

Transcript. Episode 3 Life-long movers

Interviewer (INT): Kate Stephenson

Respondent (RES): Gethin Thomas

Music – Success by Marble Sound (Adobe Stock)

INT: Hello and welcome to another Physical Activity and Wellbeing in Education podcast episode with me, Kate Stephenson, Education Advisor and Physical Education Specialist in County Durham. We continue our PE, School Sport and Physical Activity and Wellbeing dialogue today with another one of our delightful guests.

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INT: Hello listeners, lovely to have you with me and guests again. Today I have Gethin Thomas with me. Gethin is an independent consultant who works in the field of education, health and wellbeing and he's here in County Durham this week so I've jumped in to have a podcast and a chat with me discussing some of the things we're both quite passionate about in the field of physical education, school sport and physical activity and our focus today will be dialogue in and around physical literacy, and we'll explain that for some of our listeners in a little while, but we're coming at it from an education point of view of best practice and informed practice, thinking of curriculum PE provision and pedagogy in schools and thinking of the aims or the intent I guess of your broader school sport and physical activity programmes. It's also that broader understanding isn't it, Gethin, of what physical literacy and its importance for the whole community and at every stage of life. So part of this podcast is to inform and educate I guess, inform and educate the average listener around some of the important concepts within PE and physical activity landscape and very much what, as I've said, we're very passionate about, that whole child development aspect.

So I'm going to stop talking as I usually go off, I get passionate about what we talk about, Gethin, and I'm going to allow you to introduce yourself a little bit more. Would you like to

tell the listeners a little bit about yourself and your field of practice and perhaps begin to explain a little more about what physical literacy is and why it's so important.

RES: Yes, of course. Thanks, Kate. Well, I'm from North Wales and I worked as a what we'd call a challenge advisor in North Wales working in a similar role to yourself, Kate, for many years and during that period of time my relationship with Bangor University and my work as a lecturer working with undergraduates and postgraduates also evolved and developed during that period of time. I then went to work alongside Welsh government developing the new curriculum in Wales, Curriculum for Wales, specifically working on the area of learning and experience health and wellbeing, bringing in physical literacy to inform its development and since then I've worked for the inspectorate in Wales for Estyn, I've worked alongside national governing bodies, worked alongside different consortia and with County Durham Sport in my independence capacity as a consultant looking at physical literacy informed practice and at the moment, as you can imagine, much of my time is spent working with public health and local public health teams as well as within education, as well as with sports-orientated bodies and I guess the big question here is, what's the big deal about physical literacy?

Well, let's strip it back a step and look at where we have been in the past and in the past physical education was very much about the what, it was about what we did, it was about sport, it was about activity and it wasn't necessarily about the child and putting the child in the centre of the experience. And of course you could argue that we've spent hundreds of thousands if not millions trying to encourage our population to be more active and the question has to be asked, have we been successful in doing what we've done in the past and the answer to that is probably no. We've got increasing prevalence of non-communicable disease in society, we've got an increasingly inactive society, so let's pull that back to the basic question, why PE? Why school sport? Why physical activity? And the answer quite simply is that society isn't moving enough and as a result it's compromising our health, our wellbeing, both physically and emotionally. It's compromising our prosperity. It's compromising our socioeconomic prosperity in terms of locality and it's also impacting on our longevity, the quality of our lives, and when you think about levelling up and inclusion, can that be achieved if we still have children who are by the age of five who are overweight and are obese and that has that increased significantly over the last two years since the occurrence of Covid.

If we delve a little deeper into that question, why do we need to move and why is this important, well, from an educational perspective a child's physical development is closely

correlated with their cognitive development and if children aren't given the opportunity to develop the neural pathways from the left and the right hemisphere through what we call contralateral movement, something like crawling or climbing, then that will compromise their acquisition of speech, language. It will compromise their processing speed in terms of thought. It will compromise their short-term memory and we're seeing more and more children with these developmental delays appearing in our nursery settings in those early years and of course that compromises their educational prospects throughout their educational career. So there's a lot that hangs on our engagement and the relationship that we have with physical activity. So that's the why.

