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Lifestyles and gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests among Irish adolescents

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This paper strives to provide an insight into the multifaceted relationships that young people have, examining the social, cultural and institutional discourses, which shape their lives. We set out to discuss, from an empirical poststructuralist perspective, the way in which Irish adolescents write about the reality of their lives and privilege certain practices and forms of subjectivity. We are particularly interested in the role and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people, asking what institutional and cultural discourses are brought into play to construct particular identities and social practices associated with leisure and sporting interests. This paper focuses on a purposeful sample of 168 written narratives of Irish post-primary students (14/17 years of age), chosen to represent the gender of students, a range of rural and urban school locales from different geographic locations and single sex and co-educational schools. We focus on the inter-relationships between (1) family and friends; (2) community-localism and tradition; (3) commodification and globalisation; (4) popular culture; and (5) gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests. The family is a strong focal point for these young people as are their friends and being part of a community. The young people (boys in particular) are significant consumers of ‘media sport’ and both girls and boys were knowledgeable of national and international politics. We also comment on the extent to which female and male adolescents negotiate, similarly or differently, culturally dominant discourses within physical activity and sport, with significantly more boys choosing to write about physical activity and sport in their narratives.

Keywords: Adolescents; Poststructuralist; Ireland; Lifestyles; Narratives

Introduction

In an earlier paper (Collier \textit{et al.}, 2007), we explored the accounts of students’ discourse related to the role of physical activity and sport in the lives of Irish children and youth. The paper primarily relied on the narratives of primary-aged students and, where we did focus on adolescent-related trends from the narratives, our attention was limited to physical activity and sport, acknowledging that the discourse on sport and physical activity for the adolescent students was much more complex and diverse than those of the primary-aged students. The paper we present here draws on the advice of Wright \textit{et al.} (2003), Sandford and Rich (2006), and Wright (2006) who encourage investigation into providing more complex insight into the

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multifaceted relationships that young people have, examining the social, cultural and institutional discourses which shape their lives. We set out to discuss, from an empirical poststructuralist perspective, the way in which Irish adolescents write about the reality of their lives and privilege certain practices and forms of subjectivity. Similar to Wright et al. (2003), we are interested in the role and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people, asking what institutional and cultural discourses are brought into play to construct particular identities and social practices associated with leisure and sporting interests.

Using the narrative paradigm and discourse and content analysis, we examine and convey our understanding of physical activity from the point of view of young people in relation to other aspects of their lives. Informed by Lupton’s (cited in Wright, 2006) investigation, we examine how students represent themselves and others in their narratives, the dominant principles conveyed, what notion of physical activity and sport is privileged in the texts and the broader discourses structuring these representations. We also examine the extent to which students’ perspectives presented in their narratives match the official cultural and institutional discourses, and how this may challenge dominant discourses that function to discriminate or privilege certain young people (Azzarito & Solomon, 2006). We anticipate that by investigating and understanding young people’s notions of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ (Wright, 2006), suggestions for future practice (particularly in encouraging a greater interest and investment in physical activity participation) will be generated.

We critique and challenge the assumption that girls drop out of physical activity as they progress through the teenage years due to lack of interest. However, evidence in the narrative may support the belief that these girls are in fact not disinterested in being involved in physical activity per se but rather are disengaged from the nature, structure and opportunities available to them (Wright & King, 1990; Sandford & Rich, 2006).

We are also conscious of the notion of ‘choice’ from a poststructuralist perspective, acknowledging that while young people may be in a position to make choices there are also instances where investment in a particular position and practice may limit the choice made (Wright, 1995). We are conscious that poststructuralism rejects the views that ideas formed in society are fixed, stable or universal and that meanings are not transcendent (Azzarito & Solomon, 2006). We endeavour not to undermine or mis-represent the complex meanings and identities that are conveyed through the narratives, but rather keep with the theoretical basis of poststructuralism by not claiming to capture truths but rather examine how young people construct realities and with what effect (Wright, 2004).

**Positioning of young people**

Six core concepts have been suggested as central to positioning young people’s social practice (Sandford & Rich, 2006), and these are habitus and physical capital, hidden curriculum, corporeal regulation, popular culture and physical culture,
identity and subjectivities, and situated learning and communities of practice. These concepts are a useful framework to build on as we believe our study can contribute to understanding young people’s social practice. Due to the nature of our interest being in the role and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people, the concepts primarily of interest here are ‘physical capital’, ‘popular culture’ and ‘physical culture’. ‘Physical capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986; Schilling, 1991) conveys the physical attributes and abilities that arise through engagement with sporting and social practices, with gender being a particular social characteristic that impacts an individual’s physical capital. ‘Popular culture’ focuses on elements of popular youth experiences that are predominant and accessible to most people in society and includes elements such as media, music, fashion and sport. Popular culture arises not only by people living their lives, but also by industries attempting to sell goods (Moje & van Helden, 2005). ‘Physical culture’ relates to aspects of the body as it engages in various forms of physical activity (Kirk, 1999). Physical culture (also referred to as ‘movement culture’, see Crum, 1994) has more recently become an appropriate means for making sense of young people’s physical activity lifestyles, acknowledging that the physical activity contexts in which young people (do not) reside are not isolated from other social or cultural experiences (Macdonald, 2002).

