Practice Matters

**ONLINE PHYSICAL EDUCATION: WAS IT ANY GOOD?**

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**Background**

The 11th of March 2020 was a highly significant date across the world, as this is when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Following this announcement, on the 18th of March the Secretary of State for Education in England announced that all education institutions (schools, colleges and early years) were to close on 20th of March. This closure was a preventative measure to reduce the rate of transmission and prevent a rise in COVID-19 cases. School closures would stop social mixing between different households, but also had several other impacts on educators, students and families across the UK. This article will focus on these impacts on the education system within the UK, specifically in England. Through looking at the use of technology and teaching delivery approaches during lockdown, it will discuss both the positive and negative aspects of online education. It will also highlight the impact the pandemic had on physical education (PE) and on mental and physical wellbeing, particularly within the lower social class.

Online education has been prevalent since the 20th century. For example, educational programmes at the University of Phoenix in the United States went online in 1989, when they began using CompuServe (Kentor, 2015). We then fast-forward to March 2020 when teachers were faced with the prospect of delivering all PE online. Closing institutions resulted in the loss of face-to-face teaching and an immediate reliance on online learning spaces. This made online learning the only way to ensure the continuation of PE.

**What problems arose during lockdown?**

Due to the disparity of young people’s backgrounds across the UK, students were faced with unequal opportunities to access education – a basic human right (Pandit and Agrawal, 2021). Family income, social class and parental education levels are all factors that may have led to the exclusion of some students from online lessons. For example, even when families did have access to online technology, larger families with multiple children in education may not have had enough devices for the number of children. This may have hindered individual children from accessing regular lessons. A study conducted by the University of Southampton found that, within the UK, advantaged children (with access to individual technology) had 3.8 learning hours on average, compared to 2.6 hours for disadvantaged children (who shared resources with family members) (Pensiero, Kelly and Bokhove, 2020). This highlights significantly inconsistent student access to the technology required for online learning and the impact this had on attendance. On average, disadvantaged children received half the amount of learning online compared to being in school.

The temporary but urgent solution of moving education online during the pandemic provided educators with an interesting insight into what the future of education could look like. A student who has access to remote learning can have a more active role in their learning, which is a step in the direction of shifting the focus from teacher-centred learning to a learner-centred paradigm (Oyarinde and Komolafe, 2020). Despite this, Korkmaz and Toraman (2020) found that educators felt they were unable to provide pupils with feedback or support due to teaching being online. They also found it difficult to identify when students were struggling. Interestingly, in studies by Oyarinde and Komolafe (2020) feedback from secondary school students stated that the use of Google Classroom during the pandemic allowed them to influence their own learning. It also enabled them to receive immediate feedback due to the online presence of the teacher.

Another major challenge with a reliance on technology is access to the internet. In England, on average 12 per cent of children did not have access to the internet when at home (Newlove-Delgado *et al.*, 2021). This poses the question that if low-income families could not afford internet access, how were children expected to attend online lessons and continue their learning? Distance learning highlighted the digital inequality within the UK, where some students had to rely on a phone screen to interact with online lessons whereas more advantaged pupils had a computer or laptop (Coleman, 2021).

However, family socio-economic status is not the only factor affecting access to online education. Schools in more deprived areas are more likely to have insufficient infrastructure to support online learning, which further expands the digital and learning divide (Coleman, 2021). The National Foundation for Educational Research conducted a survey across primary and secondary state schools during lockdown. According to teacher responses, 81 per cent of children with limited access to information technology (IT) access or a lack of study space were less likely to engage in remote learning (Lucas, Nelson and Sims, 2020). This highlights the importance of bridging the learning gap and preventing further division to ensure disadvantaged children can leave school with the range of opportunities that their advantaged peers have.

The pandemic also resulted in social isolation, lack of structure or routine and a rise in anxiety levels, leading to a rise in reliance on mental health services. A longitudinal study compared mental health before and during COVID-19 (Pierce *et al.*, 2020). Findings show that the percentage of the population who reported a clinically significant level of mental distress increased greatly. Despite there being a general increase in mental health concerns, COVID-19 accelerated the rate of this increase due to social isolation and changes to everyday life. Schools realised the importance of communication with children to maintain pastoral care, with some providing a phone number throughout lockdown offering children the option to talk or receive support. It is reported that several of these pastoral phone systems were 24-hour services (Beauchamp et al., 2021). This promotes a step towards a more open and inclusive education where disadvantaged children feel valued. Not only were the services available for students but also for parents if they had any worries about their child or the child’s education.