For me physical literacy as a concept becomes a how. It's a way to engage in conversation, it's a way for us to really challenge what it is we are doing and how we are doing it, what it looks like more importantly as an experience for that young person because the relationship that some of us have with physical activity that leads to lifelong engagement is due to the fact that we've had positive social, emotional and physical experiences in the past and those positive experiences shape our attitudes and our values and leads us to wanting to lead active lifestyles, but for others they've had negative experiences perhaps in the past and as a result they choose to lead sedentary lifestyles because being active is the last thing they want to do.

INT: Absolutely. Thanks so much, Gethin. You've touched on an awful lot of points there, in particular the why. You mentioned the obesity levels for instance and we know from those NCMP data, the National Child Measurement Programme, which looks at reception age children and Year 6 children and measures their weight and their height for instance that it's around – I've written it down – about one in five reception age children are overweight or very overweight and that rises to one in three in Year 6 and that's definitely exacerbated because of the lockdown periods of time and also our digital norm of moving less and reliance on technology perhaps and that's perpetuated into our adult life with the pressures of modern day living and we are moving less and sitting more. Obesity levels in terms of public health and wellbeing, and then you mentioned also the fact that we're thinking about developmental delay. In County Durham we do several CPD opportunities for teachers to look at children who are significantly often not reaching their milestones in terms of their physical development and it's not necessarily because there's a physical disability of sort it's because they haven't had the broader experiences of movement right from the crib to the floor to vertical movement and all of that as you've said builds on those neurological fibres moving and twitching and responding from movement to support brain development;

cognitive associations are huge. Then of course we've got that physical movement that actually is releasing all of those chemicals to support brain development but also the health and mental health aspects, the release of dopamine, serotonin and all of that, which we can go into. But touching a little bit on the how in terms of we're talking about physical literacy, let's explain a little bit about what that means.

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INT: So if we're thinking layman terms and we're thinking about our newly qualified teachers perhaps who may have had very little initial teacher training within the field of physical education and we hope that they'll begin to develop what physical literacy is for the children in their care. It stems right from the building of physical skills and competencies that you've said about those ABC building blocks, agility, balance, co-ordination, we begin that development from as I've said in the crib, that core distal movement, etc, and then we're building into fundamental movement using our larger body parts, etc, but we build skills over time. Now, we've got a duty of care in our schools to ensure that our physical education curriculum builds those physical skills and competencies over time progressively to support the broader physical literacy of learning which builds cognition, which builds social communication skills, which builds personal qualities, all of this, we could go on and on couldn't we and we'll talk about it a bit more, but it's also that motivation, that engagement. It's capturing and understanding and a love of movement that it becomes a social norm, that it's embedded into our everyday practice in school, outside of school and it's not seen as an isolated taught subject that isn't about everything, it is your physical education learning but it's broader in physical movement and what it does for us and what it can do. I'll let you chip in, Gethin.

RES: Absolutely. I think that just to elaborate on the points here, what is physical literacy? Well, physical literacy is a recognition that the body and mind are one and that you and I and everybody else is the product of your experiences and if you've had positive experiences that are both social, emotional and physical you're more likely to do something again in the future, you're more likely to look for opportunities to do something again. Now, if you don't look at that holistic approach and you see physical education or physical activity and sport as being a purely physical experience, then you dismiss that holistic approach. Let me give you an example; if you're playing a game of rounders for example and you are in the outfield and the ball comes through the air towards you and there's an expectation that you are to catch the

