

How sport and exercise contribute to education goals

Oliver Dudfield

Sport is a key component of the Commonwealth's identity and central among members' shared traditions. Increasingly there is also recognition that sport can be harnessed to contribute to broader development and peace efforts. A growing body of research suggests sport and physical education (PE) can be valuable contributors to broader education objectives, and there are an increasing number of initiatives across the Commonwealth focused on maximising this potential. Yet, in many parts of the Commonwealth sport and physical education are neglected within education policy and practice. A re-examination of the role of sport and PE as part of the broader educational experience is therefore timely – especially in an Olympic year.

Varied views on sport in education

Opinions on the value of sport and PE within wider education policy and practice vary considerably. The diversity of educational contexts and challenges in the Commonwealth exacerbates this variance. On the one hand, the notion that sport and PE make important contributions to wider education outcomes is dismissed. These pursuits are labelled as frivolous and assigned a low priority when compared with other urgent issues facing education. On the other hand, fervent advocacy of the importance of embedding sport and PE within education is equally identifiable. Positive advocates present sport and PE as critical for a holistic approach to education. It is common for examinations of 'sport in education' to



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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child upholds cultural participation and 'the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities'

be framed through these types of binary lenses; sport/PE objectives are separated from education objectives and assessed independently. Yet, an integrated approach is more useful in which sport and PE are considered within a broader framework of education and development goals.

The right to participate in sport and PE is enshrined in international human rights agreements. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises 'the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'. The International Charter of Physical Education and Sport states that 'every human being has a fundamental right of access to physical education and sport', declaring that these are essential for the full development of their personality (UNESCO, 1978). Even so, PE is marginalised in many parts of the Commonwealth and the status of sport remains a low priority within education policy (Hardman, 2007). This is not because education policy makers or practitioners deny these rights; rather, pragmatism and prioritisation dictate this limited focus.

Commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has positioned increasing enrolment in education as paramount. While numbers have risen in the Commonwealth over the past decade¹, sector leaders – including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – have highlighted that enrolment is only one component of universal 'education for all'. Quality of learning, engaging and retaining the most vulnerable

(including people with a disability) and addressing gender disparity remain urgent issues (UNESCO, 2011). These challenges are further exacerbated by the 'youth bulge' and a decrease in real spending on education in many regions (Burnett, 2011). In the face of such challenges, it may seem imprudent to advocate for a further consideration of the role of sport and PE. However, the growing number of sport-based initiatives across the Commonwealth addressing similar issues, coupled with supportive research, suggests that ignoring sport and PE within education may discount a potentially innovative and cost-effective tool.

The value of sport-based approaches

Research suggests appropriate and well-delivered PE and sport have a positive effect on children within educational environments (Bailey and Dismore, 2004). Additional work argues that notions that participating in sport and PE adversely affects educational attainment are misconceived (Stead and Neville, 2010; Lidner, 1999) and that, under the right circumstances, participation can actually lead to improved academic performance (Bailey et al., 2009; Trudeau and Shephard, 2008; Cornelißen and Pfeifer, 2010). Much of this research has been conducted in contexts with well-developed school sport and PE programmes and typically outside of low- and middle-income countries. However, acknowledgment of the benefits of incorporating sport and PE is not limited to these contexts or, most tellingly, to the sport and PE fraternity. Development agencies working in the space of child development

Box 1 Child-Friendly Schools and International Inspiration in Mozambique

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The Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) Initiative is intended to provide quality basic education for all children, with a particular focus on girls and vulnerable children. In Mozambique, the approach supports the implementation of an integrated, multi-sectoral minimum quality package of components designed to raise children's learning outcomes. These include water provision, separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys, child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms, health screening of children, physical education (PE) and sports, life skills education, mechanisms and structures to prevent violence, abuse and exploitation and assist child victims, and initiatives to reach orphaned and vulnerable children. The model is intended to attract new learners as well as encourage retention among those already attending schools. It therefore also includes a social mobilisation component focusing on the right of every child to education.

