

Using an action research model to bring about school improvement through PE and school sport

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Abstract

The paper describes an innovative curriculum development project in England that aims to improve the quality of PE and sport in schools and use them strategically to bring about whole school improvement. Outcomes include improvements in pupils' self-esteem, attitudes to learning, behaviour, attendance and achievements in PE and across the curriculum.

To achieve these outcomes, schools have followed an action research approach. This approach is different from that previously used by most schools in England. The paper will describe this action research process. This includes setting objectives, selecting appropriate strategies for improvement, identifying signs of success and selecting appropriate information collection strategies for monitoring progress and informing development.

The paper examines how the innovative use of this action research model has brought about significant improvements to aspects of schooling. The project has had an impact on the national strategy for PE and sport in England, influencing the continuing professional development programme, the monitoring and evaluation of PE and sport in schools and curriculum innovation.

Therefore the paper will be of interest to those who wish to explore:

- the impact of curriculum development
- the contribution of action research to school improvement.

Background to the project

The national curriculum for England was revised in 2000. One of the amendments made to the national curriculum for physical education (PE) was the insertion of the following statement:

‘The Government believes that two hours of physical activity a week, including the National Curriculum for physical education and extra-curricular activities, should be an aspiration for all schools. This applies throughout all key stages.’

(The National Curriculum for England – physical education, p.6)

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was asked to find out how schools could meet this aspiration, especially at this time when there was a considerable emphasis on literacy and numeracy, particularly in primary schools. Information collected through national curriculum monitoring indicated that the average amount of time for PE was one and a quarter hours, but in some schools it was much less than that, and almost non-existent.

Visits were made to several schools that were identified as already meeting this aspiration. Notes were made about how these schools had overcome the perceived barriers to meeting this aspiration, but significantly, we noted that all of the schools we visited were deemed to be good or excellent schools by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, the schools’ inspectorate body in England).

The link between school effectiveness and the use of PE and school sport needed to be explored further. Eight schools from across the country were asked to work with the team at QCA to investigate how PE and school sport could be used strategically to make a difference to the young people in their schools and to the school as a whole. The schools were in very different localities and ranged from a small, rural, two-teacher primary school to a large secondary school in the city of Manchester.

We focused the project on the following aspects of school improvement:

- improved progress and attainment in PE
- improved progress and attainment across the curriculum
- increased inclusion
- improved attitudes to learning
- improved behaviour
- improved attendance
- improved citizenship and leadership qualities
- increased involvement in healthy, active lifestyles.

Over the last five years, we have invited a further 120 schools to join the project, working either individually or in partnership with other schools. This was to broaden the range of schools that we were working with and increase validity of our findings.

Schools working within the project were supported in a variety of ways. An action research model was established with the schools so that they all took a similar approach to the project. Consultants were appointed to work closely with the schools to help them to clarify what it was that they were trying to achieve. The consultants also helped the schools to select appropriate strategies that were likely to bring about improvements. These consultants were sometimes working at the school, as a senior member of staff or leader of PE, but more often they were external advisers from the Local Education Authority or University.

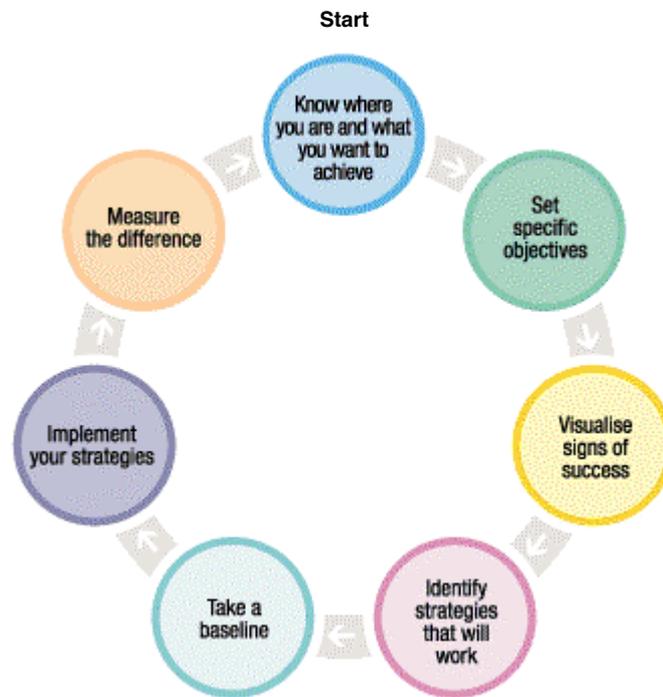
Some of the schools chose to work in partnership with each other. Sometimes this was because they were involved in a particular initiative already and so the partnership was already established (eg. Education Action Zones or School Sport Partnerships). Other partnerships were created because a number of schools in a similar locality wanted to explore the impact that using high-quality PE and school sport strategically could make in their schools and they could see benefits of working together and sharing ideas with each other as they undertook the investigation.