ball but you can't because you've never been taught how to catch or you don't have the confidence, the belief in yourself that you will be able to catch this ball and you drop the ball, what does it become? Well, it becomes a social experience because everybody else has seen this. Now, if that group of learners who are there around you don't demonstrate empathy, don't behave within acceptable social norms and they start to take the mickey, they start to provoke and pull your leg sort of thing and make fun of you then it becomes an emotional experience if you are unprepared to accept that this is something that you enjoy and that you like. So all of a sudden the physical and the social and the emotional experience have happened simultaneously and it's a pretty negative one, the one that I've described, so will you be looking forwards to the next game of rounders? Perhaps not. Now, if you have that negative reinforcement time and time again over weeks, months, years, then when you reach the age of 16 and you're given the opportunity to make the choice from your own volition, are you going to be active or not, you're more likely to say, No, I'm not, I really don't like physical activity, I don't like sport, I don't want to do it anymore. But building up from that basic foundation, physical literacy is therefore about the development of confidence, motivation, physical competence – and I'll explore that in a moment – as well as knowledge and understanding and they are equally as important as one another, they are holistic, they are inextricably linked. You can't isolate one thing above the other.

So as you described earlier, Kate, the physical competence developing from the basic foundations of movement, your agility, your balance, your coordination, your fundamental movement skills, yes, that's absolutely true because that's one element within physical competence, it's one part, it's one part of three within physical competence, but that has to be developed simultaneously with the belief that you can get better and that you can progress with the motivation to invest effort and if the belief that you can make progress and you're willing to invest effort what you see as an observable behaviour is perseverance. Now from an educational perspective you've got to create the climate within which a child can see progress being made, so there's an onus on the teacher to create an environment where using assessment for learning principles for example, sharing learning intention, success criteria, you map out those really small steps that lead towards progression in learning so that the child experiences success and achievement and that's what makes it enjoyable and fun. Now, if we're going to have a population in the future that actively seeks opportunities to be active, that they're looking for opportunities to be active, then being active has got to be fun, it's got to be enjoyable and if not then you're not going to look for that opportunity. So whatever it

is that the what looks like in terms of the activities or the sports themselves it's got to be fun and enjoyable and success-orientated.

Now, physical activity can be informed by physical literacy but that extends across the school day and it's about building the base of the pyramid, normalising movement again by active travel to school, having active meaningful breaktimes, active lunchtimes, active lessons across the curriculum where we normalise getting up, moving around, standing up to work, standing up to discuss a project or a piece of work, doing some artwork on our feet, rather than sitting down in a sedentary way all of the time. Physical education, what does that look like through the lens of physical literacy in terms of the pedagogical approach that's adopted? I've suggested that assessment for learning becomes an important part of that. Then we look at extra curricula provision and having the freedom of choice and decision-making, that becomes an important part of supporting intrinsic motivation; we'll never be intrinsically motivated and enjoy what we do if we're forced into something, told what to do, rather than given the opportunity to choose for ourselves what we want to do. So physical literacy isn't something that's done to someone, it's something that informs our practice, it informs our policies, it informs our behaviours and it informs our approaches, in other words from an educational perspective, our pedagogy.

INT: Wonderful. Thank you for all of that, Gethin. At the heart of physical literacy is very much isn't it the building and the nurturing of that motivation and commitment to being active throughout life isn't it.

RES: Absolutely and that's critical, that word then, that word "nurturing" and that's what we want, we want this to be an experience that nurtures that child and it becomes child-centred. So it's equally as important as we try to unpack physical literacy as what it is to mention what it isn't and it isn't a resource, it isn't a product that you can buy that has a series of lesson plans because that goes completely against the grain of it being child-centred and it isn't something that is just relevant to children. It's something that at County Durham Sport we're exploring how that can inform the future, so all the generations, how it can inform active communities, how it can inform active sustainable travel, so it's a very agile concept really and it is the lens through which we check and challenge everything we say and everything that we do around physical activity.

INT: Thank you, Gethin. You said there as well it's that one size doesn't fit all, so when we're thinking about the pressures on primary school teachers, secondary school teachers in terms of curriculum across all subject areas that often there's requests for schemes of work that will do that for us, what do you need to do, we want to do this lesson one, lesson two, and you've said already about that assessment for learning practice which we promote across County Durham in particular within the way we build our units of work and our pedagogical approaches because our curriculum needs to be meaningful and it needs to be supportive of the particular children we are teaching at that time there and then, of that cohort, with a foresight of where we want to take the children on their journey of learning but also that the children know and understand what that journey is and why. It's very much that cognitive engagement in what they're doing rather than being done to them, which you've touched on before.