Sport and play are children's right as detailed in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Added to this is the broad consensus that regular physical activity is essential for the physical, mental, psychological and social development of children and adolescents. Although PE and sport are an integral part of the primary school curriculum in Mozambique, many children – particularly in rural primary schools – had a limited opportunity to engage in sports in an organised manner. Most primary school teachers lacked formal training in PE and sports management.

Now, however, PE and sport have been revitalised and integrated into schools benefiting from the CFS Initiative – as well as across

the country – through the global International Inspiration programme, which started in Mozambique in 2009 in partnership with UNICEF, the British Council and UK Sport. International Inspiration was launched in India in 2008 with the goal of reaching 20 countries and 12 million children in order to connect children with the inspiring power of sport in the run up to the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012.

While initially CFS and PE focal points were trained as master trainers in the seven CFS districts, subsequent training was conducted for master trainers from teacher training institutions. This helped to accelerate the integration of PE and sports into these institutions nationwide. Moreover, the Ministry of Education re-issued a regulation for PE and sports activities to be conducted for at least two hours weekly in primary schools. The Ministry also developed a user-friendly PE and sports manual, based on the results of a knowledge, attitude and practices study, which was printed and disseminated to all schools in 2012.

The CFS framework, coupled with a high quality and inclusive PE and sports programme, has the potential to enhance quality basic education. PE and sports make schools more attractive for children, resulting in increased enrolment, retention and completion rates. Sport can also be an effective programmatic tool to help achieve goals in health (including HIV and AIDS), education, gender equality and child protection.

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Photo: Victoria Holdsworth

Athletes preparing for the 2012 Paralympic Games

and education also incorporate sport-based approaches in partnership and delivery strategies (see Box 1)².

Recognition that sport-based approaches can be employed to support education and development objectives has grown extensively over the past decade. The UN General Assembly has passed a number of resolutions recognising sport as a means to promote education, health, development and peace³. Commonwealth Heads of Government have also identified the vital importance of sport in assisting young people to stay healthy, contribute to society and develop into leaders of their communities (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011). Sport-based contributions have been integrated into the UN machinery and the development efforts of selected Commonwealth governments, while dedicated programmes, initiatives and funding mechanisms have also developed outside of government. Such approaches are most commonly referred to as Sport for Development and Peace (SDP). The growing recognition of this field is exemplified by estimates suggesting that the number of SDP programmes and providers grew sevenfold between 2005 and 2009 (Kay, 2009).

Central to the concept of SDP is recognition that sport-based approaches have the potential to engage and support the development of children and young people. Numerous benefits are identified in this space. First, well-designed and effectively managed sport and physical activity can improve physical health and contribute to social and cognitive development (Bailey, 2006). Second, sport offers a different medium through which to engage children and young people, including those with disabilities, girls and women⁴. Third, the opportunity to participate in sport and

physical activity can include signposting to education programmes and, once children and young people are enrolled, encourage attendance (SDP IWG, 2008). Finally, the unique context provided by sport-based programmes can also assist in strengthening relationships between peers, adults and youth and teachers and students⁵. In education settings, these benefits can contribute to creating a more child- and student-friendly environment. It should be noted that many of these benefits are a 'consequence of the context and social interaction possible' in sport-based approaches as opposed to the physical participation in activity (Kidd and Donnelly, 2007). The correlation between the potential contributions of sport-based approaches and the urgent challenges identified in achieving 'education for all' suggests there are implications for education policy and strategy.

Maximising the contribution of sport-based approaches in support of education goals is not without challenges. Sport is by no means a panacea for the challenges faced by education policy makers and practitioners, and results from sport-based approaches are not automatic. A myriad of social, cultural and contextual factors affect outcomes; critically, sport-based approaches must be integrated as part of wider interventions. Deliberate planning is required, considered monitoring and evaluation essential and most likely there will be capacity-building implications – albeit that many successful initiatives integrating sport-based approaches and PE have not been centred on training 'specialists' (see Box 2).

