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### 'Physical Education is for Life' (PEL) Part 3

Teachers as adaptive professionals

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## **‘Physical Education is for Life’ (PEL) Part 3: Teachers as Adaptive Professionals**

### **Introduction**

In the first two articles of this series about ‘Physical Education is for Life’ (PEL) we presented the case that school PE should become the ‘connective catalyst’ for the lifelong and life-wide PEL journeys of all children and young people (Jess et al., 2023). Based on ideas from complexity thinking, we proposed that the shift towards a PEL vision will require a more flexible, expanded, and personalised approach to school PE. Framed within five lifelong physical activity dimensions, we have described a school PE curriculum focused on the long-term development of the holistic foundations that support all children and young people’s PEL journeys (Jess et al, 2024). However, to put this PEL-related curriculum into practice, we acknowledge that teachers will need to re-consider the way they approach their PE practice. In this third article, we subsequently turn our attention to the adaptive practices that teachers will need to develop, both individually and collectively, to engage with the lifelong and life-wide aspirations of the PEL vision.

### ***Becoming Adaptive Practitioners***

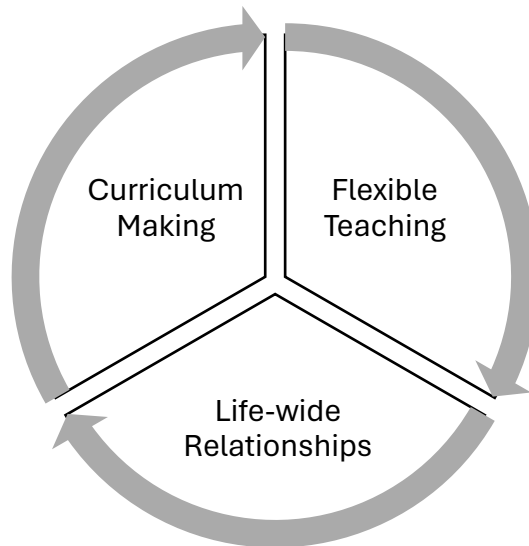
From a PEL perspective, if school PE is to help all young people develop the holistic foundations that support their PEL journeys, teachers’ adaptive practice will be key to the successful enactment of this vision. This need for adaptive practice is based on the recognition that, while young people, classes, schools, and local communities have many similarities, they also have many differences. Therefore, as teachers seek to help all children and young people develop their holistic foundations, school PE cannot be delivered as a one-size-fits-all, quick fix package but will need to become a long-term undertaking that purposefully seeks to support the life-wide physical activity pathways of each child and young person. To scaffold these holistic foundations, teachers will need to be adaptive in their professional practice as they acknowledge, interpret, accommodate, and respond to,

- Each individual child and young person they teach.
- The school’s approach to PE, sport, and physical activity.
- The formal and informal physical activity opportunities on offer within each local community.
- The social and cultural contexts of each school and local community.

In addition, because schools and their communities do not exist in a bubble, each local setting is always being influenced, often strongly, by policy-related decisions made at local and national level. To accommodate these influences across the education system, and successfully engage all children and young people in meaningful and worthwhile PEL-related experiences, teachers will need to take an adaptive approach to school PE: an approach that is broad, flexible, and inclusive. Their adaptive practice is therefore a complex process that, over time, requires them to develop the “ability to respond to, and influence, the dynamic and ever-changing environment in which they work” (McMillan and Jess, 2021, p. 276).

However, as they seek to put this PEL vision into practice, teachers not only need to be adaptive in their classroom practice but also in the way they engage with other teachers and stakeholders across and beyond the school. To become these adaptive practitioners, three interconnected factors will be key: curriculum making, flexible teaching and life-wide relationships (see

Figure 1). The implications of these three practice-related factors are now discussed as we revisit the PE Department in Flexible High School from the first article in this series (Jess et al, 2023). In the remainder of the paper, we explore how the interrelated nature of these adaptive practice factors come together to support the shift in school PE towards a PEL vision.



**Figure 1: The Interrelated Factors of Teachers' Adaptive Practice**

### **Revisiting Flexible High School**

In article one of this series, we presented an overview of the impact that the PEL vision had on the PE Department at Flexible High School. Building on this overview, we return to the school to present a more in-depth scenario that considers how the PE Department's efforts to put the PEL vision into practice has impacted on their curriculum, teaching, and life-wide practices.