You were talking there about or we were talking about that nurturing of it and obviously the fact we're having this conversation is that we're not quite getting it right, be it at whatever stage in a child and a young person's life and certainly perhaps when needing those interventions and what we're doing across curriculum or our broader PESPA – PE, School Sport, Physical Activity – offer or what we're doing in the community to support and engage people in movement opportunities, we're almost having to step in because things haven't progressed the way we would want in terms of a moving a nation.

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INT: Some of the work that I'm doing with secondary schools for instance are looking at how we improve the quality of and the breadth of the PE curriculum because historic models don't work or we need to be self-reviewing what we have in place to make them meaningful for that particular group of children, etc, and some of it's about thinking also about how we use physical education for those wider educational outcomes that we need to support the health and wellbeing of our students for instance. A lot of it- Sorry, go on, Gethin.

RES: There's something interesting there isn't there in that you're alluding to the fact that there's been a considerable investment over time through the school sport premium and has that been effective in turning it around in terms of child and youth and young adults' engagement in physical activity and perhaps it's been successful in slowing down the rate of increase in sedentary behaviour but has it been as effective as it could have been? Perhaps not. And

perhaps that's because we seem to be hooked on doing more of the same. If we've got 55% who are active and choose to be active in their own time, if we continue to offer the same activity what we're trying to do is increase slowly that 55% to 56% to 57% to 60% when actually perhaps what we should be doing is looking at it from the other direction, working with that 45%, 40% that are inactive and offering something for them and of course there's a big shift isn't there in the work that a school games coordinators in terms of addressing that kind of gap and looking at things differently which will be exciting as that piece of work develops over time.

You mentioned health and wellbeing and physical activity and school sport through physical education offers opportunities for us to develop the whole person and if we consider that example of the rounders game that I mentioned earlier and if we're looking at- Mental health is a really interesting one for me because there's a lot of investment in strategies such as mental health first aid, knowing and understanding what it is, what it isn't, but nobody's actually addressing the underlying problems here that we have in society and much of our problems around mental health stem from the way that we process our past experiences and it's about understanding your emotional responses and why you respond in a particular way to an experience. It's about understanding as a group of individuals that your behaviour is shaped by your social norms and that those social norms may not necessarily be acceptable and that it's okay amongst a group of boys to be misogynistic, that actually you're not considering the feelings and the emotions of another individual who may process this in a very different way to how you meant it and will as a result worry and will impact on their self-esteem, their self-worth, their confidence and so on and we can explore some of these concepts that shape human behaviour and would potentially make the world a better place through physical education.

INT: Oh, absolutely. If you think about that broader whole child development across all of this, physical education is a vehicle to make some remarkable changes across building characters we need for the future, Gethin, and we need those empathetic, resilient, nurturing individuals with the leadership qualities, etc – we'll try not to go down that route – but talking about, you were on about we are a product of our past experiences and goodness forbid that we go back to seeing the PE from the lens of the film of the book Kes for instance with is it Brian Glover, oh who was he, Mr Sugden? But that model of what PE is and yet actually we're still thinking about how we nurture those positive experiences because it's not correct for everybody and part of that Sport England funding for secondary it taps into

the primary premium key indicators too. It's also about fostering those positive perceptions of physical activity and physical education; so that is about what is happening in the curriculum and also about meeting the needs in that broader provision.

You mentioned the primary PE and school sport premium there in around what sort of legacy will we have. We've had a lot of years of funding and we don't know what will happen next academic year whether we will have that funding again but we should be building sustainability, we should be building the confidence and competency of our primary school teachers to deliver a quality provision but my fear, which I've shared with colleagues in and around the education and the physical education sector, is that we sometimes throw our money at the hot and sweaty stuff which is all great for getting people moving and the competitions and activities, etc, and maybe experience of a little bit of change and different opportunities but we don't always then cater to those children who are still not having a positive experience of movement, we're perhaps just catering more opportunities to the sporty children and we're not building a legacy around that.