Too often advocates overstate 'the power of sport' to make a positive contribution in supporting development. Such rhetoric is not conducive to the design of measured, evidence-based policy

and practice that incorporates sport-based approaches. Repositioning the focus of sport in education so it is explicitly framed by broader educational and development priorities shifts this balance. This is the essence of effective SDP approaches.

Conclusion

Across the Commonwealth there is a growing level of awareness and understanding of the value of PE and how sport-based approaches can be effectively incorporated to support development goals. Initiatives based on evidence-based models and explicitly focused on the development priorities to which sport-based approaches can contribute have proven most effective (Kay and Dudfield, in press). In the context of education goals, these priorities include engaging and integrating marginalised groups; supporting child- and student-friendly environments and pedagogy;



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Sport is about co-operation and inclusion as well as competition

Box 2 The Just Play Initiative of the Oceania Football Confederation

Franck Castillo

Because of the strong fun principles, young people are attracted to go to school, and this is what PE should be.”
(Benedict Esibaea, Director of Primary Education, Solomon Islands, 2011)

The outcomes and influence of Just Play on their school work is obvious. Just Play and its components have a great impact on school and young children’s lives, socially, physically and mentally. Most of these children will become better citizens. Things taught at home are enforced on the soccer field.
(Ativeniana Pomana, School Principal, Tonga, 2011)

Kids have so much fun. You can see their confidence growing and their integration with other kids, especially their own age group. (Tuna Likiliki, parent, Tonga, 2011)

The United Nations reported in 2006 that 26 per cent of girls and 18 per cent of boys were out of school in the Pacific region (UN, 2006). Research from around the world shows that sports in a school setting can improve attendance, attention, problem-solving skills, academic outcomes and holistic child development.

The Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) Social Responsibility Department – in partnership with the Australian Government, Football Federation Australia and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) – has designed a sport for development programme called Just Play, with social objectives linked to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 on universal primary education and MDG 3 on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Just Play has been carefully designed for children aged 6–12 and is based around fun, structured and safe activities as well as the distribution of educational tools (booklet and DVD) and activity packs. It is implemented by teachers who are not required to have any football knowledge but who undergo two days of training to allow them to deliver a user-friendly, six-week programme.

An external review of Just Play (Bates, 2011) showed that the programme helps:

- Ministries of education fulfil PE legislation in areas with limited or no PE resources.

- Make school more attractive to children, with a growing number of children returning to classes, less truancy on days when Just Play is held in the afternoon and parents reporting that the children are excited to go to school on Just Play days.
- Promote girls’ involvement in sports. Of the over 83,009 children who have taken part in activities, 42 per cent are girls.
- Promote the involvement of girls and boys in sport and their social development, and ensure a lasting impact that centres on building the capacity of teachers and community members to independently deliver quality sporting activities for children.
- Children to concentrate more in class. At an early stage of implementation, children are beginning to demonstrate improved life skills such as better teamwork, discipline and respect. Children highly value the opportunity to enjoy time with friends, challenge themselves and master new skills.

OFC has appointed Just Play project managers in American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tahiti, Tonga and Vanuatu to co-ordinate the programme in their respective country. OFC and football associations in each country have signed a memorandum of understanding with the ministry of education. Primary school principals select teachers to attend the two-day training on a voluntary basis, after which OFC provides equipment for teachers to deliver the six-week programme during school time. Development officers from the football associations visit the schools once a week to monitor the programme, while project managers evaluate the programme and compile recommendations in collaboration with the ministry of education.

For further information see: <http://www.oceaniafootball.com>

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and integrating sport and PE to enhance the quality of education. Using these parameters to enhance sport and physical education within education policy and strategy offers a platform for new partnerships and opportunities.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Net enrolment rate in primary education in the Commonwealth in 2009 was 87.5 per cent, with relative gender parity. In 2000, global enrolment was 83 per cent.
- ² For example, see <http://www.unicef.org/sports/>
- ³ <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/sport/home>
- ⁴ For example, see Jeanes, 2010 or Hayhurst et al., 2009.
- ⁵ For example, see Crabbe, 2009.

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