#### ***Curriculum Making***

From a PEL perspective, curriculum making lies at the heart of the teachers' adaptive practice. In this sub-section, we consider the teachers' move to become curriculum makers and discuss the following aspects,

The new PE curriculum at Flexible High School involves:

- A shift away from the PE curriculum as a product solely focussed on the content of individual physical activities.
- The PE curriculum becoming the 'connective catalyst' for all children and young people's PEL journeys.
- A curriculum process that is dynamic and focussed on scaffolding each child and young person's holistic foundation for their PEL journey.

- Teachers using their professional judgement to create learning experiences based on each child and young person's PEL journeys and the influence of the context in which they live.

Prior to PEL, the PE curriculum was relatively static and focussed on the specific content of different physical activities (e.g. soccer, swimming, gymnastics etc.). This curriculum was often developed at national level, based on pre-prepared schemes of work and positioned the teacher as the technician tasked with delivering the curriculum. However, once the department decided to adopt a PEL vision, the teachers recognised the need to reconsider the way they defined, and engaged with, the PE curriculum. At this early stage, they made two simultaneous changes. They began to shift from a focus on specific physical activities by reframing the curriculum within the five lifelong physical activity dimensions i.e. recreation, health, performance, functional and socially-responsive physical activity (See Jess et al, 2024). In addition, they also began to focus their attention on each young person's PEL journey. As a consequence, key practice-related issues emerged. The most significant issue was the realisation that each child and young person's PEL journey was different, although there were often some similarities. Some journeys focussed on sport performance in formal settings, some on attendance at fitness clubs for health-related reasons, while others concentrated on informal activities in parks or fields or simply travelling to and from school. There were also a significant group of children and young people who took part in little or no physical activity outside of school PE. The overall picture of these PEL journeys was more complex and extensive than the teachers originally anticipated, particularly the time spent on informal physical activity (e.g. skateboarding).

Delving into the factors influencing these PEL journeys, the teachers discovered that each young person was constantly navigating many factors, some of which were limiting and others enabling. These factors included pressure or disinterest from peers, parents/carers, teachers, and coaches; financial issues in relation to club fees, equipment and travel; the school's ethos towards sport and competition; the nature of community-based opportunities; the amount of school homework; different performance requirements for entry to clubs; and a lack of interest. The teachers also acknowledged that the young people's development during the adolescent years often resulted in significant, sometimes rapid, variations in their physical, cognitive, social and emotional behaviour. From a PEL perspective, re-creating a PE curriculum that was a one-size-fits-all product locked into the classroom setting and disconnected from young people's life-wide experiences did not make sense. The new PE curriculum could no longer be the pre-programmed fixed product of set learning tasks that had long dominated.

The teachers agreed that any new curriculum would be framed within the lifelong physical activity dimensions and focussed on the holistic foundations supporting each child and young person's PEL journey (see Jess et al, 2024). Furthermore, they recognised that relationships, with and between children and young people, had a key role in the curriculum making process. By understanding the children and young people they worked with, the teachers were able to exercise their professional judgement and develop a dynamic, contextualised curriculum that accounted for individual PEL journeys. In designing this new curriculum, the teachers recognised they would need to acknowledge, navigate and accommodate each child

and young person's holistic development, the interactions that took place in the classroom and the influence of key factors from the school, local community, local authority and national contexts.

The department also recognised that, while physical activity would remain the context in which the new curriculum would be enacted, the focus would shift to the holistic learning that could be woven through the lifelong physical activity dimensions and PEL journeys of the children and young people. However, as noted in the two previous articles, holistic foundations are not fixed building blocks but evolve and develop in a non-linear and often messy manner as each young person's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional learning changes at different rates and in different contexts. As such, the teachers now purposefully set out to support the development of each young person's holistic learning so that it could be applied across their life-wide, and later lifelong, PEL journeys. To initiate this curriculum making process, the teachers agreed to collectively build a more in-depth understanding of the lifelong dimensions, the holistic foundations, and the ways that holistic learning could be effectively woven through the curriculum. Consequently, this re-oriented curriculum process focussed on interweaving fundamental movement skills; specialised movement skills; physical activity habits; physical activity knowledge and understanding; decision-making skills; cooperative and collaborative skills; resilience, motivation, enjoyment and more. In addition, many recent holistic models and approaches like sport education, teaching games for understanding, teaching personal and social responsibility and meaningful PE are now included as part of the curriculum. The new PE curriculum is becoming the 'connective catalyst' for PEL. However, as we now discuss, the PE department also recognised that this curriculum making process could not be disconnected from their teaching in the classroom and from life-wide stakeholders.

