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# **Exploring Student Attitudes To Outdoor Education Within A Physical Education Curriculum**

The completion of this Professional Development Project aims to extend and further the researcher's professional development and progress through the identification and development of an innovative aspect of practice. In order to decide upon an area of study which would benefit the researcher, but also develop the PE department within the research's current placement school (School X) the author collaborated with several members of the PE department. An area of focus for School X at GCSE Physical Education (PE) is Outdoor Education (OE), completing Orienteering and Hillwalking as part of the practical aspect of the GCSE course. However, no such activity is taught at Key Stage 3 (KS3) level in the PE curriculum. It was decided that the aim of this study would be to explore student attitudes to OE delivered within a PE curriculum to KS3 pupils. These attitudes will be compared to other activity areas, such as; Athletics, Games, Gymnastics, Swimming and Dance. School X have a member of the PE staff trained in Orienteering and Hillwalking and have had several Orienteering courses set up around the school grounds. School X has also been mapped and scaled as part of this set-up, making it an accessible activity to deliver within the PE curriculum as it can be delivered on the school grounds. Currently, Orienteering is offered as one of the activities to GCSE PE pupils, however, it is only used with KS3 pupils for one off lessons, i.e. there is no formal unit of work devised for Orienteering at KS3 level.

OE and Dance are currently non-statutory components of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) for PE at KS3, with Games, Athletics, Gymnastics and Swimming being statutory components (NIC, 2007). School X has an admirable PE curriculum, planning and delivering lessons that cover all six of these areas. In School X, at KS3, classes will have two periods of PE, with an additional two game periods each week.

A unit of work for Orienteering will be devised between the researcher and the current PE department in School X, which will be delivered to two Year 10 classes during PE lessons. This study will focus on student attitudes toward OE before and after the unit of work was completed over five or six weeks. Year 10 students will complete a questionnaire before the first lesson of Orienteering and also at the end of the completed unit of work. The results will be analysed to explore whether attitudes towards OE had changed after participating in Orienteering and comparing these attitudes to those of other activities delivered within the curriculum. The researcher, along with the PE department will explore if OE should be more incorporated in to the learning experiences of KS3 students in School X.

## **Literature Review**

### **Attitudes towards Physical Education**

Attitudes can shape our behaviours, born from beliefs that individuals have about people or things, and can determine individuals' involvement in certain activities, influence the goals individuals set and choose to abandon (Rikard & Banville, 2006). In PE, being aware of students' beliefs can be a critical to understanding their interests, dislikes, and involvement in

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certain aspects of the curriculum (Strand & Scantling, 1994).

Subramaniam and Silverman (2007) discuss that a positive attitude towards PE can impact upon student learning and enjoyment of the class and is also an essential component to encouraging an active lifestyle. Developing these positive attitudes towards PE, a variety of interesting activities are required to be delivered by educators, generating active participation and a sense of fun (Rikard & Banville, 2006). There has been research found that students have negative experiences of PE and in some cases stated that they hated PE (Olafson, 2002; Hashim et al. 2008). Specifically researching female students' attitudes to PE, Olafson (2002) found that although these students revealed they hated PE, they did not hate being active. It was found that the dislike towards the subject stemmed from official demands from the Norwegian curriculum, how the subject was communicated by the PE teacher and also poor or intolerant peer relations within the class. In support of this research, Fisette (2011) also found female students' experiences of PE showed concern about being watched by both peers and teachers and judged on their bodies and skills, preventing them from feeling safe and comfortable in class. Although both these studies focus of female experiences, Fairclough, Stratton and Baldwin (2002) state there is reason to believe that male students could also suffer from negative experiences in PE, but their experiences are harder to document and have not been researched extensively.

Research supports the notion that there is a strong association between a growing negative attitude towards PE and the decline in physical activity that an individual participates in throughout the stages of maturation (Stelzer et al. 2004) and that students with a negative attitude towards PE will be less likely to participate in physical activity throughout their lives (Carlsson, 1995).

Smith et al. (2007) discussed how traditional youth sports have dominated PE for years. For students who have dropped out of these organised traditional youth sports outside of school, it is thought that they will not respond positively to PE, if PE continues to be an extension of the negative experience in these activities (Skirstad, Waddington & Safvenbom, 2012). If the PE curriculum overlaps too much with organised and competitive sport, it will reinforce those negative attitudes, experiences and behaviours already present in certain students and will simply enforce the positive experiences of those involved already involved in this type of activity, potentially not leading to developing the individual student (Safvenbom, Haugen & Bulie, 2015).

