

Reimagining Physical Education in England: A Call for Radical Reform Towards a Health-Centred Curriculum in Primary and Secondary Schools

Dr Matthew Fleet

Southampton Solent University, the United Kingdom

Abstract

Physical Education (PE) in England is in urgent need of radical reform. Despite decades of curriculum revisions, significant government investment, and shifting policy rhetoric, PE remains constrained by outdated, games-led traditions, an inconsistent educational purpose, and widening inequalities in provision particularly through the increased outsourcing of primary PE to unqualified external providers. The subject has failed to keep pace with the changing needs of today's children and young people, nor with the growing public health challenges of inactivity, obesity, and poor mental health. A curriculum that once promised to inspire lifelong engagement in physical activity is, too often, failing to do so.

Drawing on my doctoral research 'Ideology and Transformation: Newly Qualified Teachers' Understanding of Physical Education' this presentation will examine how PE is currently perceived by those entering the profession, and how I believe the subject must evolve. Using a Habermasian Critical Theory and Ideology Critique framework, I explored the ideologies shaping PE and worked with newly qualified teachers (NQTs) across all key stages to investigate their understanding of the subject and to empower them to articulate 'Utopian Ideals' for a more inclusive, relevant, and health-centred PE.

Building on these insights, I argue for a radical reimagining of PE in England one which explicitly shifts towards a model of Health Physical Education (HPE). This reformed curriculum would prioritise physical literacy, holistic well-being, and lifelong engagement in physical activity, rather than narrow sporting performance or outdated competitive models. Such a transformation requires moving beyond current policy and delivery structures and demands a closer alignment between PE, contemporary educational values, and public health priorities.

In this session, I will present a practical, teacher-informed framework for HPE curriculum reform, grounded in Critical Theory and the lived experiences of teachers. I will also explore the broader cultural and political changes required to support this transformation. My argument is that PE must evolve into a genuinely educational, inclusive, and health-focused subject if it is to remain relevant and make a meaningful contribution to the lives of all young people.

10 - 12 July 2025

Helsinki, Finland

This presentation will be of particular interest to policymakers, curriculum leaders, teacher educators, and practitioners committed to developing an inclusive, future-focused PE that supports the health and well-being of all learners.

Keywords: critical theory; curriculum reform; health; ideology; physical education