Current trends in Ireland report relatively high involvement of school-aged children, compared to international data, in physical activity and sport, with the majority of young people having high levels of intrinsic motivation in relation to leisure participation (Office of the Minister for Children/Department of Health and Children, 2006). There are strong differences between adolescent Irish females and males with respect to their participation in active leisure pursuits (Connor, 2003; de Roiste & Dineen, 2005; Fahey et al., 2005). Similar to international research findings, younger adolescents and male adolescents are most likely to be involved in physical activities and sport, and there is a ‘drop off’ in involvement as adolescents (particularly girls) progress through post-primary school (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Sport England, 2003; Wright et al., 2003). While females tend to emphasise friendships and close relationships in small groups (Coleman & Hendry, 1999), the decision to participate in sport is often linked to how young people perceive their feminine/masculine role in society and gender is a barrier to participation in recreation due to more recreational activities and opportunities being available to boys than to girls (Coakley & White, 1999). It is anticipated that by examining young people’s experiences of physical culture, we will gain a richer understanding of the place physical activity and sport currently has in their lives.

Demographics of young people living in Ireland and educational trends

The Government of Ireland Central Statistics Office (2006) provides demographic information from the 2006 census. The population of Ireland in 2006 has been
calculated as just over 4.2 million, with the larger socio-economic classifications being in non-manual, employers and managers, lower professional and manual skilled, respectively. Over 3.5 million of the Irish population are Roman Catholic with the next highest denomination, the Church of Ireland (including Protestant), dropping to 125,000. Almost 90% of those residing in Ireland are Irish with a further 7% being from other white backgrounds.

The following demographics are taken from The ‘State of the Nation’s Children’ report (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006), an updated statement of key indicators of Irish children’s well-being. Ireland has a higher percentage of children under 18 than any other European Union Member State, with 25% of the population in Ireland under 18 years. Eighty-six percent of children live with both parents/guardians while 14% live with a lone parent or guardian. Traveller children and non-Irish children account for 1 and 4% of the total child population, respectively. Irish children’s mean scores show they perform equivalent or higher than 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries means scores with respect to reading literacy, mathematics and science. Ireland ranked third among 33 countries when reporting involvement in binge drinking. A higher than average number of children reported being physically active in comparison to 34 World Health Organisation (WHO) countries.

Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2005) conducted an innovative and in-depth piece of Irish research to establish and better understand young people’s impression of well-being. Using photography and subsequent discussion through schema development with young people from urban and rural post-primary girls’, boys’ and mixed schools, they found a ‘degree of complexity with which young people understand the influences on their well-being to be interrelated’ (Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005, p. 64). While the young people were able to identify what they considered to be the most influential factors for their own well-being (e.g. home, family and friends), complexity arose in the different ways in which they perceived the categories to be connected to one another.

In presenting findings from over 1000 essays written by Irish post-primary students from 12 schools, Lynch (1999) commented that there were a number of notable differences between single-sex girls’ and boys’ schools. Students were asked to write about any time or place where they believed they had been unfairly or unequally treated since attending their current school. Stress and control (of behaviour and appearance) along with examination results and attainment of college places (also evident in the UK, see Flintoff & Scraton, 2001) were prominent issues from girls’ schools while physical strength and sporting ability were highly appreciated in the boys’ schools. In reporting the percentage of essays within the different school types that commented on issues relating to school sport, the percentage ranged from 0 to 6% in single-sex girls’ schools and from 0 to 31% in single-sex boys’ schools. Co-educational post-primary schools ranged from 1 to 19%.
Irish physical activity rates outside of formal school time

Extracurricular sport and sport clubs or other organised contexts outside the school provide opportunities for involvement in physical activity outside formal school time. Extracurricular sport is part of the school programme but takes place outside the formal curriculum while sport clubs or other organised contexts are outside the school and provide competitive and recreational sport for all (Fahey et al., 2005). In Ireland, there are a number of native Gaelic games that are administered by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). They include Gaelic football, an outdoor team sport where players can use kicking and hand passing to move the ball and hurling, an outdoor team sport using a stick, called a ‘hurley’, and hands to strike the ball. Camogie is the name given to the women’s version of the hurling game.