The QCA worked with the consultants to confirm investigation plans and provide ideas for appropriate strategies and information collection methods as required. A small amount of funding was negotiated for each school or partnership of schools to cover attendance at meetings and the purchase of resources that would enable appropriate strategies to be put into place. Once a year, all of the schools involved in the project gathered for a two-day workshop to celebrate their successes and work on their plans for the following year. Headteachers (principals), teachers, learning support assistants and lunchtime supervisors have all been represented at this event. QCA also visits each locality in the course of the year to meet with the schools involved to verify findings and encourage further progress.

The findings from the project have been published on the QCA website at www.qca.org.uk/pess.

The action research model

To investigate the impact of PE and sport on young people and whole-school improvement, schools used an action research model. The model has been developed during the course of the project as a result of feedback from the schools. The model, or investigation cycle, is pictured below:



Stage 1: Know where you are and what you want to achieve, then set specific objectives

The effectiveness of schools in England is judged against a number of different criteria. The areas for whole-school improvement that were identified for the purpose of this project were:

- improved progress and attainment in PE
- improved progress and attainment across the curriculum
- increased inclusion
- improved attitudes to learning
- improved behaviour
- improved attendance
- improved citizenship and leadership qualities
- increased involvement in healthy, active lifestyles.

We referred to these as the headline objectives.

The schools were asked to identify at least one of these headline objectives, preferably an area that had been identified on their school development plan as an area for improvement. Schools in England complete a self-evaluation form prior to an Ofsted inspection and identify areas for improvement on that. One of the keys to this project was to ensure that the school didn't see it as

something extra to do. Rather it could be seen as another way of helping them to achieve what they had already identified as an area for improvement.

We then worked with them to focus their objective and make it more specific. Being precise about the improvement that they wanted to bring about was seen to be critical to the success of the project. For example, a school that had identified behaviour as an area for improvement worked with QCA and their consultant to specify the specific aspects of behaviour that they wanted to improve. Were there specific times of day when behaviour was a problem? Were there particular groups of students that needed to be focused on? Did the school want to shift those who were behaving negatively to more compliant behaviour, or were they more interested in turning the compliant behaviour into actively positive? It was important to get them to express clearly what it was that they wanted to achieve, what their objective was.

The other critical aspect about this first step of setting objectives was to ensure that the objective was focused entirely on pupils, not on the teacher or on things to do. It was outcomes focused, rather than milestone driven. For example, a school that identified a need to improve behaviour might have the following specific objective:

We want to increase the amount of positive play happening at lunchtimes amongst our year 6 pupils.

Stage 2: Visualise signs of success

Having clarified what it was that they wanted to achieve, the schools were asked to write down what their signs of success would be – what it would look like when they had achieved their objectives. For example, if your objective is for year 5 boys to work with greater sensitivity to others in lessons, your signs of success might be:

- seeing the boys sharing equipment, resources and space fairly
- seeing them work without disturbing other children
- hearing them make positive, constructive comments to others.

Stage 3: Identify strategies that will work

It was at this point that the schools began to consider the strategies that they could put into place to bring about the improvement that had identified they wanted. Ideas were shared between the schools working on the project and guidance was given from QCA and consultants working directly with the schools. Examples of the strategies that were used have been written up on the QCA PESS website in the Steps to Success section (www.qca.org.uk/pess).

