



GOLD

Now the show is over, **Crispin Andrews** examines the likelihood of a genuine Paralympic legacy for disabled students in a cutting climate...

British stars scooped 118 medals at this year's Paralympics – more than any nation except

China. Jonnie Peacock, Ellie Simmonds and David Stone could and should inspire thousands of disabled children to take up sport. The logical future, and the one spun by the LOCOG PR department, looks very bright. There is however, a flaw in an otherwise excellent plan: government has taken away the funding and the incentive from schools to provide sporting opportunity for disabled youngsters.

Local politicians and business leaders may well line the streets, demonstrating their commitment when the torch goes through their town. Mr Cameron might love the thought that the eyes of the world are on Great Britain during his tenure at Number Ten. But during an economic downturn, whether anybody is going to put their hands in their pocket to help people who are unable to grab opportunity for themselves, is another matter.

Sports colleges, funded to develop specialist provision for target groups and individuals have gone. School sport partnerships organising specialist provision for schools without the expertise or time to meet the needs of every individual – gone. Yes, the government has given schools money for one day a week school sport coordinator release. But this is at the head teacher's discretion, and could, if needs or attitudes so determine, be used on supply cover, textbooks or even a makeover for the staff room.

Even where a school does release a PE teacher as a school sport coordinator, with pressures to focus inwardly on core matters, where is this person's time more likely to be spent? Setting up football and netball fixtures? Filling in health

STANDARDS

and safety forms for an outdoor adventure visit? Or helping colleagues design the sort of curriculum that a young disabled person can access in the same way as his or her able-bodied peers?

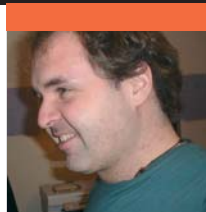
Even in such a climate, however, there are ways round all this. “We need specialists leading sessions, people who understand a specific disability sport and how to engage young people in that sport,” says Simon Harris, from Wilson Stuart Special School. Harris, who helped turn the Birmingham school into one of the country’s leading sports colleges for youngsters with physical disabilities and complex learning difficulties, believes that sending PE staff on specific disability training courses will help them deliver more inclusive lessons. He adds, “I can get five or six well-meaning volunteers down for an after school session, but that’s no use, unless the person leading the session has the required knowledge and expertise.” Harris thinks it’s likely that lots of training courses will pop up, to take advantage of the Paralympic legacy. “Heads of PE should get on the phone to the governing body headquarters, find out where the nearest one is and send a member of staff on it,” he insists.

Wilson Stuart’s school sport partnership has become a Community Company. Local schools buy in services, and staff members are able to offer the same support and opportunity as they did when they had government funding. Slated Row, a special school in Milton Keynes, still employs Lesley Byrne as a school sport coordinator to work across the city’s special schools and provide support to the mainstream. “The government pays for one day and the schools buy in to give me a second,” Byrne says.

Elsewhere, where physical education isn’t a priority, there’s a real concern that disabled children will once again be marginalised, as the day to day pressures of teaching PE to large numbers of students sees teachers revert to traditional practices that alienated previous disabled generations. School sport partnerships collected data about the numbers of children with special educational needs who were involved in sport, and set this against national targets. Without this sort of external monitoring, will we see a return to the days where disabled youngsters were sent off for a game of zone hockey with a teaching assistant during scheduled sports sessions, or worse still, to the library?

“Heads of PE will often design a curriculum based on the expertise of their staff. It’s totally the wrong way around,” insists Harris. “You should work out what your students’ needs are and then, if there is an expertise gap, upskill the workforce, so the department can meet those needs.” Harris believes that Paralympic sports could be incorporated into the mainstream curriculum. “Boccia is a good game for coordination; seated volleyball gives everyone a good work out,” he points out.

There’s a problem here though. The perception, particularly in the minds of the sport-obsessed masses, is that PE and sport are one and the same. This, of course, is nonsense, but for the country’s decision makers, education and grass roots sport is more about politics than, well, education and grass roots sport. And unfortunately for disabled children, there are more Daily Mail readers than there are disabled people. When government calls for more ‘competitive sport’ in PE lessons, they’re talking about football, cricket and rugby, not goal ball and wheelchair basketball. The Paralympics will never again be as big as it was this year. But the World Cup will, and the European



ABOUT THE EXPERT

CRISPIN ANDREWS IS A FREELANCE WRITER. HE USED TO TEACH AND COACH CRICKET AND FOOTBALL, BUT DOESN'T DRINK TEA AND COFFEE, AND HAS NEVER WATCHED AN EPISODE OF REALITY TV IN HIS LIFE.

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Championships, and the Ashes. If England does badly in any of these, how many fans will vote for a party that prioritises minority sports in schools, over our national games?

The government plans to run more festivals for disabled youngsters. But as Simon Harris says, “there’s no point putting on competitions if no one’s getting disabled youngsters into sport in the first place. We need PE teachers to design appropriate individual challenges for their students and build their curriculum around these challenges.”

After winning the wheelchair marathon at the Paralympics, David Weir talked about climbing his own personal Everest, and Simon Harris believes that every child needs this sort of challenge in their PE lessons. However he also points out that teachers mustn’t be afraid of letting disabled youngsters fail in PE and sport. “We’re trying to build resilience,” he points out. “Just like any other young person, if we set things up so the young disabled person always succeeds, we’re not preparing them for the big wide world, where they’ll experience failure like anyone else.”

One of Lesley Byrne’s jobs as an SEN school sport coordinator is to locate keen disability sports players in mainstream schools. Five years ago, Gabby Downes, who would become Britain’s youngest Paralympian this summer, turned up at one of Byrne’s disability sports events. “She enjoyed it, went down to the Guttman Centre and took up wheelchair fencing,” Byrne says. Another Milton Keynes youngster, born with no digits on her fingers but who had never tried disability sport, is now in the British pistol shooting squad for Rio. She’s also working at

her former school, as a PE assistant. “We need a database of disabled youngsters in mainstream schools so specialists can offer support and opportunity,” Lesley Byrne insists. Sadly, the problem lies with getting schools to cooperate; currently only around fifty percent respond to her requests.

The real concern is that disabled youngsters, itching to have a go at sport after watching the Paralympics, face a postcode lottery. If there’s a Wilson Stuart or Slated Row on their doorstep, then all will be well. Otherwise, it’s a lot of travelling, or more likely, disappointment and frustration. Unless of course, another high profile political reason for the authorities to focus on disabled sport comes along...



PHOTOGRAPHER: NICK WEBB