Busy doing nothing? Physical education teachers’ perceptions of young people’s participation in leisure-sport

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Busy doing nothing? Physical education teachers’ perceptions of young people’s participation in leisure-sport

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Within the substantial body of research examining the professional knowledge of physical education (PE) teachers one particular area remains relatively under-explored: namely, their understandings of young people’s participation in leisure-sport and the implications of this, if any, for the practice of PE. There are grounds for thinking, however, that in this aspect of their professional knowledge PE teachers might not be as conversant with patterns of participation—among young people, generally, and their own pupils, in particular—as one might expect. In order to examine this tentative hypothesis, the present study involved focus groups with a total of 29 PE teachers at six secondary schools in England. A central finding of the study was that PE teachers’ perceptions of their youngsters’ leisure-sport lives tended to be characterized by a blend of myth and reality. Many teachers, for example, underestimated the levels of participation in leisure-sport both of their own pupils and the 15–16 years age group, generally. Nevertheless, the teachers’ observations regarding what amounted to growing and diversifying sporting repertoires among their pupils were, to a greater or lesser degree, commensurate with the profiles reported by the pupils and with wider trends associated with the changing lifestyles and preferences of young people. The paper concludes by briefly locating this study of professional knowledge within the sociology of knowledge, while observing that the content and form of PE for Year 11 pupils at the six schools in this study appeared to be informed by the common-sense, everyday knowledge of PE teachers rather than by evidence from national or local surveys of young people or studies of their own pupils.

Keywords: Leisure-sport; Participation; Physical education; Professional knowledge

Introduction

Over the last quarter of a century or more, a substantial body of research has emerged examining the professional socialization and professional knowledge of physical education (PE) teachers (e.g. Lawson, 1983a, 1983b, 1988; Dewar & Lawson, 1984; Evans, 1986; Kirk, 1992; Curtner-Smith, 1995, 2001; Ennis & Chen, 1995; Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000; Rovegno, 2003). More recently, a number of studies have begun to examine young people’s perceptions of PE, their relationships with teachers, and the perceived impact of their experiences of PE on current and future
participation in sport and physical activity (e.g. Williams & Woodhouse, 1996; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Jones & Cheetham, 2001; Bramham, 2003; MacPhail et al., 2003; Wright et al., 2003; Macdonald et al., 2005; Smith, 2006; Smith & Parr, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). As productive as this research have been in throwing light on various aspects of the ‘rather mystifying’ (Tsangaridou, 2006, p. 503) topic of PE teachers’ professional knowledge, one particular area remains relatively under-explored: namely, their understandings of young people’s participation in leisure-sport and the implications of this, if any, for the practice of PE. In one of very few studies involving PE teachers’ perceptions of their pupils, Rich (2004, p. 216), for example, observes that little is known about PE teachers’ knowledge of ‘girls’ experiences, inactivity and/or the “opting out” of PE and sport by many girls.’

At first glance, however, it seems quite reasonable to assume that PE teachers will know something about the levels and forms of participation in sport and physical activity in the leisure time of the young people they are teaching; especially in light of the fact that the encouragement of lifelong participation among young people tends to be viewed by PE teachers as a, perhaps the, primary aim of their ‘profession’ (Fairclough et al., 2002; Green, 2003). After all, one might ask, why teach PE to young people if not to foster a desire to be active both now and in the future? Kirk (2005, p. 5), among others, argues that ‘the goal of lifelong participation is of major consequence . . . for physical education’ and points to the National Curriculum Physical Education (NCPE) in England and Wales as an example of ‘the ubiquity of this aim.’

There are, nevertheless, grounds for thinking that in this aspect of their professional knowledge PE teachers might not be as conversant with patterns of participation—among young people, generally, and their own pupils, in particular—as one might expect. To that extent, the PE curricula they construct (within the confines of NCPE) may be more-or-less expressive of their youngsters’ leisure-sport lifestyles and more-or-less likely to impact upon their participation therein. In this regard, several studies (see, for example, Mason, 1995; Green, 2003) hint at the possibility that PE teachers’ perceptions of the leisure-sport lifestyles of young people might amount to a mixture of myth and reality.