The pandemic also posed concerns for students’ physical health due to a reduction in physical activity and social interaction, which resulted in unhealthy lifestyles consisting of little exercise, poor diet and lack of sleep, all of which may lead to a rise in obesity levels. According to Cronshaw (2021), the pandemic manifested multiple issues, including social problems (due to isolation), psychological problems (stress, anxiety and depression) and physical problems (lack of sleep), which all affect an individual’s overall health. However, they also reported that live-streamed, online workouts had a positive impact on people’s wellbeing, generating a sense of belonging and autonomy. Participants reported that the live-streamed activities gave them a routine and were something to look forward to in such a time of uncertainty.

**What did physical education do?**

To make online PE accessible, movement-based activities, such as martial arts and yoga, were introduced in many educational institutions; these could be practised remotely and did not require equipment. They may have encouraged students to try new sports, as the usual PE curriculum doesn’t often have room for these activities due to the dominance of team games (Vilchez *et al.*, 2021). Statistics showed that PE among other creative subjects were heavily dependant on parental instruction to engage with PE tasks, rather than the use of online classes (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Due to the reliance of tasks being set, pupils did not necessarily have to use technology to be online for their entire PE lessons, instead pupils had to go away and complete the tasks set in their own time. This therefore raises the question as to whether a parent’s engagement in physical activity has an influence on their child’s?

To combat social isolation, some schools also included family activities within lessons to encourage a higher level of engagement in physical activity. Potentially, this could promote family engagement outside of lessons too (Kim *et al.*, 2021). Families who had the means bought equipment to encourage physical activity throughout lockdown, including trampolines, football nets, scooters and bikes. Utilisation of urban green spaces and natural areas also increased, with many discovering the tranquil properties and exercise benefits these environments provided. Woodlands and forests were visited by families and individuals for exercise, mental wellbeing and educational purposes. For example, forest schools allowed families to learn about the outdoors whilst being physically active, proving outdoor adventurous activities’ worth within the PE curriculum.

Additionally, resources such as problem-solving booklets were shared on PE websites for use by both schools and families. These encouraged family engagement in accessible yet creative forms of physical activity, such as children having to spot and tick off random objects during a walk. Activities like this increase children’s motivation to go out and explore as they are engaged throughout.

Many schools saw a restriction of PE lessons to just fitness and dance. This was because of limited space and equipment in students’ homes. To tackle this, elite athletes turned to social media with schemes like the British Olympians’ #isolatedgames to encourage creativity within sport by using household resources, such as using a sofa instead of a pommel horse. As well as highlighting how athletes were still exercising despite being stuck at home, and enabling children to interact with and be inspired by their sporting heroes, this reinforced the Olympic and Paralympic legacy of encouraging lifelong participation.

Similarly, throughout lockdown, Joe Wicks was viewed as “Britain’s PE teacher”, leading three fitness sessions a week for children and families. They provided a regular routine and encouraged the nation to stay active. Whilst the country’s engagement with this was positive, it certainly did not deliver high-quality physical education. PE is more than just fitness, and if a qualified PE teacher had the same media platform, a vast and innovative scheme of work could have been taught, incorporating the values and skills that PE teachers are trained in to help children learn.

**Has anything changed?**

The pandemic had a major impact on schooling, which brought not only PE but education in general to the centre of attention. Since the various lockdowns, there has been a move within some schools to shift the focus of PE away from sport and being physically active, towards being healthy and targeting students’ social, physical and mental wellbeing. As a result, students learn about health holistically, including the importance of diet, sleep and looking after their physical and mental health.

Similarly, many schools have seen a change in the structure of PE assessments. During remote learning, students had more influence over their core PE assessments because teachers were unable to observe their practical performance (Killian *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, schools changed the format of assessments to allow students to document their physical activity through videos and journals. This revolutionises PE, shifting away from the classic examination process and enabling students to facilitate and record their own learning achievements.

The digital divide was made evident throughout the pandemic and is now at the forefront of discussions on how to make technology accessible for all, regardless of socio-economic status. A positive takeaway from the pandemic is that there is now greater interest within the education sector in advancing technological uses, providing more opportunities within learning. It will be interesting to see, within the review process of these new advances, how the use of technology will be modified for the inclusion of PE.

Despite PE being the leading subject to promote a healthy active lifestyle, schools have overlooked this post-lockdown due to the academic demands to get pupils ‘back on track’. As a result, some schools reduced the amount of PE taught. The use of online education in regards to PE was beneficial in encouraging teachers to utilise the broadness of the national curriculum and be creative in their lesson planning. In addition to this, pupils were able to positively engage with their learning through the use of social media by creating tik toks to document their skill development. By utilising social media, it provides a familiarity to pupils who use it every day, and are therefore more likely to want to interact and take control of their learning. Despite this, it cannot be ignored how family income can be a barrier to at home education in relation to both internet access and technology access. Looking forward, PE practitioners should consider not only the activities they offer within their lessons, but also how they are delivering and assessing the content, as the lockdown proved how teaching traditionally was ineffective.

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