### ***Flexible Teaching***

As they moved to focus the PE curriculum on scaffolding each child and young person's holistic foundations, the teachers recognised they needed to be more flexible in their teaching.

Flexible teaching at Flexible High School:

- Moves beyond a transmission approach.
- Supports the self-organising knowledge and skills of each young person to help them become independent learners.
- Leads to expanded teaching repertoires that include interactive, participative and open-ended approaches.
- Assesses starting points, designs flexible learning intentions, uses formative assessment to track progress, creates learning spaces to discuss meaningful life-wide possibilities and revisits learning to scaffold holistic foundations.

While each child and young person's physical learning remained central to the PE experience, there was an awareness that their cognitive, social, and emotional learning was also a key

feature. For children and young people who were inactive across and beyond school, the emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of the school PE experience took on an increasingly important role in the creation of a positive foundation for their future PEL journeys. Therefore, in addition to physical foundations, helping young people develop the appropriate knowledge and understanding, decision-making skills, social skills, motivation, and emotional resilience had become a prerequisite of the holistic PEL foundations. The PE department subsequently recognised that each child and young person needed support to develop the self-organising knowledge and skills that would help them become independent PEL learners once they had left school.

However, to help develop the mix of physical, cognitive, social and emotional learning that would create these holistic foundations, the teachers were conscious they needed to move beyond the simple transmission model and be more flexible in their teaching. If they were to effectively weave holistic learning through the PE experience, the teachers would need to respond to, and influence, each child and young person's behaviours. While they still used some whole class teaching, they began to include small group, pair, one-to-one and individualised learning experiences to differentiate and personalise the learning experiences. Therefore, to ensure the learning activities were interactive and meaningful, the teachers sought to increase their teaching repertoires by including more interactive and participative approaches like questioning, group discussions, open-ended tasks, short presentations, peer teaching and others.

As the catalyst for this flexible teaching, the teachers agreed to re-orient their teaching approach by focussing on the following five teaching strategies.

1. Begin by assessing each child and young person's starting point. For example: What was their previous physical activity experience inside and outside of school? What was their current PEL journey inside and outside school? What was their current level of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development? This background history would help to shape what would follow.
2. Design flexible learning intentions for classes and individuals in each class. Because each child and young person's starting point was different, and their future holistic learning unpredictable, the teachers recognised the need to design learning intentions that children and young people could have active input into and could be adapted as the learning process progressed.
3. Use formative assessment to track each child and young person's holistic learning and PEL journeys over time (e.g. questioning, reflection tasks, journals). This approach to assessment also offers a way to build relationships by developing knowledge and understanding of children and young people as individuals and in groups. Information gathered through this ongoing formative assessment is critical in hearing the voices of children and young people and feeding forward into learning intentions and curriculum design.
4. Create opportunities to help children and young people consider how PEL was, or could be, a meaningful and valuable part of their life-wide experiences. In PE lessons, the teachers began to use time differently to create 'learning spaces' so that the young

people could reflect upon, and plan, their school PE experiences and PEL journeys. These 'learning spaces' helped children and young people share their thoughts and experiences with classmates and teachers. In addition, the learning spaces were used to consolidate learning, challenge thinking and even allow for discussion about creative ideas for future PEL journeys.

5. As each school year progressed, the teachers used formative assessments to revisit important holistic learning and help consolidate and scaffold each child and young person's foundations.

By taking this more flexible approach, the teachers became aware that most of the young people in their classes were becoming more comfortable sharing their thinking about, and experiences of, school PE and their PEL journeys. Teachers also noticed increased participation and engagement which suggested that flexible teaching also aligned with developing a more inclusive learning environment within PE. Progress is certainly being made, although some of the teachers have found this transformation in their teaching more difficult than others. However, as the teachers continue to make moves to become adaptive practitioners, the change in their practice is not only evident in their classroom interactions but, as we now discuss, in the relationships they are beginning to develop with the many life-wide stakeholders who influence each young person's PEL journey.

### ***Life-wide Relationships***

While PE at Flexible High School had traditionally been viewed as only being a school subject, the shift towards PEL has had a significant impact on the relationships the teachers are now seeking to develop not just with children and young people but also with the many life-wide stakeholders influencing each child and young person's PEL journey. In this sub-section, we consider the following aspects of the department's efforts to develop life-wide relationships with key stakeholders.