As reported by MacPhail et al. (2007), physical activity provision after school is a major source of sport participation for Irish children. Over 60% of post-primary students participate in after school sport at least once a week and 52% participate two–four days a week. Almost 30% of girls and 16% of boys indicated no participation in extracurricular sport on a weekly basis (Fahey et al., 2005). Rates of extracurricular participation decline as students move up through post-primary with 61% of second-year pupils and 41% of sixth-year pupils participating two or more days a week. The rate of non-participation in extracurricular sport doubles from 15% in Year 2 to 30% in Year 6. The fall off in some sports, however, is less pronounced but these are sports played mainly by boys (hurling and Gaelic football) while the largest declines are in sports played more by girls (basketball and hockey) (Fahey et al., 2005).

Over half (52%) of the students in Fahey et al.’s (2005) study reported they participated in non-school sports at least two or more days a week. The differences in participation rates out of school for boys (64%) and girls (41%) were as dramatic as the data reported for extracurricular sport participation. Gaelic football (14%) and dance (13%) were the most popular out of school activities for girls with swimming and camogie (9%) a joint third. Boys preferred soccer (31%) and Gaelic football (29%) with hurling (18%) a distant third. More students have access to physical activity sessions per week in non-physical education settings than they have for physical education classes. While Fahey and colleagues (2005) note that participation rates are higher overall for adolescents in after-school sport than in either physical education or extracurricular activity in school, the differentiated rates of participation between boys and girls is most noticeable here (MacPhail et al., 2007).

Narrative paradigm

Central to poststructural analysis is a focus on discourses which make up social institutions and cultural products. Narratives act as the discursive practice through which we examine how young people construct their identity in relation to their school context and the larger socio-cultural context outside the school (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Vadeboncoeur, 2005; Collier et al., 2007). Discourses are values,
beliefs and attitudes that take concrete forms in institutions, such as schools and impact young people’s construction of identity. Dominant discourses shape youths’ processes of normalisation which in turn influence young people’s (leisure) participation in and out of school (Azzarito & Solomon, 2006).

Doyle and Carter (2003) and Lewis (2007) list a number of elements related to a narrative perspective, including human beings having a predisposition to ‘story’ their experience (i.e. to impose a narrative interpretation on information and experience) and that a story resists singular interpretation. Clough (2002, p. 5) presents the use of narratives in educational research as one way of carrying out research under postmodern conditions, ‘Though postmodern inquiry is often described by commentators, it is surely given with its nature that it cannot be prescribed. So the task becomes less one of counting up quotations than of determining for oneself the meaning, process and significance of postmodern inquiry’. In particular, we are interested in identifying ‘regularities of meaning’ (Wright, 2006). That is, how the patterns in language use in the narratives convey discourses constituting young people’s lives and how particular social practices and social relations identify their (individual and group) systems of beliefs and values. Our particular interest is in the place and meaning of physical activity and physical culture in young people’s lives. Fundamental questions still exist about the relationship between involvement in school physical activity and the physical culture that young people (involved in what Tinning and Fitzclarence (1992) refer to as a ‘postmodern youth culture’) are drawn to and practice outside of school. It is anticipated that our use of the narrative paradigm, discourse analysis and content analysis will address such questions.

Sample selection

In 1999, as part of an initiative aimed at involving young people in millennium celebrations, a national sample of young people (approximately 34,000 young people aged between 10–12 years and 14–17 years) were invited, in the school context, to write a single page about their lives, the future and their vision of Ireland in the new millennium (O’Connor, 2005). This paper focuses on the narratives of the Transition Year students (14–17 years of age). Transition Year is a non-examinable year after the Junior Certificate examination (three-year junior cycle for those from 12 to 15 years of age) and before proceeding to senior cycle (catering for 16–19 years of age). A ‘Transition Year’ enables students to make the transition from a highly structured environment to one where they take greater responsibility for their own learning and decision making (www.ncte.ie/transition/guidelines.html) before embarking on the strong examination focus of the remaining senior school years. The activity-based learning ethos of the Transition Year programme allows students the opportunity to: (1) engage in independent, self-directed learning; (2) develop general, technical and academic skills; and (3) mature and develop without the pressure of an examination. For this study we chose a purposeful sample of 168 narratives (116 girls and 52 boys) that were chosen to represent the gender of
students, a range of rural and urban school locales from different geographic locations and single sex and co-educational schools.

Data analysis

Discourse analysis is a useful and viable way to help understand the adolescent lives in the domains of sport and physical activity (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). Discourse analysis is composed of two main dimensions, textual and contextual. ‘Textual dimensions are those which account for the structures of discourses, while contextual dimensions relate these structural descriptions to various properties of the social, political or cultural context in which they take place’ (Lupton, 1992, p. 145). A poststructuralist approach allows for all forms of meaning production, including narratives, to be analysed as texts and to identify social and cultural hegemony and the manner by which it is reproduced (Lupton, 1992; Wright, 2004; Smith & Sparkes, 2005). Theory formation, and the way in which ideology is reproduced, is a particular focus of discourse analysis, allowing one to ‘delve below the surface of texts and talk, to critically reveal the meanings and ideologies which are reproduced within’ (Lupton, 1992, p. 146). In analysing the narratives we are also interested in what the young people do not write about, that is, the gaps or silences in communications (Ball, 1990, 1993).