Rikard and Banville (2006) carried out research with over 500 high school students across six schools, focussing on their attitudes to PE. The methods of data collection in this study were questionnaires and focus groups for students. The questionnaires included both Likert-Scale questions and open-ended questions. In nearly all focus groups, students complained about the lack of variety in the curriculum delivered. One student in the focus group stated, "It's the same thing every year", in their opinion of the sports activities available. Other students in focus groups suggested including specific activities such as outdoor activities and other activities that they had never done before.

## **Outdoor Education**

Dyment (2016, p. 148) defines OE as focusing 'on nature, risk, adventure, skill development, and social and interpersonal development'. Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) and OE

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can produce many positive health and well-being benefits which may be difficult to achieve through other means (Webber & Hardwell, 2019). OAA and OE can provide opportunities for holistic education (Wattchow & Brown, 2001), and enhanced self-awareness and interpersonal skills. In addition to these benefits, OAA and OE can offer opportunities that cultivate life skills, including risk management, independence and resilience. OAA activities can offer experiences that create vivid long-term memories, through methods of exploration in learning. The OAA activities are different to those activities of normal family experiences, such as holidays of visiting relatives or friends and they can help develop healthy lifelong habits, positively influencing academic attainment (Webber & Hardwell, 2019).

In a world of growing electronic devices and social media encouraging sedentary behaviours in young people, society and policy makers have begun to emphasise the need and benefits of outdoor physical activity (Sharma-Brymer & Bland, 2016). It has been found that young people connecting with nature have seen mental health benefits (Maller & Townsend, 2006). Along with improvements in mental health, other benefits to outdoor physical activity and education have been observed by Kuo and Taylor (2004). One benefit observed by the authors was that children diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder had an increased capacity to concentrate and had significant positive behaviour changes when they spent more time outside and in nature. This suggests that OAA could be a positive activity to ensure inclusion within the PE setting, if positive behaviour is seen in children who have additional learning needs.

OAA has been incorporated into education system for over a century (Webber and Hardwell, 2019). At present, OAA and OE is a non-statutory component of the PE curriculum at KS3 (NIC, 2007). However, advocates of the learning area have justified OE and its place in the curriculum, that extends further than just the physical and psychomotor aspects of PE (Bailey, 2002). OE can make clear and valuable contributions to other areas of the curriculum, such as Geography, Biology and Citizenship (Dismore & Bailey, 2005). To deliver OE successfully and effectively, Thomas (2019) analysed four different studies which focused on developing features that were central to OE teaching and learning. From the four studies (Cosgriff, 2000; Blenkinsop, Telford & Morse, 2016; Sutherland, Stuhr & Ayvazo, 2016; Williams & Wainwright, 2016), Thomas (2019) created a theoretical framework, combining the findings from these studies to develop the four key teaching and learning strategies for effective OE. The four strategies are; experiential learning, carefully sequenced and placed activities, a facilitative teaching style and active engagement.

## **Experiential Learning**

Several terms have been used to define the process of learning from experience. John Dewey (Dewey and Dewey, 1915) discussed “learning by doing,” while Wolfe and Byrne (1975) discussed the term “experienced-based learning.” Hoover and Whitehead (1975, p. 25) define experiential learning as: ‘Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively and behaviourally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement.’

For more than 100 years, the works of John Dewey (1916) have advocated the values of experiential education. Dewey accentuates that experiential learning (hands-on, active, in-context) is an essential to the process of meaningful and comprehensive student learning. Throughout the past 20 years, the negative consequences attached to low test scores have

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influenced schools and teachers to narrow the curriculum, prioritising test preparation and raising test scores (Berliner, 2011; Blazer, 2011). As a consequence, student-centred, experiential learning that incorporates subject matter in meaningful ways have been de-emphasised or eliminated (Mora, 2011). Although this research is based from the school system in the United States, perhaps similar trends can be observed in the Northern Ireland school system. OE is one type of experiential education that is currently receiving less emphasis in schools. Because of the priority and increased emphasis on test-based education, there are fewer school-based opportunities for children to experience nature and actively participate in environmental science outside (Mora, 2011)

James and Williams (2017) discuss how each teacher has experienced students in their classes who lack confidence in the classroom because they are uncomfortable with the traditional school related-skills involved and that OE provides them with an opportunity to thrive in an outdoor field experience where they can demonstrate their skills in a more hands on, active and experiential manner. The same could be suggested for students in a PE setting, lacking confidence in games-related activities and more comfortable with the freedom that OE and OAA can provide.