This study set out to examine this tentative hypothesis as an adjunct to a broader study, the object of which was to explore the place of sport and physical activity in the lives of 1010, 15–16-year-olds in England and Wales (Smith, 2006). More specifically, it sought to examine: (1) PE teachers’ perceptions of their 15–16-year olds’ participation in leisure-sport; (2) how they arrived at these impressions; (3) how such impressions were seen to inform the PE curricula they constructed; and (4) how accurate these perceptions were when juxtaposed with data generated by the parallel study of youngsters’ self-reported participation as well as national survey data (see, for example, Sport England, 2003a, 2003b).

Methods

The study involved focus groups with PE teachers at six of the seven schools that had provided the sample of pupils for the main study. All of the schools were state-funded,
mixed-sex comprehensive schools. With the exception of School E, which was a voluntary-aided Catholic school, all schools were non-denominational and community-funded. Four of the schools had been awarded Specialist School Status (two were designated Specialist Sports Colleges (SSCs); one a Technology College; and one a Mathematics, Computing, Business and Enterprise College). Five of the schools had sixth forms for 16–18-year-olds. The schools ranged considerably in terms of the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level (from 15% in School D to 70% in Schools C and F). The schools also ranged considerably in terms of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) scores (from 6% for School E to 45% for School F) of the Super Output Areas (SOA) in which they were located, and according to the proportion of young people entitled to receive Free School Meals5 (4% in School C to 42% in School A). Against these criteria, the socio-demographic profile of three of the six schools included in the study can be described as largely lower-working/working-class (Schools A, D, and E), one as mainly upper-working/lower-middle class (School B), and the remaining two (Schools C and F) as largely middle/upper-middle class. In this regard, each group of schools could be said to have been broadly representative of other schools recruiting similar student profiles elsewhere in England.

A total of 29 teachers (18 males; 11 females) participated in the focus groups between February and May 2004. Of those three (two males; one female) were from School A, four (two males; two females) from School B and six worked at School C (three males; three females). Two teachers taught at School D (two males), eight (five males; three females) were employed by School E, and eight (six males; two females) worked at School F. Consequently, because of variations in the extent to which each of the schools were able to accommodate the requests of the researchers, more males than females were represented in the sample of the focus group participants.

Focus groups were chosen as an appropriate means of generating data for several reasons. First, conducting focus groups with teachers in pre-existing PE departments allowed the participants to ‘recall common experiences, share half-forgotten memories, or challenge each other on contradictions between what they are professing to believe in the group and what they might have said or done outside the group’ (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 191; emphasis in the original). Second, the teachers were able to ‘relate each other’s comments to actual incidents in their shared daily lives’ (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 105) and to bring to the surface common views that might not otherwise be exposed, as well as the ways in which they arrived at their impressions (see also, Smith et al., 2009).

Each of the six mixed-sex focus groups was conducted contemporaneously with the wider study of Year 11 pupils’ sporting lives reported elsewhere (Smith et al., 2007a, 2007b; Smith et al., 2009). Informed consent was indicated by the teachers’ participation in the focus groups—having had the nature and purposes of the research explained to them in a covering letter and at the outset of the focus group itself. Each focus group lasted for between 45 and 60 minutes, took place in a quiet school classroom or office and was conducted by a facilitator with the aid of a ‘scribe’/moderator who, among other things, managed the recording of each focus group. Each
group was audio tape-recorded with the teachers’ consent. The facilitator began with a brief, standardized explanation of the nature of the focus group and how it related to the broader study. In order to help allay any fears on the part of the participants regarding use of the data, all of the teachers were given a verbal guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity before the focus groups commenced. In order to further reassure the teachers of the authenticity of any published data they were invited to retain one of the two tape recordings of the focus groups.

All of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. The themes used to structure the focus groups (as well as a starting point for analyzing the data these generated) featured the teachers’ perceptions of levels and forms of participation (and trends therein) among 15–16-year-olds, the place of sport in their leisure lives, the sources from which PE teachers’ impressions were drawn and the relationship between these impressions and the PE curricula they devised and delivered. These themes incorporated several sub-categories (for example, in relation to gender differences) whilst other themes (such as the accuracy of teachers’ perceptions when juxtaposed with the findings of the broader study) emerged within the focus groups.