Stage 4: Take an appropriate baseline, implement the strategies and measure the difference

Once the planning was done, schools were asked to take a relevant baseline so that they had a clear picture of what their school was like before they put into place the strategies. Without this they would not be able to show any improvement. We worked with them and their consultants to identify appropriate tools and methods for collecting the information they needed without making the information collection, collation and analysis too burdensome.

They then started to implement the strategies they had selected and, at appropriate intervals, checked what progress they were making towards achieving their signs of success. This meant that they were evaluating the impact of the strategies and could make adaptations to make them more effective if needed.

Once they had completed the investigation cycle once, they were encouraged to reflect on what they had achieved, where they now were and what they wanted to achieve next. In so doing, the learning journey continued and the schools continued to make progress, whilst able to recognise the successes they had achieved.

The project findings

All of the schools involved in the project have seen improvements in some or all of the aspects of whole-school improvement identified. It is impossible to separate the impact of their strategic use of high-quality PE and school sport from that of other initiatives and strategies that they might have been using. However, all of the schools involved acknowledge that PE and school sport has helped them to bring about the improvements they have seen in recent years and findings have been replicated. Their individual success stories are told on the QCA website, but a summary of what has been achieved by the project schools as a whole is summarised below:

Inclusion in PE and school sport. The schools involved in the project have more than 75% of their pupils taking part in a minimum of two hours of high-quality PE and sport each week. In two-thirds of the schools, 100% of pupils take part in more than two hours.

Progress and attainment in PE and school sport. Standards and achievements in PE and school sport have risen across the schools involved in the project. GCSE results have improved. Sixteen schools that focused on using core tasks¹ to improve progress and attainment in PE reported a particularly significant improvement in standards that pupils achieved.

¹ You can find more information about the core task approach to teaching PE, and the impact it has had on progress and attainment, on the PE subject page of the QCA website (www.qca.org.uk/pe).

Increased involvement in healthy, active lifestyles. As an inevitable result of greater inclusion in school sport, pupils are now more involved in healthy physical activity. Around one-third of the schools involved in the project focused strongly on developing healthy, active lifestyles among their pupils and all have seen improvements in pupils' patterns of physical activity and diet. Several have achieved the Healthy Schools standard.

Attainment across the curriculum. All of the schools involved in the project from the outset have seen significant improvements in national curriculum test and GCSE results. Schools that have joined more recently have also begun to see some improvement in many subjects across the curriculum. Although it is often difficult to relate improvements in attainment across the curriculum directly to investment in PE and sport, many headteachers feel that it has had a significant impact.

Attendance. Schools that focused on using high-quality PE and school sport to improve pupils' attendance have almost all succeeded in improving the percentage of pupils attending school regularly and on time. In particular, schools have seen improvements in pupils' attendance on the days that they have PE lessons. One middle school that has made Friday 'skateboards, skates and scooter day' has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of pupils absent at the end of the week.

Attitudes to learning. Every school involved in the project has seen significant improvements in pupils' confidence, self-esteem, desire to learn, concentration and time on task as a result of improving the quality of PE and school sport. This has had an impact not only in PE lessons, but also across the curriculum.

Behaviour. Many schools involved in the project chose to focus on improving behaviour through PE and school sport. Every school that did this saw a significant increase in positive behaviour and reduction in negative behaviour (some primary schools have dispensed with poor behaviour logs altogether). There have been dramatic falls in the number of pupils in detention and the number of aggressive incidents reported. At one infant school, for example, the number of aggressive incidents at lunchtime fell from 226 to just 40 a week over the course of the school's first year in the project.

Citizenship qualities. As part of improving the quality of PE and school sport, most of the schools in the project have given pupils more opportunities to get involved in choosing activities through school councils, sports councils, junior governors and group decision making. As a result, there has been an overall improvement in pupils' citizenship qualities.