If successful, engagement in practical experiential learning should 'produce habits of emotion and intellect which would procure a worthy cultivation of leisure' (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 138).

This thinking would involve ensuring that the engagement of students and autonomy in learning were a priority when planning lessons and how to cultivate habits and values effectively. Dewey and Dewey (1915) discussed the problem of students losing interest in formal group exercises and whether or not increasing the variety of activities available would solve this, or if the solution was to cultivate a deeper experiential engagement in activities.

When students' experiences in activities are perceived as meaningful, they empower individuals to engage fully in that certain activity (Leffert, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1997). Students may perceive an activity as meaningful if they have some control over what to do, when they do it and what the purpose behind it is. Students who engage actively beyond the realms of the classroom have many unique opportunities to develop autonomy (Horwitz, 1989). These increased opportunities for autonomy are pedagogically valuable and necessary in our culture (Sibthorp et al. 2008). OAA offers students opportunities to engage actively as a measure of control and choice are provided, which are not often experienced in their daily lives. Autonomy in experiential learning can lead to empowerment, which in turn results in personal growth (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Gambone and Arbretton (1997) identified several core program elements that are often accentuated in experiential education settings, which include many OAA programs. The elements include: a sense of safety, interesting and challenging activities, a sense of belonging, supportive relationships with adults, involvement in decision making, opportunities to experience leadership and involvement in the community. These elements are suggested to contribute to youth development. The dimensions of autonomy experienced in OAA (e.g. responsibility, leadership development and self-reliance) are what authors Gambone, Klem and Connell (2002) and Witt and Caldwell (2005) suggest that young people need to mature in today's contemporary culture. OAA and OE may be able to offer these experiences, where other activities in PE may fall short.

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Dyment (2005) suggests that students learning in school grounds can achieve similar benefits that arise from learning in other outdoor locations, in a multisensory and contextual mode of learning. As outdoor learning engages skills from various different disciplines (Dismore & Bailey, 2005), it could also enhance multidisciplinary learning. Beames and Ross (2010) found that in primary school students, 'outdoor journeys' in the local neighbourhood improved cross-curricular and holistic learning, also improving the connection between the students and the local surroundings.

## **Limitations to OE**

However, there are many challenges to implementing school-based OE and it seems easier to work with primary school students in this area compared to secondary school students (Dyment, 2005). Limitations to implementing OE within schools could be, inflexible and overcrowded curricula, resource shortages, safety issues, lack of teacher knowledge and confidence, poorly designed or insufficient school grounds that limit use, lack of pupil interest and unsuitable weather (Bentsen et al. 2010; Dyment, 2005; Han & Foskett, 2007; Rickinson et al. 2004).

Another limitation to OE is the sense of freedom that can be experienced by students, in a way that they forget the normal discipline rules of the classroom because they are outside and in a new environment. However, in a study by Fagerstam (2014), the author found that teachers experienced this limitation at the start of a unit of work or extended time of OE, as students were not listening to instructions, but the more time the students spent in OE, the less this limitation impaired teaching and learning and students became accustomed to this way of learning. Within the same study by Fagerstam (2014) researching teacher's perceptions of OE, one teacher recorded that their class required well-structured teaching due to additional learning needs and was apprehensive to implement OE in to the timetable. This suggests that the delivering of OE can be limited because of teacher perceptions of their classes needs, but as previously mentioned, OE could be beneficial to those with additional learning needs (Kuo & Taylor, 2004).

Society is growing more risk averse. Schimelpfenig (2007) cautions, "We operate in a climate, in both our profession and society, of growing intolerance to the adverse consequences of risk. Sociologists tell us that this present generation of parents is especially protective of and adverse to negative consequences, or even some discomfort, for their children" (p. 2). Presently, some OAA programmes are decreasing due to concerns over risk and liability. This trend is often driven by fear of litigation rather than what research reveals about the educational value and ways to limit and minimise the actual risk involved (Daniel et al. 2014).

## **Conclusion**

According to the research discussed above, there are potential benefits that implementing aspects of OE and OAA in to the PE curriculum could bring to students. However, there is a lack of research focusing on Secondary Schools in the UK and the effect of OE and OAA on PE students and their attitudes. Research suggests that even if PE departments incorporate OE and OAA in to their schools, it will not come without its difficulties, such as risk factors and the Northern Ireland weather.