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EVERYTHING OKAY, MATE?

"Everything okay, mate?" is a question that often passes the lips of working-class males up and down the country in a range of work situations and social environments. However, is this ever genuinely asked with a view to receiving a considered and honest response? With suicide being the primary cause of death for males under the age of 19 in the UK, and a disproportionate amount of these deaths being from men living in socially deprived areas, could a more focused and strategic introduction of traditionally male-orientated pastimes, such as darts, pool and snooker, to the Key Stage 4 physical education (PE) curriculum provide an opportunity for more working-class males to benefit from opportunities to communicate and socially interact outside and beyond school? More importantly, could a more strategic and concerted effort to introduce these pupils to traditionally working-class, recreational activities provide regular opportunities to spend time in the company of friends, colleagues and family members in a relaxed, sporting environment where they may be much more inclined to highlight the fact that they actually might *not* be okay?

Tragically, between July 2022 and August 2023 there were almost 5,000 deaths from suicide in England with the overwhelming majority (74.8 per cent) of these being male (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2023). When viewed in greater detail, it is also evident that not only is suicide the biggest killer of men under the age of 50, it is also the leading cause of death for males in the UK between the ages of 20 and 34 (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Whilst the reasons behind this significantly high disparity in suicide rates are both varied and complex, the most prominent issues that lead to male suicidal thoughts and actions are commonly associated with the heightened masculine and financial expectations on men, the decreased likelihood that men will discuss their feelings with others or seek medical help, and a fear that informing employers of their mental health issues would lead to negative responses from colleagues and longer-term implications for their jobs/careers (Samaritans, 2023). Whilst these social pressures clearly impact on the lives of many men in the UK, there is evidence to suggest that for males living in working-class communities in particular, there is a heightened expectation to be a 'real man' in many areas of their lives, pressure for them to engage in appropriate and acceptable employment, and an expectation that they are able to 'man up' in the face of adversity (Priory Group, 2023). In addition, there is also evidence to suggest that males from lower down the social scale are more likely to cut back on things that promote better mental and physical wellbeing when money is tight – a decision that can lead to the types of social behaviours that increase the likelihood of suicidal thoughts (Samaritans, 2023b). As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that men from lower down the social scale are ten times more likely to take their own lives compared to those from more affluent social backgrounds (Samaritans, 2023b).

It is certainly worth noting at this point that the complex and wide-ranging issues that can lead to the emergence of suicidal thoughts are certainly not limited to the working class or to males. It is also important to highlight the fact that the decision to take one's own life is often linked to long-term mental health issues that may have begun in childhood, with a significant number of suicides being linked in some way to existing mental health conditions, addictions and/or a family history of suicide (Bertolote & Fleischmann, 2002). However, research, government policy and suicide support and prevention organisations (such as Samaritans, Mind and Papyrus) state that addressing social isolation, promoting positive life changes and providing comfortable opportunities for people to talk to others or for friends and family to express their concerns are all effective ways to support people with suicidal thoughts or tendencies.

There is also no suggestion here that the structure, content and delivery of PE in schools can act as a way to address the range of issues that lead a disproportionate number of working-class males in the UK to consider taking their own lives. By extension, it is also worth acknowledging that halting and addressing the youth mental health crisis that currently exists in the UK cannot (and should not) be solely the role of PE staff in much the same way that the subject cannot (and should not) be expected to solve issues such as childhood obesity and anti-social behaviour alone. However, effective PE can and does promote the types of behaviours and attitudes that develop positive lifestyles and habits that may improve long-term physical and mental health. Perhaps more importantly in this particular case, PE and its promotion of such habits can also form part of a collective effort to promote the lifestyles that may (amongst many other things) lead young, working-class males in particular to leave the house more regularly and speak with friends more openly, thus improving their mental health.

As many will know, one of the ways that the subject of PE has looked to promote and encourage committed, long-term participation in sport and active leisure is by moving towards option-based PE lessons at Key Stage 4. Whilst the whole PE curriculum is now more varied in many schools, it is in Years 10 and 11 that many PE departments have opted to move away from more traditional and team-based curriculum activities in favour of more recreational lifestyle activities, such as Pilates, boxercise, yoga and walking, that more accurately reflect contemporary society and youth interests. In this regard, research (Smith, Green & Thurston, 2009) suggests that by structuring and delivering the Key Stage 4 PE curriculum in this way and utilising the input of external instructors or, in some cases, visits to local facilities, many schools have been able to introduce their pupils to accessible, socially appropriate and less-structured and competitive activities that have the potential to keep pupils participating, both as teenagers and adults. Despite these potential benefits, though, such offers to pupils in PE clearly come with logistical and financial issues linked to the cost of sessions and travel, the flexibility of the school timetable, the confidence and experience of existing PE staff, and the availability of suitable facilities and/or equipment for delivery in school. With regards to working-class male pupils more specifically, there have also been claims that when such

