Reconsidering current objectives for physical activity within physical education

Matthew Hobbs, Andrew Daly-Smith, Jim McKenna, Thomas Quarmby, David Morley

Even though physical activity (PA) contributes to better health, many young people fail to achieve the target of 60 min per day.1 The whole school day and within that physical education (PE) are increasingly seen as important opportunities to accumulate PA.1–3 Paradoxically, even though school days including PE are more active than those that are not,1 PE is frequently identified as insufficiently active.4 Research papers and policy documents commonly use two objectives, advocated by organisations within the UK3 and the USA,1 to ascertain if PE is active enough (table 1). However, each objective lacks grounding in contemporary evidence and, despite assumptions of their equivalence, contain profound differences. Furthermore, over-diligent pursuit of these objectives by research and policy may result in teachers prioritising fitness-based objectives by research and policy4 8 is concerning, as research must move beyond considering levels of MVPA in isolation. Future research may be warranted to develop an appreciation of how much objectively measured MVPA can be achieved within a typical PE lesson, while meeting the other multifaceted aims of PE, for instance, the need for developing physical literacy. While the quest for PA is important, this must not be at the expense of developing physically literate young people.

Finally, while PE may be reasonably expected to make a substantial contribution to children’s daily PA, this must not sacrifice other important PE outcomes. Given their long-term value, these other markers of PE quality—such as the enjoyment of PA or the development of physical literacy—need to be afforded renewed priority, perhaps by explicit integration into future objectives.2 10 To support the development of objectively determined PA objectives, in tandem with achieving the multifaceted requirements of PE, it is essential that education makes a full contribution to these public health debates. Acknowledging that interventions within PE generate only small increases in PA,10 it is now time to look beyond PE as a ‘silver bullet’ for resolving the inactivity crisis, towards all segments of the school day. Importantly, what is at stake is not just achieving PA in PE, but encouraging lifelong participation in PE and the long-term health of children.

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Table 1 A summary of objectives to increase activity within physical education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Objective for ‘sufficient’ PA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Association for Physical Education1</td>
<td>Students should be actively moving for at least 50%–80% of the available learning time</td>
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<tr>
<td>The US Department of Health and Human Services1</td>
<td>Students should engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for &gt;50% of the time they spend in PE class</td>
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</tbody>
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PE, physical education.

1 Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, Yorkshire, UK
2 School of Social and Health Sciences, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK
3 Academy of Sport & Physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence to Matthew Hobbs, School of Social and Health Sciences, Leeds Trinity University, LS18 5HD, Leeds, UK; m.hobbs@leedstrinity.ac.uk

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Editorial

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