

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL LITERACY FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

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This sports college is a fairly typical mixed, inner-city, 11 – 16 school with relatively challenging socio-economic circumstances. One third of students are offered free school meals, almost 40% have SEN, a quarter are from ethnic minority families and 90 students have English as an additional language.

When a new Head of Girls' PE arrived she found a rather depressing, although not uncommon, situation. Many girls were 'very negative' towards PE and school sport (PESS) and had 'poor relationships' with the staff. The majority of girls did not enjoy the subject and staff '... seemed to be going through the motions but no progress was being made'. In collaboration with the Director of Sport the new Head of Girls decided to work with a inclusion consultant to improve the situation in her side of the department.

Firstly a forum was held for Year 8 and 9 girls to air their opinions about PESS to a neutral third party. This information was then used to provide a CPD session for PE department staff which concluded with a plan for action. The objective was to break down the barriers preventing girls from taking part in, enjoying and achieving in PESS.

Below are some of the major findings from the forum and the subsequent action taken:

a) 'Teachers attitudes ...they're not on our side.' There was a lot of resentment among the girls towards their female PE teachers' attitudes, styles and relationships with students. Comments included '... unhelpful ... need to understand ... unsympathetic'.

In response a CPD session was run to help sensitize the staff to the issues and give them an opportunity to contribute towards improving the situation. One result was a Girls' Sports Council where girls from Years 7 to 10 meet each term with two members of the female PE staff to discuss changes they feel would be for the better. This is a very informal discussion held before school with breakfast provided. Staff show their commitment to improving staff-student relations by making an effort to action at least one of the agreements before the next meeting; this is clearly appreciated by the students.

b) 'The kit's rubbish and we get too cold outside.' The next biggest complaint was about baggy tracksuit bottoms that rip easily, being lent dirty kit or odd trainers and not being allowed to wear a coat or hooded top outside.

As a result of the Girls' Sports Council a new kit was designed including a choice of stretchy plain black bottoms, dance trousers or their own, plain black bottoms. Further, a new KS4 t-shirt has been introduced and fresh team kits are being brought in. But most importantly the old PE jumper was replaced by a very popular new fleecy hooded top with the school name across the back.

c) 'We have to do rugby and it's too rough.' It was felt by staff and students alike that more choice in activities would encourage positive attitudes all round. The idea of 'PE pathways' was introduced to KS4 options meaning students now choose a certain route at the beginning of the year according to their own preferences eg fitness, games, dance etc, while the staff can still ensure students follow a balanced programme over the year. This was enhanced by bringing in new instructors for outdoor ed and boxing, for example. Importantly pathways have now been offered to Year 9 girls who now choose between a 'games' and an 'athletic' route.

d) 'There's nowhere to do dance ... where the boys aren't watching you.' There were no specialist facilities for dance or aerobics type activities but neither was there even anywhere out of public view for girls (or boys) to feel 'safe' from the gaze of others. A new build was not possible so the old-style gymnasium was converted into a dance / fitness studio with mirrors and a good sound system with specific styles of music for different activities such as circuit training, step, aerobics, boxercise, aerobics. The windows in the main doors were papered over and the second set of doors has been closed off so people don't need to walk through the gym any more. Further, funding was secured to install fitness equipment such as rowing machines, cross trainers, power plate, stationary cycles, free weights, bars, trampettes and other smaller fitness items.

It's also important to recognise that alongside this work there has been a change in the attitude of female PE staff towards the girls. This is harder to pin point and write about but certain principles run through the success of the actions above. They include communication, respect, expectations and a commitment to action/change. These more subtle changes have played no small part in the significant changes in girls' attitudes that staff have seen since the new Head of Girls arrived. In fact, they have become reciprocal with girls *themselves* now showing better communication, increased respect, higher expectations and a greater commitment to action/change

The changing room is now a more relaxed place to be, there are fewer notes, girls are getting changed quicker. Lessons are more active, more productive and of a higher standard. After-school clubs have expanded and total numbers taking part exceed those of the boys!

So, as a result of staff listening to their issues and fulfilling promises, girls are '... much happier and more confident in the PE department'. Consequently, they are becoming more health-aware and ultimately more physically literate.

From Claudia Cockburn