activities are offered at Key Stage 4, the options often favour female pupils or can be linked to longer-term expenditure (such as monthly gym memberships). In addition, whilst many PE departments clearly do offer appropriate, alternative or non-traditional activities that may be more suited to boys (for example, golf, parkour and mountain biking), studies have found that, when presented with options, many working-class pupils are likely to choose more of the same by opting to play large-scale, competitive games of football with their peers rather than engaging in something new or leaving the school site (Scattergood, 2023). Whilst playing football is clearly popular with working-class males in particular, and has the potential to promote and improve long-term physical and mental health, committed participation is short lived (players rarely play past the age of 40) and is often constrained by, and dependent upon, the availability of suitable facilities and other participants, even when played recreationally. In addition, a more social and spectator-based involvement in the game is increasingly costly and may, indeed, promote isolating and inactive behaviours as males opt to watch football games from the comfort of their home.

Given these issues, there does seem to be scope for many schools (particularly those located in working-class communities) to provide more suitable activities for adolescent males. For example, more typical working-class leisure pursuits, such as pool, darts and snooker, are closely linked to local facilities, are relatively cheap to access for schools in the short term and boys in the long term, and can realistically lead to both recreational and competitive participation well into and throughout adulthood – often regardless of boys' personal relationships.

In terms of being able to implement this Key Stage 4 PE offer in practice, there is clearly a need to take pupils off site in school time, a requirement that local clubs would be happy to accommodate albeit with some form of cost passed to either the school or the pupils themselves. It is important to acknowledge that many of these activities are strongly associated with the consumption of alcohol in the less-than-sporty environments of public houses and snooker halls. They also generally require relatively low levels of physical activity, which may conflict with traditional views of PE, and there is the fact that PE staff taking pupils to the local snooker hall is likely to raise some eyebrows at the least, and some serious questions and concerns at worst, in senior staff and parents. However, it is the longer-term, broader social and mental health benefits that need to be kept in mind as male working-class adolescents are taken (with full supervision) by their PE staff to local snooker clubs and pool halls. There, they will learn how to conduct themselves in these types of social environments, they will be taught how to referee and score, and they will become confident and competent players of games that they can feasibly play for decades to come. Once they are comfortable in attending these establishments, such activities provide a wide range of opportunities for males of all ages to use facilities beyond school and socially interact with friends, peers, family members and work mates without the need to be committed to fixtures, availability, significant costs or other obligations. Indeed, one might argue that it is these types of environments that provide the opportunity and have the capacity for males, and young males in particular, to engage in and enjoy a flexible and accessible indoor activity – one requiring very little equipment – in the company of people with whom they are comfortable and at ease.

Admittedly, games such as pool and darts have an association with public houses and alcohol that no school would be keen to promote. However, facilitated by national smoking bans and a significant decrease in alcohol consumption amongst young people (26 per cent of 16-24-year-olds are teetotal in the UK – DrinkAware, 2022), public houses and snooker halls are no longer the smoke-filled, beer-swilling establishments they once were. Indeed, it could be argued that the competitive, team-based activities traditionally promoted by PE departments are also associated with a heavy drinking culture, for example at rugby and football matches. Indeed, engagement in many typical working-class sports often goes hand-in-hand with the consumption of alcohol, from the post-game pint after a game of cricket to the day out at the races. That is to say, it is likely that these young men have already been exposed to the culture of drinking alongside sport, therefore a structured and supervised visit to a local snooker hall during school hours will influence them less in terms of exposure to drinking than first thought.

Furthermore, it could be argued that even if exposing young males to public houses and pool halls *did* promote the consumption of alcohol in the longer term, it is precisely after a couple of post-work drinks and a game of pool, or a game of darts at the local with family members, where the question of "Everything okay, mate?" could be answered with the type of response that could lead to a genuine conversation about their mental health.

By providing opportunities for and links to popular and socially acceptable male activities, such as darts, pool and snooker, within Key Stage 4 PE, the subject will surely encourage more males to interact socially in a safe and accessible environment with people with whom they feel comfortable – potentially for the rest of their lives. Admittedly, shouts of "180!" coming from the gym or groups of Year 10 males being transported to the local snooker hall may bemuse heads of PE and parents when first suggested. However, strip away the stereotypes and stigma, and we are left with accessible and appropriate activities, wherein males interact and communicate without the need for structured commitment or overt physical activity. At the very least, they provide opportunities for males to leave the house and spend time with friends well into old age. At the very best, it could help to save someone's life. ■

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