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Could 'sport sanctuaries' in schools help young people recover from the impact of a pandemic?

Victoria Wells is the National Lead for Targeted Interventions at the [Youth Sport Trust](#), a children's charity working to ensure every child enjoys the life changing benefits that come from play and sport. She is also a Multi Academy Trustee Wellbeing Lead, and Chair of Governors. In this think piece she shares reflections from her own experiences and from schools around their response to COVID-19, and how schools could support their young people further in their recovery curriculums.

This piece examines some of the hurdles to learning facing young people as they returned to school following the COVID-19 lockdown. It acknowledges the fundamental challenge for schools in supporting young people with a wide range of needs in their recovery back to the school environment as well as exploring how they are engaging in the classroom. Some solutions may have worked in the past yet are now ineffective as schools find themselves tackling the issues brought by a continuing global pandemic.

It concludes with the hope that integrated approaches through the co-construction of **sport sanctuaries** will be adopted, across a range of schools (including mainstream, special and alternative education) and that children and young people are empowered to increase their capability in using sport as their sanctuary.

[How could co-constructing 'sport sanctuaries' support schools as they re-engage pupils into learning?](#)

Imagine a classroom in a school that bombards you from every angle with new and changing sensory information that you couldn't process....

- the change in desk layout
- the coloured tape that directs where you can and can't walk into
- the smells of disinfectant and anti-bacterial hand sanitiser
- verbal rules that determine if you can socialise with your friends at break or lunchtimes who fall outside of your class/form bubble
- the sounds of anxious chatter from fellow pupils about 'what COVID is' and 'what does being in a pandemic mean'? Or unknowns such as 'will school close again'?
- the constant thoughts about what you experienced during lockdown, but not necessarily having the confidence or ability to verbalise these thoughts; the worry of passing COVID onto your elderly grandparents, having to take on additional care responsibilities for younger siblings, or catching the virus yourself, or if home isn't a safe space for you, the thought that school may close once again and you find yourselves 'locked in' as opposed to locked down (as one pupil described it to me).

Imagine having to hold all this in having to concentrate, trying to focus, remain engaged, and attempt to follow instructions from your teacher.

We are in a time in our education history like no other. Each young person will have had a unique experience of lockdown. Each young person is suddenly faced with a changed environment (that remains fluid and unknown at the time of writing this) and each young person will have different coping mechanisms to respond to this whilst they try to remain engaged in their lessons.



For those where these mechanisms are not necessarily positive strategies, such as the child who cannot verbalise their fear when another child gets too close to their personal space; what will schools do when faced with students who suddenly lash out or respond in a negative way? We only must do a quick review of school behaviour policies and additional sanctions to see where this may end for that child.

The Recovery Curriculumⁱ identifies 5 levers that will support a young person in their recovery from the losses they have experienced during this time. I believe that it is through Metacognition and Space (Levers 4 and 5) that schools can co-create **sport sanctuaries** designed to support young people with their re-engagement to school life.

The co-construct of sport sanctuaries has developed as a result of my own experiences during this time and through conversations with Head Teachers from both mainstream and Alternative Provision schools. As human beings we all need or seek some form of sanctuary. **This sanctuary, pending on our thoughts, feelings and experiences may be one that increases or heightens our alertness, a space to let off steam, or even one that brings a restorative sense, through peaceful and calming activity.**

For my children during lockdown it was being intentional in stepping away from home learning; moments where there was a need to release built up energy from participating in virtual classrooms. This took the form of running up, down and along our grass outside; being able to vent their frustrations at trying to grasp new calculation theories; or on other days, simply feeling the rhythmic nature of throwing a ball against the wall repetitively by way of a release from comprehension tasks. For other young people, sport can be used to set them free from pressures experienced during the school day, like when they are struggling in certain subjects or studying intensely for examinations. Indeed, one secondary student attending a high school in Kent shared how he uses rugby to improve his engagement to learning. Through intentionally using his mind to take him to positive experiences felt while on the pitch, he could transfer this sense of safety to the present moment, resulting in happier and healthier approaches to his learning.