Approaching the project inductively, each of the three researchers randomly selected and analysed 20 narratives from the sample of 168, chosen to represent the gender of students, a range of rural and urban school locales from different geographic locations and single sex and co-educational schools. The initial analysis of the 60 narratives was the basis for the development of categories before each researcher analysed the 168 narratives. The initial analysis employed an ‘open’ coding system, whereby we considered the data in minute detail while developing the initial categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Content analysis was used in the initial coding of the narratives by coding and assigning particular sections of content from each narrative to defined categories that were informed by themes evident in the narratives. Content analysis allowed us to examine the thematic similarities and differences between narratives provided by the young people. The 13 categories consisted of family (demographic, size, role and occupation), aspirations (personal and professional), hobbies (music, sport, leisure/physical activity, films/cinema, reading, singing/acting, shopping, video/television, having fun, going out), locality (identity with Ireland and home), friends, work, political commentary (social and economic/military), school, popular culture (films/cinema, fashion, events, religion, music, television, language, media, sport), identity, significant events, health and fitness, role models and philosophy of life. In addition, particular narratives that favoured engaging with only one category were noted. For example, one young person spoke only of a particular family member and another focused solely on being an Irish Traveller.
While being conscious of retaining some degree of cultural identity among the voices but also protecting the anonymity of the young people and their schools, abbreviations were assigned to each narrative using numbers and labels that reflect gender and school type. The abbreviations used are GCS (girl in a co-educational post-primary school), GSS (girl in a single-sex post-primary school) and BCS (boy in a co-educational post-primary school).

Trustworthiness and credibility

The narratives were written within the school day in response to a specific task and may therefore be positioned within a particular social and cultural context. Our own engagement in the research process, and how we each interpret the texts, is positioned by the current situations we occupy. The lead author is British and has been working in Ireland for five years while the second author is American and spent a year in Ireland working on the same project as reported here. The third author is Irish and has returned to work in Ireland after over two decades in North America. All three currently work within physical education teacher education and have a strong interest in sport pedagogy, including youth sport provision. There was no influence from the researcher(s) in collecting these data as none of the authors were involved. The initiative from which this material evolved is explained elsewhere (O’Conner, 2005).

We do not suggest that the narrative extracts/quotes we use in this paper are illustrative of the collective narratives as we recognise the ‘complex, interrelationships’ and ‘qualitative differences’ (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001) between individual choices and different aspects of the young people’s lives. The narratives convey the specific circumstances in which these young people live. Narrative extracts are selected to illustrate particular themes or individual issues and are not intended as generalisations.

Findings and discussion

In an attempt to provide insight into the multifaceted relationships that young people have and how such practices position their leisure and sporting interests, we have chosen to focus on the inter-relationships between: (1) family and friends; (2) community-localism and tradition; (3) commodification and globalisation; (4) popular culture; and (5) gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests. With physical culture as the lens we attempt to understand and interpret the leisure and sporting interests and engagement conveyed in their narratives.

In examining ‘sporting interests’ we are interested in all forms of physical activity, a category that commonly encompasses the sport, recreation and exercise components of physical culture. Guided by Kirk’s (1999) discursive practices for each, sport refers to a set of practices governed by techniques and strategies that lead to competition and require specialised facilities. Physical recreational activities are
alternatives to work used to revitalise and are usually informal and non-competitive. Exercise tends to refer to activities that contribute to explicit health outcomes and includes walking, swimming and gym work.

Family and friends

Young people consistently reported being one of between three and seven siblings in a family and there were instances of a significant age spectrum across siblings. One 18-year-old boy reported being one among 13 children, ‘My father and mother had two boys and eleven girls... We have different views on things in my house as my eldest brother is 34 and my youngest sister is 16’ (BCS, 49). Contrary to popular belief, many young people get on well with their parents, and look to them for guidance and support (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). This is endorsed with young people making it clear that they respect their parents and the support that they continue to offer, acknowledging that some of their closest relationships are with family members. The family was a strong focal point and numerous examples of the support structure provided by the family were evident, ‘Pull together when one of us needs it’ (GCS, 8) and, ‘My life was an easy one, where everything was provided by my parents... anything I needed or wanted was provided by them. They are exceptional people’ (BCS, 25). One girls’ narrative focused solely on the role of her mother in her life (GSS, 49). There was evidence that stereotypical roles of the mother as a housewife, home help and childminder and the father as a farmer were in existence. There were sporadic references to tense family relationships, parents splitting up and ‘broken homes’ and one girl articulated a moving portrayal of dealing with a mother who was an alcoholic (GCS, 14).