Leadership skills. High-quality PE and school sport offer pupils many opportunities to develop leadership skills that they can then transfer across the curriculum and outside school. Most of the secondary schools involved in the project now offer pupils the opportunity to work towards the Junior Sports Leader Award. All schools that have developed playground activities have trained pupils as play leaders. The quality of leadership skills shown by young people has improved significantly as a result.

The impact of these findings

These findings have made a big difference to the schools involved in the project. The work that they have done for the PE and school sport project has influenced their approach to other aspects of their school, such as curriculum organisation, timetabling, planning, and teaching approaches. They have become more reflective practitioners and use the action research model to bring about the improvements they recognise as important.

However, the impact of the findings goes beyond the schools involved in the project themselves. In the time that the project has been running many changes have taken place relating to PE and sport in England, and the findings of the project have played a significant part in enabling these to happen.

Most significantly, the aspiration statement published in the national curriculum document has become an entitlement for all young people and has a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target attached to it. The PSA target is 'to increase the percentage of school children who spend a minimum of two hours each week on high-quality PE and school sport within and beyond the curriculum to 75% by 2006.' This target has been extended in the last few months to 85% by 2008. Progress towards meeting this target is monitored by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. The QCA project had demonstrated that two-hours of high-quality PE and school sport both within and beyond the curriculum each week was possible in schools and this was influential in raising the profile of PE and sport within Government circles.

A national strategy for PE, school sport and club links (PESSCL) has been established, funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) for three-years until 2006 to the tune of £459m. This funding is topped up by lottery funding for PE and sport and so the total investment until 2006 will be about £800m. There is already strong indication that funding will continue until at least 2008. The strategy is set up to meet the PSA target, but its aim is that 'all children, whatever their circumstances or ability, should be able to take part in and enjoy PE and sport'². The findings from

² Details of the PESSCL strategy can be found on the Teachernet website (www.teachernet.gov.uk/pe) or in the publication *Learning through PE and Sport* (DfES, DCMS 2003)

the QCA project were used as one source of evidence to persuade Government Ministers that the investment was worthwhile. The project is also identified as one of eight strands of the strategy.

Work in the QCA project schools led to the clarification of what was meant by 'high-quality' PE and school sport. This was done from an outcomes perspective, looking at what pupils will be saying and doing when they are involved in high-quality PE and sport rather than starting from a provision standpoint. The findings from the schools have been published in a booklet that has been made available to every school in England³. The project schools have also been leading the way in modelling the self-evaluation of quality. Their work is being drawn together to produce a second booklet designed to help teachers to self-evaluate the quality of PE and sport in their schools and to bring about improvements.

One other significant impact of the QCA project has been the use of the same action research approach in the new national professional development programme for teachers of PE. Fifty-six modules have been written to cover the secondary and primary phases relating to learning in and through PE and school sport. These modules are being rolled out to all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England over the next couple of years and will be available free of charge to teachers of PE. Each of the modules follows the same action research approach as used by the QCA project schools. Delegates will have done some pre-course work to identify what the specific area for improvement is in their context. The course tutor will then lead them through a number of activities that will help the delegates to clarify what they want to achieve, identify signs of success, select appropriate strategies and choose effective information collection methods that will enable them to demonstrate that they have made a difference. Delegates will be expected to undertake a small-scale investigation when they return to school. The success of the course tutor will be evaluated on the difference that delegates are able to make to their young people when they return to school.

This is totally different to any other national professional development programme that there has been in England for PE and sport and has proved challenging for many as it begins to be rolled out. The intention is that the programme will help to create reflective practitioners, who are able to look at the impact of what they are doing on young people.

Areas for further development

As this paper demonstrates, the findings from the QCA project on PE and school sport have already had a significant impact on PE and school sport in England. The schools involved in the project have found the action research process helpful. The challenge for the project now is to

³ *High Quality PE and Sport for Young People – a guide to recognising and achieving high quality PE and sport in schools and clubs* (DfES, DCMS 2004)

demonstrate more clearly the picture of high-quality PE and school sport so that all schools can learn from the excellent performance and achievement of the schools that already understand what it means and how to achieve it. Only then will the real goal of **all** children, whatever their circumstances or abilities, taking part in and enjoying PE and sport be able to be achieved.