in sport understand the evidence base together with the key drivers and processes of engaging in sport and physical activity, it should be patently obvious that sport councils and other sporting bodies have an important role to play in ensuring the development and delivery of high-quality and appropriate physical literacy programmes for children and young people. The question has to be asked of both Sport England and the Youth Sport Trust: why are you not working together to reinvigorate some of the great programmes and products of the past such as Top Tots, Top Play and Top Parent?

2. Joined-up communication and education

Making people, and especially parents, aware of the importance of children being physically literate in terms of the implications for physical activity, general health and wellbeing in later life is a major issue that needs addressing.

There are lots of different organisations who are promoting their own messages, such as the British Heart Foundation (Keep your Kids Active), Play England (Playday) and the Department of Health (Change 4 Life Campaign) but there appears to be little or no co-ordination of these messages. Surely someone or somebody should be co-ordinating a mainstream and social media campaign about the importance of children being active, emphasising the educational, health and sporting benefits of physical literacy?

I know we live in times of austerity but surely the relevant powers-that-be could pull together a campaign and related awareness programme for parents who could, if given the appropriate information, guidance and advice, make a significant difference over the long-term. The focus of any campaign should be getting people to understand the interdependence of engagement in sport and physical activity through the life cycle with motor skill learning and play time during childhood.

3. National guidance and curriculum development

Let's be brave and publish nationally agreed guidance to help people to achieve being physically active and literate throughout the life cycle. Let's follow the example of the Department of Health which has recently published the first ever guidelines for 0 to 5 year-olds recommending that such children (assuming they can walk) should be active for about three hours a day.

Tackling activity and obesity problems is seven times more effective if dealt with before five years of age compared with six years and older. While knowing this is a great step forward, it does little to meet the need for appropriately skilled practitioners to facilitate the development of appropriate motor skills. What I propose is a set of complementary messages and related support from the Department of Education about the importance of physical literacy as it relates to the Early Years Foundation and Primary Schools Physical Education curriculum.

The amount of time allocated to initial teacher training (ITT) for primary teachers and the lack of specialist physical education teachers in our primary school system has been a long-running bone of contention. The lack of any real progress on this matter requires a different approach. Let's consider ways in which we can get appropriately qualified and skilled practitioners, such as play leaders, children's physical activity instructors and multi-skills sports coaches, working alongside primary teachers to help develop children's physical literacy.

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No doubt there are similar issues in the world of up-skilling pre-school teachers, play leaders, nursery nurses and health visitors about how to develop appropriate reflex and basic movement patterns but let's at least have a go; if we allow the present trends to continue we are only stocking up more participation and obesity problems for the future.

4. Setting measurable norms and monitoring systems

We should follow the example of other countries and establish norms for the development of key motor skills during childhood together with some simple protocols or measurement tools so that children's motor skills can be assessed in terms of progress.

Just as we are starting to do with the fight against obesity, we should develop and implement motor skill intervention programmes across all forms of education. This would ensure that children do not fall too far behind in any aspect of their development.

There appears to be a growing number of healthy living projects at a local level, such as the Wave Project in West Midlands primary schools which encourages healthy eating and an extra 30 minutes of daily exercise using various established childhood exercise programmes, such as Take 10, Wake Up & Shake Up, Activate and Positive Play. This type of initiative must be championed as a great way forward but much more needs to be done.

Currently annual measurements are taken for height and weight as part of a health-checking system. As part of this programme why not start to integrate progress in relation to developmental norms for motor skill development? It is clear that health professionals are keen to see lots of activity that helps promote health and wellbeing but perhaps what is missing is a consideration of the quality of that movement activity learning and what interventions in terms of improved motor skills development will add value in terms of future capability to participate in a variety of situations. The danger of following a health-only monitoring and intervention programme is that we get a lot of reasonably healthy individuals who have poor motor skills. So sitting alongside these health programmes (or as an integral part of them) we need to have the input of some monitoring of motor skills linked to a set of agreed development norms and intervention programmes as required.

5. Workforce development and centres of excellence

Mention has already been made about the importance of developing skilled practitioners. Whether they are early years teachers, teaching assistants, play leaders, health professionals, physical activity practitioners, primary teachers or sports coaches they need training in the relevant aspects of delivering high-quality and effective programmes that promote physical literacy.

This is probably the single most important aspect of this six-point plan for without an appropriately trained and skilled workforce progress in other key areas will be severely hampered.

When researching this topic I came across an interesting initiative in Scotland called Basic Moves which was created in 2004 to help all young children (5 to 7 years) develop a basic movement foundation through provision of a professional learning programme for teachers and physical activity professionals. The key question has to be why the PE profession has not taken such a positive initiative forward to a wider audience? If action and leadership in this key area relating to the teaching of primary PE cannot be progressed I propose that the way forward will be to develop specialist qualifications and higher education centres of excellence for learning and development that enable coaches to make the transition to recognised teaching status so that they are able to deliver programmes both inside and outside the PE curriculum.

Basically, if the world of physical education cannot address this issue it will have to be addressed by the sports coaching sector through the development of appropriately qualified and skilled children's coaches.

6. Long-term approach to implementation

Understand that all of these proposals will take time as this is about changing people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. It is about developing a new culture in which there is a common goal around physical literacy while recognising that education, health and sport all need to play different but complementary roles. Just for a change let's stick to a joined-up policy that is not only evidenced-based but given enough time to work.

Joe Coach is the *nom de plume* of a highly experienced and impressively qualified sports coach.

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