The next section reports the findings from the focus groups using the original questions—regarding levels and forms of participation and trends therein, as well as PE teachers’ sources of information and the changes they have made to their curricula—as a framework for the various analytical themes. The findings are presented in this way to allow ease of comparison with data from the parallel study of 15–16-year-olds (as well as national survey data) which provides the crucial relational counterpoint to the teachers’ perceptions. Significant aspects of the themes are then alluded to as sub-clauses to the various sub-headings.

Findings

Physical education teachers’ perceptions of their 15–16-year-olds’ participation in leisure-sport

Levels and frequency of participation: busy doing nothing? In response to the question ‘What proportion of young people in Year 11 (15–16-year-olds) do you estimate are taking part in sport and physical activity in their leisure time?’ answers were quite varied. Some teachers took the view that ‘There are a lot in the year group that do a fair bit’ (C [school], 4 [identity number of each teacher], m [sex of teacher]):

F5m: I’d say it’s quite high.
F8m: It’s quite high I would have thought.
F6m: High in the girls as well.

F4m: 80%.
F8m: I think a high percentage do something every week.
Most of the teachers, however, expressed the view that it was a minority, somewhere between one-quarter and one-third, who consistently took part on a regular (at least weekly) basis:

D1m: In my opinion, except for those who are committed to a sport, they do very little . . . I wouldn’t say that there are more than 35 (of 175) kids in our school in Year 11 who do anything on a regular basis . . . it’s around 15% downwards.

E3m: I’d guess a third.
E6m: Less than that.
E8f: A quarter and lower for the girls.
E7f: The girls will be doing several activities but there will be only a few of them doing it.

All-in-all, teachers in each of the groups tended to view their pupils as differentially located along a continuum with the majority situated at either end. For some teachers this involved ‘quite a large cohort who do everything and then quite a lot who do nothing’ (E1m). For a larger group, however, it was deemed to consist of a minority of highly active youngsters at one end of the continuum and a much larger group of highly inactive youngsters at the other:

A1m: It appears to me that there’s quite a small percentage of them that do quite a high percentage of sport. There’s certainly a few that I can think of that will do three, four or five sports outside of school. They’ll play golf, football, tennis and badminton but they’re definitely in the minority; the majority of them don’t appear to do that much.

A2m: It’s probably 15–20% (of the year group) who participate in their leisure.
A2f: That lot will probably do something every day and at the weekend whereas the others will do very little.
A1m: You get the impression that they do very, very little. (emphasis in the original)

The teachers pointed to what they saw as a clear sex dimension to participation, with boys far more likely to be at the ‘sporty’ end of the continuum and girls at the disengaged pole:

D2m: You generally find that the kids that are sporty are boys in particular . . .
D1m: Overall, for girls . . . in this school you’ll find that they do very little of PE outside of school. There are a few that I know will go to this new aerobics or fitness class.

C6f: I’d say on average for the girls it’s about one hour a week maximum.
C3m: And for some none—there’s a high percentage of them.
C2m: I’d have said one (hour) session would be generous for girls.
C3m: I think that the general rule is that they do very little.
C2m: I’d say about 25% of girls do (sport and physical activity) and that would be erring on the side of generosity.
Forms of participation: ‘football, football, football.’ When asked about the kinds or forms of sports their 15–16-year-olds were undertaking in their leisure time, very many of the teachers responded by emphasizing what they saw as the dominance of sport (and football especially: ‘It’s football, football, football for the boys’ [D1m]) in the leisure-sport lives of their pupils and those of boys in particular. The perceived dominance of football in the leisure-sport profiles of boys notwithstanding, some PE teachers pointed to what they took to be their involvement in so-called ‘lifestyle activities,’ as well as other games:

F7m: For boys, I’d say football mainly and again fitness-suite, [and] basketball to a certain extent—but it’s not as popular as football and fitness suite.
F8m: Golf.
F3f: And some go to the cricket club as well.
F4m: For the majority though it’s the football isn’t it really?

Some teachers expressed the view that their youngsters’ involvement in lifestyle activities was indicative of involvement in a breadth of sporting activities:

C1m: We also have a lad who is a very keen and good skier.
C6f: There are quite a few of them (boys and girls) doing individual things like cycling and orienteering.
C4f: A lot of them do horse riding and dance, don’t they, that we don’t always hear about.
C1m: You get some martial arts and things don’t we?
... 
C3m: There’s a few girl swimmers.
C6f: The girls tend to do aerobics and fitness.