Developing relationships at Flexible High School involved:

- Identifying three life-wide stakeholder groups to build initial relationships with: staff from Flexible High School, the feeder primary schools and the local community.
- Recognising that many stakeholders hold different views about the purpose of school PE.
- Acknowledging that the development of these life-wide relationships would be a long-term process that needed to be handled sensitively.
- Realising that teachers would need to become advocates for PEL.
- Contacting external PE colleagues also seeking to adopt the PEL vision.

In the early stage of its transition to PEL, the PE department agreed to categorise three key stakeholder groups: the groups who had most direct influence on the PEL experiences of the children and young people. These stakeholder groups were,

1. The primary teachers and senior leadership of the feeder primary schools
2. The teachers and senior leadership across Flexible High School
3. The practitioners, administrators, volunteers and parents/carers supporting physical activity opportunities across the local community and at home.

The teachers recognised that PEL represented an opportunity to work more closely with these different stakeholder groups. However, they were also aware that its relationship with many of these stakeholders had previously been limited or non-existent. Building a more collaborative and integrated school/community culture to enact a PEL vision would therefore be a complex and long-term process, particularly as many of the life-wide stakeholders would hold different views about the purposes of school PE. For example, some primary teachers may consider PE as a break from the work in the classroom, some fellow teachers in the high school may not think they should be part of a school-wide approach to PEL, while some community practitioners may have an elitist expectation of school PE as a resource to identify talented performers or, conversely, simply sport. If the PEL vision was to be integrated across the school and the local community, the PE department recognised they would need to take the first steps to introduce and oversee the initial enactment of PEL.

However, the teachers were also conscious that they would need to sensitively handle the sharing of the PEL vision and any moves towards a more collaborative culture with the different stakeholder groups. They acknowledged that they not only needed to become advocates for PEL but also to engage in a ‘hearts and minds’ exercise to get as many stakeholders as possible on board. The department agreed that this ‘hearts and minds’ exercise was particularly important because many stakeholders already had a particularly beneficial influence on the PEL agenda e.g. sport development officers, physical activity coordinators, commercial groups, representative sports groups etc. This being said, the department realised that taking on this advocacy, and potential leadership, role across the school and community would be a new experience for them and represented a role that some of the teachers felt may be beyond their remit. Therefore, in this early phase of PEL, the department acknowledged that many stakeholders would bring different knowledge and skills to the collaborative discussions. As such, they recognised they not only needed to share the PEL vision with the stakeholders but also attempt to work with them to create new ways of thinking and working.

While these new collaborations succeeded in bringing people together, attempting to work together proved to be both enjoyable and tense. The teachers therefore recognised it was important not to rush these life-wide PEL developments but to take time and be aware that the process may be messy and uncomfortable at times. Consequently, in these early interactions, the teachers found that framing the discussions within the lifelong physical activity dimensions proved to be a particularly useful starting point. In addition, the Head of Department, with two colleagues, decided to make contact with other PE teachers, departments, researchers and teacher educators who were adopting a PEL vision. While these PE collaborations are still at an early stage, initial discussions focussed on sharing PEL experiences have been particularly helpful and progress has been made towards the creation of advocacy materials to share across their communities. This emerging community of practice is beginning to evolve into a PE network that supports the life-wide collaborations taking place at Flexible High School.



## Conclusion

In this third article of the series, we have turned our attention to the implications of a 'Physical Education is for Life' (PEL) vision on teachers' practice. We have discussed how the shift towards PEL requires teachers to take an adaptive approach to their practice. Revisiting Flexible High School from the first article in the series, we have considered how the teachers in the PE department adapted their practice within and beyond the classroom as they set out to enact a PEL agenda. As they began to put PEL into practice, the teachers became curriculum makers and flexible teachers in the classroom context whilst concurrently initiating collaborative relationships with many of the life-wide stakeholders who influence the PEL journeys of the children and young people in the school. Significantly, as they interacted with these different stakeholders, the teachers actively took on an advocacy role for PEL. Building on these three introductory articles, the PEL team are now in the early stages of moving the project forwards by focussing on the introduction of the PEL vision in schools and communities, the development of PEL resources and professional development courses, PEL research projects and PEL advocacy work with a wide range of stakeholders. Future articles in the PEL series will report on these different PEL activities. If anyone is interested in finding out more about the 'Physical Education is for Life' (PEL) Project, please contact any of the authors, whose names and email addresses are available at the end of this article.

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