RES: It's not about the sweaty and the movement because the danger there is that it's something that's done to someone and how many of us as adults like something done to us. How many of us have resigned and left a job because we feel that we are being bullied into something that we don't believe in. So the child's voice is really important here and giving choice and having autonomy of decision-making and if we're going to foster intrinsic motivation, if we want a future population that actively seeks opportunities to be active then that child from a very early age and throughout their educational career has to have a voice and more importantly, something we're not very good at it, we need to listen and that means also fostering that sense of belonging within the group which really speaks to what I spoke about earlier in terms of those broader concepts around the wellbeing aspect and using PE as a vehicle to support the development of a better society in the future. We're not using PE to build resilience and build characters and toughen people up in order to be able to navigate a really harsh horrible world, we want to develop a future population that makes the world itself a better place and I think PE becomes the vehicle through which to do that.

Now, in terms of the legacy of the PE and school sport premium, teachers are best placed to teach their cohort of learners because they know them inside out and it's about placing the child in the centre of the experience, not the sport or the activity but the child and recognising that the child's needs are going to be different. I think that one thing we really need to focus

on is developing the confidence of the workforce, developing their skillset so that they're able to apply what they do in the classroom and I've mentioned assessment for learning principles and it's about that pedagogical approach to the physical domain, into physical education, and I think that we've got a workforce that we could support to do this and it is going to take time to do that but I think that just buying in services in the form of external providers and coaches just to coach and deliver and then not engage and learn from that experience as a teacher is a missed opportunity.

INT: Absolutely and I think raising the awareness and importance of physical education within the statutory requirements of our English curriculum is really important as well, thinking in terms of Initial Teacher Training and how much hours are dedicated to that area of subject. In terms of the push for PE to be a core subject and how wonderful would that be in the future for that to have the precedence in with English and mathematics for instance and maybe that's something that should be considered more so on the back of our concerns around public health and wellbeing and actually looking at it as that vehicle for personal development, which we know HMI and Ofsted are very much looking at in terms of the character development of students as well as their personal growth and the accountability around schools to support and nurture – I'm going back to that word again – but to support that for our children and young people.

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RES: Yes, absolutely. It is interesting how we are trialling, [unclear 00:30:14] trialling what PE as a core subject might look like in one of the largest multi-academy trusts in England and the learning from that will really be of interest and let's hope that we are successful in influencing Westminster in including PE as a core subject. The question is what will it look like because we can't continue to do what we have always done and dare I say there are pockets of resistance out there; we still have and I can be controversial in this respect, that we still have the Kes's of the world still teaching PE. It is going to be a shock to the system because we're going to have to look at PE not just as an experience that supports our physical development, our confidence, our motivation and knowledge and understanding but also as a vehicle through which you can experientially support learning around that personal, social and health education agenda as well and I think that's a really exciting opportunity. I think this is where exploring those key concepts around human behaviour, you mentioned empathy, the word resilience comes up time and time again but let's move on from that. We're talking about

exploring social norms. We're talking about experiencing and processing our experiences and exploring our emotions. Relationships, what do relationships look like? What does a healthy relationship look like? Experiencing rules and rules are concepts aren't they. We know that some tend to interpret rules in a different way to others, not that I'm making a political comment there, but there's lots that we can learn from physical education that goes beyond the sport and if the sport drives the experience we're really doing our children a disservice because actually it should be the child at the centre and the child driving that experience; the sport itself becomes somewhere in the subtext somewhere, it's the experience that's most important.

