It is widely maintained that sport may contribute to the development of young people’s well-being. Where, therefore, pupils are deprived of opportunities to participate in sport, or are offered second-rate or partial provision, educators ought seriously register concern. Appreciating the nature of such a lacuna, if indeed it is such, requires a proper understanding of the relationship between sport, physical education and well-being. The relationship is often misconceived, however, by problems relating to the idea of well-being itself.

Subjective theories of well-being have dominated accounts of the value of sport and physical education to young people. Articulating the value of sport has been confined to demonstrating the pleasure, fun, or enjoyment with which sport is associated. These factors are not insignificant, but do not exhaust the ways in which sport and physical education may enhance our well-being. Accounts of well-being comprised entirely of subjective assessment also fail to recognise that all agents may be mistaken as to what best enhances their well-being. Moreover, pupils are representative of persons who are sometimes incapable of being ‘fully informed’, and this recognition seems central to education itself. By contrast, objective theories of well-being propose that certain values are essential for human beings to flourish. Constituents of some objective theories, such as Nussbaum’s (2000) whom we discuss here, include both health and play. It is precisely within such an objective framework, we argue, that the value of sport to pupil’s well-being is best understood.

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