A noticeable difference between the girls’ and boys’ narratives was the boys’ link with family members’ involvement in the same sports as they were now involved. For example, one boy who strived to become a professional football player wrote that his father almost played for an Irish football team (BCS, 43) and another spoke about how his brother who had been boxing for 15 years began training him before he joined a club (BCS, 17). Friends were closely connected with family as being important, more so in girls’ lives, ‘The most important thing in my life is my family and friends. Both my family and friends mean so much to me’ (GSS, 18).

Friendships appear very important to Irish children ranking first among 35 WHO countries when asked if they have three or more friends of the same gender (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). There was evidence that friendship groups provided support, companionship and mutual activity interests and that young people were members of different groups of friends, such as school-based and/or sports-based groups. Friends were frequently named in narratives as those who were trustworthy, listened, helped and made them laugh. Girls also mentioned boyfriends who were conveyed as providing a loving relationship (GCS, 32; GCS, 43). One boy mentioned his girlfriend.
Community

Many of the young people convey happiness to be living in Ireland with a mix of students living in a rural community, on a farm, by the sea or in a housing estate. Young people were aware of drugs, drug dealers and crime impacting on some communities. Their actual homes were conveyed as being special to them and allowing them to feel safe, in one instance being referred to as a ‘haven’ (GSS, 38). In a previous paper exploring issues related to local embeddedness of the same young people surveyed here, O’Connor (2005) noted boys being more likely than the girls to refer to their local area and boys being associated with greater embeddedness in the local area through sporting activities and interests.

The GAA (which promotes the national games of Gaelic football, hurling, handball, and camogie) is the dominant sporting body in Ireland. Gaelic games provide an important focus for Irish young people’s perceptions of national identity (Waldron & Pike, 2006). This is perhaps heightened by an absence of a significant international aspect to Gaelic games, although there is a North American County Board of the GAA which promotes the related games in the USA. The GAA stronghold areas tended to be portrayed as small, rural communities. The community allegiance to, and provision of, GAA was strongly evidenced in the narratives, ‘I hope that Meath win the All Ireland Final in Gaelic Football in September this year. It would be great to have a new title of All Ireland Champions for the new millenium’ (GCS, 11) and ‘When I get home from school I get my dinner and watch TV. I then usually go and play camogie with a local village then come home and go to bed’ (GSS, 55). Young people were also critical of local community sports facilities, ‘Sport is all good but around here in [name of town] sport’s facilities are very rare and nobody gets to do anything but hang around the streets’ (BCS, 26).

Commodification and globalisation

Young people have become significant consumers of media products and information technology, which in turn has become an important source of socialisation for youth (Tinning & Fitz Clarence, 1992; Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Similar to Tinning and Fitz Clarence’s (1992) example of ‘active choice within an expanded frame of social stimulants’, there appears to be growing popularity for soccer and rugby (Connor, 2003; de Roiste & Dineen, 2005; Fahey et al., 2005), and both receive a huge amount of media coverage not only in televised games and tournaments, but also in advertising merchandise. In positioning this statement, it is important to note the historical location of such comments. At the time these narratives were written in 1999, soccer was at its zenith, with Ireland’s performance in the 1998 World Cup (reaching the quarter finals) likely to still be prominent in young people’s minds due to the amount of coverage the tournament received through the national and international media. While there continues to be a huge interest in international soccer, the investment in advertising by the GAA in recent years and the opening of Croke Park to sporting activities other than GAA
maintains the stronghold of media attention and young people’s sporting interest and opportunity in GAA games.

There is a rise in popularity of national and international soccer and rugby, evidenced in the narratives. Many boys documented an allegiance to following English and Spanish soccer clubs, particularly Liverpool, Manchester United and AC Milan, and conveyed their investment through knowledge of the clubs’ management and players, ‘I’m a big Liverpool fan for many years. At the moment Liverpool ain’t doing the best for us supporters. Our new manager is Gerard Houiller and he’s bringing in a lot of new faces. Hopefully things will change for us in the New Year’ (BCS, 4). Boys also conveyed admiration for the amount of money to be made from soccer, ‘I admire many people who make this sport [soccer] as a professional and get wages of 20 to 40 thousand a week’ (BCS, 22). Formula One motor racing was another popularised commercial sport, ‘I follow Formula 1 and Schumacher is the best driver ever ... Micheal Schumacher is a German driver who races for Ferrari. He gets paid almost £60,000 a day for being in the team’ (BCS, 26). The soccer and Formula One interest were conveyed only by boys. One boy clearly acknowledged sport as a consumer item, ‘Sport is an increasing industry in Ireland and I wonder what will it be like in 1000 years time’ (BCS, 40).

