

## **Westminster Media Forum Keynote Seminar - Women and Sport: priorities for participation, leadership and commercial investment (article submission)**

**Author biography:** Louise Hall ([louisekathrynhall@gmail.com](mailto:louisekathrynhall@gmail.com)) is Director of Sport, Fitness and Wellbeing at Benenden School. She has previously held teaching and management positions at Brockenhurst Sixth Form College and South Downs FE College in Hampshire. She has an MSc in Exercise and Health Science (Bristol), BSc Honours in Physical Education and Sports Science (Loughborough) and Certificate in Education (Portsmouth).

### **Article reference: Increasing girls' participation rates in school sport**

Much emphasis has been placed recently on the importance of school sport and the relevance of content and experience in relation to lifelong participation. With research data consistently demonstrating correlation between activity levels and health, as well as a marked increase in obesity levels (most worryingly in young people), we must get things right in terms of our school provision. Despite knowing this, however, what progress are we actually making? What do we still need to do? There is no simple answer, of course, but we must really develop greater interest and take effective action with school programmes.

An experienced teacher, committed to sport and exercise since a young age, I appreciate that not everyone enjoys sport but I also believe there is an activity for everyone. We just need the opportunity to experience variety and improved exposure to increase awareness. Similarly, school programmes must allow greater flexibility and choice to help our young people, especially girls, find something they enjoy and will benefit from in the future. You cannot argue that sports participation provides the chance to develop skills and attributes that other forms of activity do not always offer, however if being forced to take part creates a negative attitude and limited participation behaviour for life, surely this is not a success? That's not to say compulsion is wrong; of course we need to experience a wide curriculum, particularly at a young age, but we do need to help each young person to find something that works for them. Dance, fitness-based activities and individual sports have a bigger role than often given credit for and should be recognised with a more respectable amount of time in schools. It would be nice to see our celebrity obsession become less about weight and image, and more about behaviour. Media attention and our initiatives could be better channelled into fitness trends many celebrities are involved with; would this not encourage greater participation?

Lisa O'Keefe from Sport England mentions the need for greater focus on changing behaviour rather than attitudes. This is refreshing; we all hear the messages about importance of exercise, sport and activity, but need guidance and opportunity to allow real chance of developing the behaviours that will actually make a difference. Schools can offer an unparalleled environment to drive these behaviours and therefore impact positively on our national goals; ensuring our PE curriculum, co-curricular activities and staffing, amongst other things, enable this to happen is a fundamental requirement.

Greater review through case studies and research of Independent Schools' provision would be interesting. Also, are there differences in sports participation in single sex schools compared to co-educational establishments? The flexibility and freedom to create an exciting independent PE curriculum provides great opportunity towards these aims. As is also the case with some state schools, many really do offer outstanding PE programmes where choice and compulsion each play a part, participation and performance are both encouraged and where competition is seen as healthy. Furthermore, greater focus on provision of competition is also important. One challenge for many schools is keeping girls motivated when opportunity to compete is limited, especially for those in not in the 'A' team. Despite common myth, in my experience, many girls yearn for competition and are passionate about being in a team. Is too much attention given to getting everyone active rather than retention and the number who dropout because they lose interest in 'just' training?

Finally, while new initiatives for Primary and Secondary schools are encouraging, please let's not forget about Sixth Form and Further Education. These are often ignored or perhaps the reality of their place in the sporting, active lifestyles of young people is grossly underestimated. For many girls, this is the only environment in which they participate in sport, much to the apparent surprise of some sports bodies. Addressing this group of young people in our strategy is crucial, particularly given the age range and potential for dropout. We have the chance to be world-leading. With greater investment and collaborative work towards an overall strategy, surely we can make this all happen?