

Richard Moore's Development Work Exploring the impact of individual sports on boys' self-esteem at Barclay School, Stevenage

In his role as Assistant Head of PE (Physical Education) Richard noticed an increase in the number of boys who were not bringing their kit to lessons in order, he felt, to avoid participating. Richard wondered what was causing students to want to avoid PE. There were many boys who clearly enjoyed PE; they were the ones who represented the school in extra-curricular fixtures, but there were some boys who were simply waiting for the lesson to end. These boys seemed to Richard to be suffering from low self-esteem.

Richard understood that physical activity can have both physical and psychological benefits (Bailey, 2006). He was therefore very concerned about the possibility that PE might be having a negative psychological impact on some of his students. Perhaps individual sports rather than team games would have a more positive impact on the self-esteem of this group of students. He discussed the issue with Gwen, a colleague in charge of the Learning Support Unit at his school, who he knew was also interested in this. Although accepting that the term self-esteem is difficult to define (Ollerenshaw, 2007), Gwen and Richard came to a common understanding of it as the way in which a person perceives their own worth or value (Shakelton and Fletcher, 1984).

Gwen helped Richard to identify four boys who she thought would benefit from being involved in an alternative approach to PE lessons and Richard invited them to participate in his project. He was interested in the boys' views of themselves so he interviewed each of them and in preparation for the interviews asked them to give themselves a score out of 10 in relation to a few key questions about their enjoyment of school, their enjoyment of PE, their level of skills in PE and their general happiness and success in developing friendships. Their scores provided a starting point for reflection in the interviews.

What did Richard learn from these interviews? All four boys seemed to have a very limited circle of friends and were often bullied. They described the difficulties they had in getting changed in front of other boys' as their physical appearance would provoke negative comments. One boy said:

I am not very fit and I don't like getting changed in front of other people because they are nasty to me and just take the mickey out of me, so I just don't like doing PE... most of the people keep calling me names.. they keep asking me questions like "do you have a washing machine at home?" and "have you got a bath or shower at home?" and stuff like that.

They felt very negative and frustrated not only in PE lessons but at school in general. Richard found it quite salutary to be faced with the difficulties which the school system presents for some students. He and Gwen decided on a way forward. He would teach the boys an extra PE lesson after school once a week for a period of four weeks. This PE lesson would focus on the development of individual skills rather than team activity and would take place off-site. The venues included a bowling alley and a golf centre. Activities such as Ten Pin Bowling and Golf allow the students to concentrate on their performance as individuals rather than as a team member or as an opponent. Clearly these activities can be done competitively but what really helps the sort of students Richard was working with is individuals practising and iterative self-assessment. In this situation the teacher can act as coach.

At the end of the period of extra lessons, Richard and Gwen were interested to see if the new approach to PE had made a difference to the boys' views of themselves and their relationships with others. Richard interviewed the boys again and found that some of them felt that they were more confident during the extra PE lessons. They all felt that they had learned new skills. They loved being taken out of school and felt valued by the experience. Some of the boys felt that this experience had changed their own behaviour and others' views of them. Overall, the impact on their school lives had been considerable although they still faced significant difficulties in school.

Richard found the project to be rewarding albeit emotionally challenging. His collaboration with Gwen was key to the successful completion of this development work. The project highlighted for him the importance of choice in the PE curriculum especially for the

most vulnerable students in school. He feels that individual sports offer those students with frailties the opportunity for rapid and recognisable improvement. He was particularly interested to see that the students were setting targets for themselves in the individual sports lessons, indicating a level of engagement and self-belief which would have been previously unthinkable.

Richard shared what he learned with colleagues in the PE department who subsequently undertook a major review of the PE curriculum. He was committed to continuing to collaborate with the school's Learning Support Unit and in undertaking further development work focussing on the issue of student self-esteem across the school.

Shortly after this project was completed, the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown made a speech at the close of the Olympics in Beijing in which he said: "We want to encourage competitive sports in schools, not the 'medals for all' culture we have seen in previous years," and "In sport you get better by challenging yourself against other people. A lot of sports are team games where people have to work together but they play against other teams." A few weeks later a paper presented at the annual BERA conference received a lot of media coverage. A researcher at Loughborough University presented a paper in which she argued that teachers who have experienced success in competitive sport tend to assume that it is important for their students whereas it may actually be putting young people off sport (Guardian, 2008). She argued for more consideration to be given to health related exercise.

References

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