Connections between the intensity of media sport coverage and sustained involvement and improvement in young people’s sporting activity remain tenuous (Lines, 2007). It was clear that for some of the young people sport participation was not as central a feature in everyday life as media consumption of physical activity. Girls were also less likely to convey an interest in media sport coverage and did not appear particularly troubled about the fact that they were not subject to the same sport ‘media drenching’ (Lines, 2007) as boys.

The impact of media is not only evident in how the young people choose to spend their leisure time, but also in their awareness and knowledge of local and national (political) issues and events (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Such an awareness and knowledge may also be contributed to by schools (Waldron & Pike, 2006). A number of narratives engaged with weighty social political issues that included violence, abortion, homelessness, hunger, rape, drugs, crime, alcohol, environmental issues (greenhouse effect/melting of polar ice-caps), teenage pregnancies, influence of world leaders, cloning, technology, extra-terrestrial intelligence and an over-crowded and polluted world. In discussing more economic and military issues there was an awareness of what was happening in other countries, including Northern Ireland, the Gulf war and Saddam Hussein, Kosovo refugees, Albania, NATO, third world debt, nuclear weapons and a growing economy in Ireland (Celtic Tiger).

Popular culture

Music was popular with these young people, with few reporting the ability to play a musical instrument. Music references included naming the kind of music they liked,
songs (with a number of narratives consisting only of verses to particular songs), bands (Bon Jovi, Westlife, The Corrs) and artists (Celine Dion, Robbie Williams, Britney Spears) along with references to attending discos and concerts and buying CDs. One narrative was entirely dedicated to the issue of music (BCS, 5). Boys conveyed an appreciation of music (rather than just noting the lyrics of songs as girls did) by listening to music at home, from the internet and in discos/clubs as well as reporting an interest in being involved in disc jockeying. One boy believed that music has the power to ‘represent my culture and what I believe in’ with an awareness that ‘different types of music represents different types of lifestyle’ (BCS, 5). Another reported that writing music was one of the most important aspects of his life, with an ambition to become a ‘famous rap artist’ (BCS, 30).

Fashion was mentioned, particularly but not exclusively by girls, as becoming more important as they became older, ‘I am influenced a lot by music and fashion particularly music. Music is a very big and important part in my life and that’s where most of my money goes but fashion is becoming more and more important to me’ (GCS, 46). Sandford and Rich (2006) note that appropriate clothing is a means by which young people can gain significant physical capital among their peers and this was more prevalent in girls’ narratives, ‘I went shopping yesterday to buy clothes for my brother’s confirmation. This summer I hope to go to London to do some shopping for my cousin’s wedding. Shopping is one of my favourite pastimes’ (GCS, 22).

Television was acknowledged as having a presence in teenagers’ lives. Young people listed their favourite television programmes (Dawson’s Creek, Friends, The X-Files), with one boy reporting, ‘Television is one of the most important things in my generation and I spend my day’s watching television well at least most of the day’ (BCS, 12).

**Gendered patterns of leisure and sporting interests**

While acknowledging the work that has been carried out around gendered discursive constructs within physical education (Wright, 1995; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Penney & Evans, 2002; Azzarito & Ennis, 2003; Gorely et al., 2003; Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Wright, 2004; Hills, 2006), the narratives do not allow us to comment on the dominant gendered discourses, power relations or socially accepted norms and behaviour embedded in Irish physical education classes. However, it is possible to comment on the extent to which female and male adolescents negotiate, similarly or differently, culturally dominant discourses within physical activity and sport. Physical education was not mentioned in the narratives even though we know that the time allocation for physical education in Irish post-primary schools is highest during the non-examinable one-year Transition Year programme (MacPhail & Halbert, 2005).
Girls’ sport involvement

Less than 25% of the 116 narratives from girls conveyed an interest and involvement in sport, mirroring data from a national quantitative survey (Kelleher et al., 2003). In referencing involvement in sport it was apparent that for those girls who were active they were involved in a number of sports at school and club level:

My hobbies are horse-riding, hockey, gaelic football and running. . . . play on the ladies football team. I do hockey and tennis in school. . . . I would like to proceed in my showjumping career and hopefully compete on the junior [circuit] this season. I hunt reguraly [sic.]. (GCS, 3)

Walking and swimming were more popular forms of leisure physical activity for girls than going to the gym. An example of a more passive involvement in sport was evidenced by one girl who allocated a large proportion of her narrative to the topic:

I’m really interested in sport and follow most championships; leagues and cups. I can’t wait for the olympics and thought the World Cup was great. I was a bit disappointed Holland didn’t win but at least they got to the semi-final. Edgar Davids is definately their best player. He plays with Juventus also. I’m also interested in GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association] and looking forward to the rest of the championship which began last week. As far as playing sport I don’t play much unfortunately. I used play with the local girls football team (gaelic)—[name of club] but the clubs no longer exists as of this year. Last year we won the [title of championship] championship and got to the county final, but lost. (GSS, 44)

Health and fitness references were minimal with girls favouring a more holistic notion of health commenting ‘I have my life, health and people who love me’ (GSS, 2). Only two girls made reference to being involved in sport for fitness benefits, ‘I love swimming and I go to the pool every week. I also do aerobics. I like to keep myself fit’ (GCS, 40) and ‘Sport helps to keep me fit and healthy and I enjoy it’ (GSS, 38).

