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Sport and physical education (PE) provide positive development opportunities for young people, helping them to build social and emotional resilience as well as key life skills. In recent years, Unified Academy has welcomed and fully embedded a new sporting experience into school life.

Step into our fitness studio and you'll find a full-size, state-of-the-art, professional boxing ring. It's not something that is found in many schools, if any, and we are incredibly proud and grateful to have such a unique provision onsite for our learners. It's a wonderful resource which has impacted all our students.

BOXING: BUILT AROUND OUR ETHOS AND VALUES

In the past few years, boxing has been introduced to more than 160 students aged 9-16, with social, emotional and mental health needs at Unified Academy; we've dispelled the myth that the sport may be too aggressive and not suited to boys with complex behavioural needs. On the contrary, boxing is a discipline that commands skill, commitment and strength, not just physically, but mentally. Here, boxing instils discipline, resilience and respect and is built around our ethos and values. Our students are fully aware of what a privilege it is to have access to a boxing ring, trained coaches and an enormous range of boxing equipment, and they have wholly embraced the opportunity in many ways.

The story of our boxing journey began a few years ago when our assistant principal, Mr Nicholls, introduced low-level boxing into the PE curriculum. At this stage, there was no specialist facility on-site and no resources. However, the provision has been developed over time, and today, boxing is part of the curriculum at Unified Academy, with most students selecting it as part of their GCSE PE qualification.

In response to growing student interest, we also enlisted the support of two Amateur Boxing Alliance (ABA) qualified coaches from a grassroots amateur boxing club. This enabled our students to access coaching for the training aspect as well as for personal development, including teamwork and leadership skills. Attendance rates soared during these sessions, which further highlighted how the sport was supporting our students in their learning and engagement.

PROFESSIONAL SPORTS PROVISION

The boxing ring was generously donated by The Unit Gym in Harlington. Both our Academy and Orchard Hill College and Academy Trust, which we are part of, have strong links with the gym, which had previously donated a selection of other training equipment.

Laurie Cornwell, executive principal and deputy CEO at Orchard Hill College and Academy Trust, spoke of the Trust's appreciation. "Receiving the donation of a state-of-the-art boxing ring has gone beyond our expectations, and we are incredibly grateful for such a generous act. It is a privilege to have such high-quality sporting provision available to our young people, helping their minds and aspirations grow."

Last summer, the framework for the boxing ring was constructed and the students came together to set up the ropes and padding. This created a strong sense of ownership and responsibility.

BIO

ANNABELLE THOMAS

Annabelle Thomas is principal of Unified Academy in Dorking. Annabelle has worked as an SEMH teacher for around 13 years, and began her career as an SEMH teaching assistant in a special school. Annabelle is passionate about ensuring all SEMH students are encouraged and nurtured to get the most out of their school experience and that their contributions are valued and celebrated. She believes in preparing students for life after school and strives for them to leave Unified Academy as well-rounded, confident young adults with high aspirations for their future.

> "Coaches have been known to teach boxing combinations while also helping students to crack a maths challenge!

The ring has been fully functional since September 2023 and has been used every day since. There are also freestanding punch bags, hanging boxing bags, speed balls, battle ropes, medicine balls, skipping ropes and even a sparring BOB (a training bag dummy); all of which the students make good use of.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL STRENGTH

The boxing ring is, in effect, a vehicle for students to step out of their comfort zone in a controlled and supportive environment. In the past, students would generally avoid interacting with external visitors but there has been a complete change. Students now see it as an opportunity to shine, they are eager to share their new boxing skills and knowledge with staff, parents and other visitors.

In our experience, boxing engages young people in a way that improves their self-esteem. As Mr Nicholls explains: "When the students are boxing you can see their enjoyment. These are complex young men, yet there's laughter, care and compassion in the boxing ring. It helps develop a sense of worth, confidence and self-esteem, and has instilled a profound sense of discipline and respect."

RE-ENGAGING WITH LEARNING

Students have re-engaged with their learning and show better concentration, and boxing is at the core of this. Mr Nicholls continues: "Boxing is an effective way for students to emotionally regulate. For instance, if a student needs a quick outlet, they come out of the classroom for 15 minutes, do some exercise and boxing in the ring and return to class in a more settled state, for more sustained periods of time."

Our students face challenges around literacy and retention. Yet last year, 15 students entered the GCSE PE exam and 100 per cent passed, illustrating that boxing can promote a can-do attitude. For instance, it's not unusual for students to bring other schoolwork to the boxing ring, which shows how comfortable they are in this environment; coaches have been known to teach boxing combinations while also helping students to crack a maths challenge!

Equally, our cross-curricular connections mean that the health and nutritional aspect of boxing is also explored during food tech classes. This enables students to grasp a better understanding of how to fuel their bodies and maintain energy levels.

It has also led to calmer classroom environments and the students themselves acknowledge the difference it is making to their other schoolwork and attendance. One student summed it up quite simply, stating: "I attend more lessons now."

GIVING STUDENTS A VOICE

Students have specifically noted the positive impact on discipline, strength, stamina, respect and confidence. Many also state that they are more aware of their health, have a desire to improve their fitness and have formed further friendships. One student talked about this: "The best moment so far has been being able to help the younger students develop their boxing skills." Another cited their most memorable moment as, "learning a 24-step combination," which is a complex sequence of movements to recite.

Confidence and competencies around boxing are high at Unified Academy. Our unique sports provision has helped create a secure, nurturing and disciplined environment, enabling students to make real breakthroughs in their lives. The rewards are remarkable; there have been many inspiring moments and, without question, there are more to come!

Unified Academy, in Dorking, Surrey, is for boys aged 9 to 16 who have social, emotional and mental health needs.
Orchard Hill College and Academy Trust is a family of specialist education providers from pre-school through to further education across London, Surrey, Sussex and Berkshire, fully representing all designations of special educational needs and disabilities.