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1. Policy has implicitly made traditional elite sport the model for school provision

- 1.1. The focus on performance, competition and servicing the aims of organisations with elite sport interests runs through government policy documents related to school sport from the time of John Major onwards. *Sport: Raising the Game* (DNH 1995) introduced the identification and development of future elite sporting talent as a main aim of policy: "We must [...] ensure that individuals with talent are identified quickly and systematically and that we make proper provision to allow sporting talent to flower". During Tony Blair's government, *A Sporting Future For All* (DCMS 2000) maintained this focus, seeking "more success for our top competitors and teams in international competition" (pp.5). *Game Plan* (DCMS 2002) aimed toward: "a sustainable improvement in success in international competition, particularly in the sports which matter most to the public, primarily because of the 'feelgood factor' associated with winning" (pp.12). The *PE & Sport Strategy for Young People* (DCSF 2008) emphasised competitive sport, talent identification and performance development, stating that: "[...] every young person should have: [...] access to regular competitive sport [...and...] pathways to club and elite sport". The most recent policy for youth sport, *Creating a Sporting Habit For Life* (DCMS 2012), has continued this theme, with its emphasis on the legacy of the London Olympics, its annual school games and the focus on competition and traditional sports.
- 1.2. The problem with this focus is that it colours the entire debate regarding what school sport is and should be. The National Governing Bodies of sports are powerful lobbyists and have a strong influence that is apparent throughout these policy documents, but their main focus is toward elite competition and promoting their particular sports. If one argues that promoting these sports is not in the interest of the majority of children (and adults, for that matter) they are unlikely to agree. Their interest in schools is to identify talent and encourage participation and spectatorship of their own sports. Any alternative views of how to get children more active (not focused on traditional sports provision) are excluded by the dominance of this perspective.
- 1.3. Research into PE teachers' views of their subject (Green 2002) suggest that these policies often serve to entrench teachers' pre-existing sporting ideologies, which are related to their personal histories (often in elite sport). But the vast majority of children are not and will never be elite athletes. Should policy not focus on the needs of the many rather than the few? Under 10% of children are identified as gifted at PE and sport (DfE 2010); a vanishingly small fraction of these children will go on to compete at a national level in sport; only a tiny

fraction of those will be successful on the international stage. Is this policy focus sensible when the number going on to become the "stars of the future" (DCMS 2013) will, by definition, be practically negligible? Why do we not concentrate all efforts on providing the 90% with activities they enjoy and are likely to maintain at sufficient frequency to be healthy? My assertion is that promotion of a wide variety of sporting and recreational activities in a mostly non-competitive environment are more likely to achieve this goal.

- 1.4. In recent decades, there has been a gradual move to supplement the usual range of sports available in schools with other activities. Evidence suggests that this is appreciated by many children (Smith 2009) and may have influenced the rise in participation levels by children and adults (Green 2002a, 2005). By providing more choice, children are more likely to find an activity they enjoy and become proficient in. For those who do not find competitive sports appealing, alternative activities that do not involve direct competition may provide an effective way to retain and encourage their long-term participation, enabling them to accrue a rich portfolio of positive experiences on which to rely in adulthood. Continuity can form between school participation and active lifestyles in adulthood, when built on a foundation of enjoyable, varied experiences.
2. A focus on competition is detrimental to the majority of children's enjoyment and maintenance of sport at and beyond school
 - 2.1. Those children who do not wish to participate in highly competitive traditional sports may be put off sport in school if they are not given the opportunities to participate in a non-competitive way. It is known that competitive sports have limited appeal to many children (Penney 1997) and promoting them above other forms of participation "is likely to be counter-productive in terms of promoting lifelong participation" (Green 2004, pp.81), yet both curricular and extra-curricular provision are frequently focused on competition (Penney 1997a). Even for those children who are keen on competition, 'specialisation' too early (focusing on too few activities when young) may be detrimental to lifelong participation (Kirk 2004, 2005), providing a too narrow portfolio of sport experience on which to rely in future. Even government policy documents have noted the risk of early specialisation (see Game Plan 2002). It has been suggested (Green 2002a) that proficiency in three or more activities, preferably including 'lifestyle activities' (as opposed to traditional competitive sports, see Coalter 1999), may be necessary to provide an adequate portfolio of skills and experiences for lifelong participation.
 - 2.2. Politicians are fond of reminding us that competing in sport teaches valuable life lessons like how to win and how to lose graciously, perseverance, self-discipline, etc. The problem is that this is not generally what happens in practice. At school, and particularly when puberty kicks in, the difference between the maturational age of children in the same school year can be

vast – with growth spurts occurring any time between 10.5 and 16 years for boys (see Stang 2005). Add in differences in birth month, natural ability, family support and interest, size and body type, and you have a situation in which competition in any sport is inherently unfair. As a result, when the focus is on direct competition, often the losers lose and the winners win for much of the school career. It is also important to bear in mind that performance and success in sport is generally relative, not absolute. Hence, in a school with high sporting ability, children at the bottom end may feel they are poor at sport and so identify as not 'sporty', when in fact they may be very physically able in absolute terms.

2.3. Identifying as sporty or not sporty can have long-lasting impacts, affecting the tendency to participate in exercise and sport throughout life. Qualitative research into why young children decide to be active and what they prefer has consistently shown that the two main reasons for participating are that it is fun and they get to socialise with friends. As a result, the experiences which tend to be recalled as the most enjoyable are informal ad hoc games with friends, not formal sport competition organised by adults. When competition is so inherently unfair and being successful means beating others irrespective of absolute ability, is it not obvious that focusing on competition in schools is perverse and may lead to significant detrimental outcomes for many?

3. Using the population's preferences as a model for provision

3.1. If the aims of policy are to make children and the population as a whole more active, then whether one identifies as sporty or not should be irrelevant. Having skills in a particular competitive sport has no bearing on whether one is sufficiently active to accrue health benefits. Adults which manage to reach the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines for healthy levels of activity do not generally manage this by playing traditional sports. The most popular activities are in fact lifestyle activities – "individual, flexible, non-competitive and fitness-oriented" (Coalter 1999). The most popular ten activities for men and women in Great Britain are lifestyle activities (Fox 2004) such as jogging, going to the gym, yoga, cycling and swimming. The only traditional team game that is popular amongst men is soccer; for women, no team games are popular. Indeed, only a small proportion of adults play competitive sport at all. Lifestyle type activities are also increasingly popular with children but are not traditionally provided in schools.

3.2. Providing highly organised competitive sports opportunities to children is unlikely to lead them to become active adults. On entering adulthood, activity goes from being organised to being completely self-motivated. Adults have to choose to be active and fit participation in to their busy schedules. By providing children with enjoyable experiences of participating in activities they might be able to pursue as adults conveniently and flexibly, we will have a greater chance of increasing participation in regular physical activity. Organised sports tend

to be participated in too infrequently to enable achievement of the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines for physical activity, although they can indeed form a part of it. More routine activity is required for health. Regular exercise (such as lifestyle activities) or active commuting tend to form the backbone of activity for those who are sufficiently active.

4. Conclusions

4.1. For too long schools have been viewed as training grounds for the elite athletes of the future, essentially making use of a large captive population to filter out those who might be able to achieve gold medals for the country. This focus biases policy toward perverse approaches to getting children to be more active, focusing on competition and performance, as opposed to fun, variety and inclusivity. Being physically active is not the same as taking part in competitive sport. There are many ways to be active. The type of activity and whether it is participated in competitively have no bearing on whether one is reaching healthy levels of activity. Focusing on these things simply serves to reduce choice, opportunity and enjoyment.

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