A number of comments portray the particular competing interests that girls have on their time involved in sport, ‘I play a lot of sports including hockey, tennis, swimming and horse-riding . . . I love shopping and socialising’ (GSS, 37) and, ‘I love to sail, play sports and I’m not a sports fanatic and I absolutely love to go to the beach or out with my friends’ (GSS, 52). Horseriding was a consistent interest of the girls and this may be due to the high percentage of girls who reference living on a farm and having their own horse. In listing memories that would remain with her forever, one girl included ‘sports—volleyball, soccer and table tennis’ along with ‘music—Robbie Williams, Celine Dion, Westlife and Abba’ and ‘history—Cease-fire in Northern Ireland, Death of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa, Ireland hosting the Eurovision for 5 years and also the film Titanic’ (GSS, 56). This example only heightens the competing interests and experiences with which sport involvement must compete.

Only two girls conveyed a high level of commitment to sport (sailing and gymnastics, respectively) in their narrative, the sailing narrative stating:
The thing I enjoy doing most is sailing. I try to be the best I can be at anything I care about, and I take sailing very seriously. I’ve been on the under sixteen sailing team for the last two years and both years were really good fun. I was especially pleased with my results last season because I got to represent Ireland at the European Championships. I hope to still be sailing for many years to come because I enjoy it so much and I’d like to be able to achieve a lot in this sport. Whenever I am not sailing (I’ve probably bored you enough on that subject!) I’m usually doing other sports or going out with my friends. (GSS, 30)

Boys’ sport involvement

Almost half of the 52 narratives from boys conveyed an interest and involvement in sport. It was also noticeable that when sport was referenced in a narrative, boys engaged more fully with their experiences of sport, conveying a richer experience and involvement with sport. One boy dedicated his narrative to his hopes and ambitions for the next millennium in sport and these were concerned with Jordan Grand Prix motor racing, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland soccer teams merging and Tipperary winning the All-Ireland hurling final (BCS, 16). Another narrative conveying only a sporting interest focused on the boy’s allegiance to watching soccer and his preferred team (BCS, 45) and a football poem constituted the narrative of another boy (BCS, 50).

Boys also appeared more inherently aware of sporting opportunities with a tendency to want to be active a lot of the time, ‘I am into many things which include soccer, swimming, basketball . . . I’m a very energetic sort of person who likes to keep active. This is probably why I love sports, so much’ (BCS, 27). A number of boys’ narratives began with a focus on sport:

Im sitting in English class writing this note at 11.35am. I’m looking forward to our football match against [name of club]. I’m really big into sports and Im [sic.] so glad that Leeds beat Arsenal last night because that gives Manchester United (my team) a great chance to win the premiership. (BCS, 52)

Boys named a wide spectrum of sports in which they were involved, including football, GAA, soccer, Tae-kwon-do, rugby, golf, outdoor activities, pool, boxing, snooker, basketball, rock climbing, rowing, skating and swimming. Soccer, football and hurling were the most frequently mentioned and were mostly played as club sports, ‘I play G.A.A. and hurling for my local club [name of club], I play soccer for [name of club]’ (BCS, 4). There was also evidence of boys playing sport for the school and with friends as well as club commitment:

I love to play hurling and at the moment we are in the under 15 final . . . I play with [name of club] and hope to play for Clare some day . . . I play hurling, soccer, and football for the school. Every weekend I play football with my brother, two sisters, and my neighbour. (BCS, 9)

The competitive outcomes of involvement in sport were also evident:
I have won many medals and trophies for hurling and dancing. In 1995 the set which I was a part of won the All Ireland-set dancing competition in. . . In April just gone [name of club] won the U21 C county final and I was a part of that panel as well as the minor C last year. We have an intermediate team and we are hoping to win this out as we were beaten in the final last year by neighbours [name of club]. (BCS, 10)

In discussing sporting role models, boys mentioned football players and Formula One drivers and on a number of instances conveyed in their narrative that their role models were Irish sporting personalities (from football, Roy Keane and from Formula One motor racing, Eddie Irvine).