INT: Absolutely. You mentioned PSHE there, Gethin, and often in dialogue I have and schools I work with I'm looking and talking to PE subject leaders in primary or our PE department in secondary. I work also obviously with a lot of PSHE staff as well and broader primary classroom practitioners across all subject areas but I often in secondary in particular I'm looking to see if there's departmental conversations around that broader aspect of PE, school sport, physical activity and actually how it needs to be a whole-school remit and driven as a raising of the profile across the whole school community about the aspects that support child development and welfare and that communication isn't always seen. I think there's questions happening more so because there's a direct link to those HMI inspections around personal development but the new relationships, sex and health education statutory requirements, that health aspect has the minimum amount of content of what all children and young people have to be taught and some of that is about how physical activity supports our health and wellbeing, how having hobbies is good for us, and I'm just quoting a little bit from that but is there an understanding from all of our school key stakeholders, including governors, about what is in that curriculum and why? That statutory requirement that RSHE was a levelling up, a minimum, and then that broader PSHE offer is the what you should also do because it will be meaningful to your children in your school, so that's directed by the school really listening and understanding what the needs of their children are and as you've touched upon there about PE being a core subject it's what will that look like in your school to support the particular children of your area, be it whatever demographic they're within, and some of the broader aspect of PESSPA that we've been talking about, if we're sitting in a primary or a secondary school with a demographic of real poverty or high childhood obesity levels, etc, then questions should be had about, well, how has your curriculum or what you have in schools supporting children from that

environment? What's the most imminent needs of them and how does your curriculum support that or how are you flexible in approach to support?

RES: Two points that you make there really that I'd like to pick up on. The first is relating to normalising physical activity and to normalise physical activity what we will be trialling here through County Durham Sport is a whole-school physical literacy informed physical activity policy. That starts with your commute to school, what does that look like in terms of active sustainable travel? What does breaktime and lunchtime look like in terms of active break and a meaningful opportunity to be active? What does physical education look like through the lens of physical literacy? What does it look like in terms of afterschool activity? But equally as importantly, if not more, what does the active curriculum look like across all subject areas and how can we normalise movement in the classroom? Why is that we have to sit down to learn when in industry and the workplace we're encouraging workers to stand up at their desks, to go for walking meetings, to sit on a Swiss ball? There's lots of things that don't marry up, school isn't reflective of what's happening in our communities and that's something that we want to explore in terms of that key idea of normalising being active again and normalising physical activity throughout the school day through the lens of physical literacy.

The second point I'd like to pick up on is that in terms of the marriage across the curriculum between PSHE and physical education and physical education being used as a vehicle to support learning more broadly within PSHE, through physical education, through sport, you can explore a relationship; what is a relationship? What's a healthy relationship? What's an unhealthy relationship? What's a toxic relationship and how will that manifest itself in terms of behaviour, ridicule, bullying, teasing? And we badge it all up as banter nowadays don't we but some of it is really damaging and if you don't understand where the boundaries lie in terms of these different types of relationships and when a relationship becomes toxic, can you truly recognise and acknowledge the nuances in a novel like Macbeth? So there are strong connections here more broadly across learning within schools that again physical education is the perfect vehicle to approach some of this more transferable learning that really will make the world a better place.

INT: Gethin, you've just said the words that actually summarise everything that we're trying to do here and we talk quite passionate about it. I hope that our listeners have enjoyed listening to us today as you finish with those words of physical education can really make a difference and make the world a better place and we'll echo that as we drift off into thinking

about how we can shape the future around this but some wonderful points there. Thank you so much for your time.

RES: Thank you.

INT: We hope everyone's got to grips of what physical literacy is and hopefully we'll engage with more opportunities in the future. Some CPD that's available in County; we've got our Learning for a Healthy Future conference coming up, we hope to have you there perhaps, Gethin, which is all about outdoor learning. We've got CPD and networks available talking in and around physical literacy, around curriculum development. We've got our Active 30 partnership which we're very much pushing around active routes to school, active lunchtimes, active opportunities in and after school and influencing the home. We hope you've been looking and engaging with some of our active blasts that County Durham Sport and public health and our partners in Active 30 have been advocating most recently as well. A little bit of plugging there at the end, Gethin, but there's some amazing opportunities that's happening with Education Durham and our partners in and around all of this so please do keep listening everyone. Get in touch with us in the future and we hope to speak to you again, Gethin, thank you so much for your time.

RES: Lovely. Thank you for the opportunity and fantastic conversation, thank you.

[Music plays]

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