[Sport sanctuaries:](#)

Let's unpack this a little. When you think of the word sanctuary, what does it mean to you? The Oxford Dictionary definition is *'a safe space'*. When we consider this against the biophilia hypothesis, and how biophilic experiences can reduce stress, improve cognitive function, and enhance mood and creativity, we can start to see how these spaces of sanctuary, or indeed using sport as our sanctuary, can increase our overall health and wellbeing, as well as productivity.

Overlay this with the outcomes that sport provides and the association between being physically active and academic attainment and attentionⁱⁱ, and there is something here for schools to consider.

[Back to schools.....](#)

- *'some of our pupils won't have been near a classroom in months'*
- *'the environment now is different to the one they left'*
- *'is it any wonder pupils might act up'*

This is what teachers cried when schools were being asked to implement and consider new guidelines for the start of term around behaviour. When children and young people are struggling in school, there needs to be an outlet and a

space for them to go. It is vital that we consider the school environment when we are rebuilding young people's confidence as learners. Through co-creation of sport sanctuaries in schools, through PE leads and school practitioners working together, along with the co-production with young people, both physical space and activity could be defined in school; providing opportunity for young people to seek it out when they need to feel additional safety and security. Would it not be less disruptive in a maths lesson if the teacher was able to teach a pupil for 20 minutes, before the pupil needing five minutes of a sport sanctuary was able to return, more engaged? Would lunchtimes lose some of their challenges if pupils were able to go and apply a physical movement, using sport as a sanctuary that suited their needs as opposed to a busy dining hall, or having to remain at their desks to eat their lunch due to COVID restrictions?

Supporting young people

So how can we support young people in developing metacognitive strategies to understand the way they need to self-pace their lessons? How can we start to build their capability in using PE and school sport in an intentional way? How can we start to recognise when they may need to use sport as a sanctuary for them to return fully present and engaged in school life? As one policymaker puts it '*we need to start building fences along the top of the cliff rather than parking ambulances at the bottom*ⁱⁱⁱ.'

This may take the form of alerting physical activities, stimulating both the vestibular and proprioceptive senses, so the sport sanctuary may be a space with a trampette, or a football, monkey bars, or simply a space for push ups against a wall. Alternatively, for the more hyper-alert child, their sport sanctuary may include more calming activities such as mindfulness, yoga or resistance bands.

It will be critical for schools to co-produce these sport sanctuaries with young people, for coming back to how this think piece began around how every child having had a unique experience during this period, it is therefore right to make the assumption that for every child, their sport sanctuary may need a unique element for them. This will also support and alleviate parent anxieties who would be receptive to understanding more about what schools are doing to support the wellbeing of pupils in a proactive rather than reactive approach.

If we as school sport practitioners, and schools are to enable each and every child to feel safe, secure and valued as well as develop a sense of self-awareness and self-efficacy, we may be able to contribute effectively to the essential re-building and re-engagement of our pupils, by considering the role **Sport Sanctuaries** can play in nurturing the whole child.

For further information on how the Youth Sport Trust can help you to support children and young people please visit: <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/coronavirus-support>

References:

- Carpenter, B, Carpenter, M (2020) A Recovery Curriculum: [Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic](#)
- [Public Health England \(2014\) The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment A briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education settings](#)
- Young Minds (2020) Coronavirus; the impact on young people with mental health needs. www.youngminds.org.uk
- [Youth Sport Trust & You Gov \(2020\) Wellbeing and Location](#)

ⁱ Carpenter & Carpenter (2020) <https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

ⁱⁱ [The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment A briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education settings, Public Health England \(2014\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Tawell, Emery, Daniels, Thompson, Porter, \(October 2020\) Seeking a balance: Conversations with policy makers and influencers about intervening upstream to prevent school exclusions in the context of COVID-19 and beyond](#)