**Conclusion**

The principal role of popular culture is entertainment, channelled primarily through mass media (Sandford & Rich, 2006). Physically active role models are expected to influence young people to participate in physical activity and sport (Vescio et al., 2005). It was evident that family role models were most prominent in these young people’s narratives but not necessarily with respect to being physically active. While the young women rarely noted the name of a sporting role model, the young men not only named but also were familiar with sporting role models that they admired and, in some cases, wished to emulate. Linked to this, it was evident that young men were more exposed to sport ‘media drenching’. This may have ramifications for the sport media knowledge and information that girls do not hear or attend to in comparison to boys and its impact on gendered development of sporting identities (Lines, 2007). That is, sporting media is not targeted at girls and subsequently not heard by girls. There was evidence to support previous findings that there may be less diversity in the leisure choices of young men than young women with fewer competing options for leisure time as compared to the girls (Wright et al., 2003). The boys were predominantly involved in the team sports of Gaelic football, hurling and soccer and conveyed a sustained club investment in the activities of their choice. Girls reported a wider diversity of types of sporting activities (individual and team) and, in general, less investment in such activities as school or club-affiliated participants. While boys had a more regular sport discourse, girls conveyed that friends and paid employment were competing for their sporting leisure time. Referring back to the findings of Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2005), it appears that the young people’s narratives supported a similar affinity to family and home. Family involvement in sport was more of an interest for boys than girls and girls valued friendships and their perceived future lives as mothers and wives.

The number of movement culture references within these young people’s narratives was limited in comparison with our previous analysis of narratives from primary-aged students (Collier et al., 2007). However, the narratives reported here do convey the complex and diverse cultural contexts in which young people engage with sport and physical activity. While many girls conveyed limited involvement as
participants in sport, many boys practiced the roles of participant and consumer of sport. Young people develop and maintain a number of interests at a particular time and in writing these narratives there were other competing interests that they chose to share. In these instances, it is possible to pay attention to other youth leisure and lifestyle practices that may compete with or compliment participation in physical activity. Such practices include listening to music and socialising with friends. At the same time there were a number of boys who privileged the practice of sport by only engaging with sport during their leisure time.

Previous studies have reported that young women do make conscious choices about their physical activity involvement with the nature of the activity selected and the intensity and extent of their involvement varying greatly between individuals (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Wright et al., 2003; Hills, 2006). Contrary to concern about girls’ perceived disinterest in physical activity and sport, a number of young women in this study challenge prevailing views of adolescent girls’ dominant discourses by reporting their involvement in a range of physical activities, including traditional competitive sport forms, such as Gaelic football and hockey.

Students’ perspectives match the official cultural and institutional discourses with respect to the prominence of the GAA in their everyday lives, through their own involvement and that of their friends and/or family. The importance of national games in Ireland is clearly evident. Students’ perspectives presented in their narratives do not necessarily match the dominant international discourse that assumes young people are ‘at risk’ in relation to their present and future health and in using their time unproductively, conceptualising ‘adolescence as a developmental phase characterised by an increase in risky behaviour’ (Wright et al., 2005). In fact, the narratives convey a backdrop of diverse leisure activities for both girls and boys and, while there was an awareness of the effects of smoking, drink and drugs on lifestyle, they were mentioned minimally as practices in which these young people were involved and more as issues that society needed to address. This group of young people were happy, content and appreciative of the (Irish) society in which they were living and clearly articulated their hopes and aspirations for the future, including an Ireland with no prejudices, divisions, poverty, unemployment or homelessness. While the narratives conveyed a privileged well-being of prosperity, supportive family and friends, health and happiness, one particular silence in the narratives is interesting to note. In Ireland there is a growing concern with adolescent suicide, especially among males. Ireland has the fifth highest suicide rate in Europe for the 15–25-year age group. Death by suicide is the number one cause of death among young Irish men (Houses of the Oireachtas/Joint Committee on Health and Children, July 2006).

While acknowledging that it is likely that schools inform young people’s views towards leisure and sporting interests, it is difficult to comment on the explicitness of such a relationship from the narratives reviewed in this study. The narratives reported in this paper were constructed in response to a prompt asking young people to write about their lives, the future and their vision of Ireland in the new millennium. The direction given to students may have encouraged them to prioritise
the reporting of discourses other than that of sport and physical activity. If we are to understand the place and significance of physical activity in the lives of young people in an attempt to facilitate the construction of more active lifestyles, student narratives directed to reporting the leisure and sporting interests of young people may be more insightful to this particular goal. There is wide support for developing recreational opportunities for young people through consulting and involving young people in the planning and organisational structure of such opportunities (Office of the Minister for Children/Department of Health and Children, 2006; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2007). Such consultations may determine the best ways in which families, schools and clubs can facilitate and contribute to developing and retaining leisure and sporting interests among Irish young people.

References


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