

Physical education cuts in Britain threaten children's health

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A Survey by the Sports and Physical Education Network (SPEN) has revealed that constant government pressure for children to "perform" educationally is at the expense of their physical development.

The survey by SPEN, which represents sports education organisations, revealed that in the past year half a million hours of Physical Education (PE) lessons were lost in primary schools (for children aged 5-11 years) because of government emphasis on literacy and numeracy targets. Sports teachers expect a further decline from September as schools are compelled, under government guidelines, to introduce a new "numeracy hour".

One-third of the 1,500 English primary schools surveyed reported that they had cut the time previously allotted to PE in the school curriculum over the last 12 months. Half of these had lost 30 minutes of PE each week, and a further 20 percent had lost one hour a week. A third of schools said that there was insufficient support available to train competent PE teachers and a quarter reported a lack of qualified staff in the subject.

Professor Margaret Talbot, SPEN convenor, said she expected the situation to become "even bleaker" in the new academic year. "PE is the only subject to support children's physical development, but research also shows that it is positively correlated with improved cognitive and social development. Children of this age need PE and research shows their academic work improves when they get it regularly."

The survey confirmed complaints by the National Association of Head Teachers' (NAHT) that subjects such as art, music, drama and sport are being crowded out of the school curriculum. Teachers now have to satisfy government guidelines on literacy and numeracy strategies, leaving little time for subjects regarded as non-essential.

This has compounded an already severe problem. Under the Tory government, local authorities were empowered to sell off school playing fields in order to raise money. Prime sites often went for a song to building developers, leaving school children with little area to play in at break-time. Over the past 20 years approximately 5,000 playing fields have been sold off. To this date, over 40 school playing fields, or parts of school playing fields, are sold off each month.

Physical education has been one of the prime areas for cutbacks, as schools attempt to juggle dwindling resources. A survey conducted by the NAHT earlier this year found that more than half of all primary schools have to share playing fields. Fully 92 percent of primary schools have no gymnasium, swimming pool or tennis court.

In March 1998, the Blair Labour government pledged to outlaw the selling-off of school playing fields—without government consent. But teachers and sports associations say this will do nothing to stop the rot, and schools will still have inadequate facilities. The same month Education Minister David Blunkett proposed that the study of PE at the key stage 1 and 2 would no longer figure in the national curriculum. The government has suspended orders, specifying what should be taught in PE, until 2001.

Over the last years numerous surveys have pointed to the decline of physical fitness amongst young children and the implications for their future health. Peter Warburton, at the University of Durham, conducted a study of four- to eleven-year-olds. It found that four-year-olds displayed the lowest level of "vigorous activity" of all the age groups, particularly amongst girls. None of the age groups displayed the recommended levels of sustained physical activity. The reasons are numerous—increased use of cars, the effect

of TV, restrictions on children's outdoor play for safety reasons—but limitations on children's playtime at school compounds the problem.

Pauline Wetton, a lecturer in education at Durham, studied 132 three- and four-year-olds in the North East and concluded that children were getting much less exercise. Unsuitable facilities at nursery and primary level played a significant role. In the past, Wetton commented, children could have up to 100 minutes of time when they were "more or less free to choose what they did, including playing outside." Now they tend to be restricted to a pre-scheduled 20 minutes of organised play.

Such low levels of physical activity in children can store up health problems in later life—including high blood pressure, obesity and heart disease, and increased risk for osteoporosis. Low levels of physical activity also affect children's educational and social development. A lack of freedom to play with others restricts their ability to mix and to learn how to respond in different situations. The trend towards static, desk-based, education for young children can increase restlessness and lack of concentration, and can contribute to young people become disaffected at school. According to Wetton, "Physical and intellectual development are so closely linked at this stage. Until he or she has got equilibrium of body, a child can't sit still and learn to write."

The SPEN survey underscores the retrogressive character of educational policies implemented over the last two decades, which the Labour government is continuing.

Primary school education was established as a distinct stage in the English educational system by the Education Act (1944). Whilst post-primary education in England continued to be geared towards selection and examinations, a certain leeway was established with younger children. Over the next two decades, progressive ideas regarding children's development—the importance of play and encouraging a creative approach in each child—meant that in many primaries, the formally strict timetables were relaxed. Classes were reorganised along informal lines; "small group" teaching and activities were encouraged along with an emphasis on methods involving discovery and experimentation.

These gains are now in the process of being reversed.

Labour's new proposal is for formal schooling to begin for all children aged four. Throughout primary school they will be expected to have attained a certain level, and will sit regular tests to determine their ability. As schools compete against one another to perform well in the exam "league tables", children's ability to attend schools of their choice will be increasingly influenced by the grades they have achieved.

Further government measures will greatly accelerate this process. Labour has established homework targets for all school children—extending from 30 minutes each week for five-year-olds to one and a half hours daily for those in their final year. Labour has defended its proposals on the grounds that Britain's economic competitors have a greater homework tally amongst their school children. A 14-year-old Briton averages "only" six hours a week, compared to eight and a half hours a week in Japan, the government complained.

Changes to primary provision have a domino effect on the entire education system. In an earlier period, advances in primary school education strengthened those seeking to reorganise English schools along more egalitarian lines. It led to the abolition of the hated "11 plus" test—sat by all children at 11 years of age—that meant a child's future educational and employment prospects were already determined, and to the gradual establishment of comprehensive, non-selective mainstream schools. The trend towards rigorous testing for children aged four to eleven means that selective education has returned to mainstream education with a vengeance.



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