Patterns and trends in participation: disengagement and drop-out? In response to questions regarding their perceptions of patterns and trends in young people’s participation in leisure-sport, it became apparent that there were differences among the teachers within and between schools. Among the larger group of teachers who tended toward a more pessimistic view, some believed that their youngsters took part in less sport and physical activity in their leisure than previous generations had. A small group of ‘dissenters’, however, offered a more optimistic view. Where both were in agreement was that, however, much sport they undertook in their leisure time, 15–16-year-olds’ forms of participation had broadened and diversified. In other words, the pattern of participation among this age group had shifted toward less competitive, recreational activities that they preferred to do in the company of friends. In particular, teachers pointed to what they believed to be the greater involvement of older pupils in ‘health and fitness,’ lifestyle activities and adventure sports:

D1m: I would say that it (gym/weights room) [is] the most popular activity other than football at the (leisure) centre; it’s one of the biggest uses for adults and the 14 to 16 cohort.
A2m: Yeah, that’s (skateboarding) becoming much bigger.
A3f: Yeah, that started off with a small minority but that’s growing now.

While there were evidently a number of teachers in most focus groups who took the view that there had simply been a decline in leisure-sport participation over time and across generations, others suggested that this perception might, in fact, be explained in terms of the shift toward less overt, less traditional and more flexible forms of participation of the (lifestyle) kinds previously indicated:

E3m: I’d guess that their leisure, out of school participation, has dropped over the last few years.
E2: Having said that, do you not think that its maybe become more individual therefore you don’t see as much? You don’t see them going to the rugby club as much but they’ve changed the type of activities they’re doing towards something that doesn’t require them going to a particular club . . . They can decide at 3 o’clock when they leave school whether they want to go for a swim or something as opposed to thinking that ‘At 4 o’clock I’ve got to be at the rugby club.’
E1m: They might think that they’ll do something that they enjoy with their friends if they don’t make the 15 or 20 squad at school in football and rugby.

For most teachers it was among girls where lifestyle and individual or partner sports and activities had taken hold, albeit alongside some team games:

A3f: A lot of the girls go swimming outside (of school); they go to fitness clubs and do aerobics and go to gym sessions with mums, but they don’t compete in the traditional sports.
F2m: A lot of them do trampolining.
F3f: A bit of tennis.
F1f: A bit of tennis but then a lot do dance.
F2m: Gym.
F3f: Trampolining.
E8f: A few of the girls do dance outside of school and trampolining.
E7f: Some team games such as hockey and netball outside of school.
E4m: And there’s quite a lot of lacrosse as well.

Indeed, there was general agreement that the perceived changes in young people’s leisure-sport portfolios—toward more recreational, lifestyle activities—as they moved through secondary school was more pronounced among girls:

A3f: They do a lot of sport. It’s like the Birrell Youth policy with the football; a lot of them are involved there. They don’t actually play football in school but they’ll go and play outside of school . . . a lot of them have mentioned that they play football for Birrell Youth and a lot of the girls do the dancing as well. A lot often do do a lot after school time in Key Stage 3. In Key Stage 4 I’d say it becomes less competitive and that they’d only do it if they pushed themselves to go swimming or something like that.
A1m: They (girls) change, they become more recreational . . . We do have a high percentage who do do some (sport) outside of school . . . but when it gets to Year 11 girls just seem to fade off from Year 10.
A2m: It’s recreational. When they reach Key Stage 4, they don’t want to do netball anymore or hockey. They want to go in the fitness studios, they want to do aerobics and they want to do dance… it’s away from more competitive sport to more recreational kinds of things. A lot do the recreational (activities), even those who are not particularly sporty in Key Stage 3 and didn’t particularly thrive—because it was more competitive—but when they get to Key Stage 4 and they’re doing the fitness studio they’re all there—they all want to do it—you get more participation out of doing more recreational sports.

The likelihood of ‘drop-out’ or disengagement in leisure-sport during the secondary school years was, nonetheless, viewed as a good deal less pronounced among boys:

A2m: There doesn’t seem to be such a drop off (among the boys) as there is with the girls though. It seems that the kids who are keen on sport as a whole are the one’s that remain keen throughout. For the girls, the one’s who are really keen earlier on you’ll still see them drop out for one reason or another; they’ll become less keen to be competitively involved.

A number of longer-serving PE teachers volunteered a comparison with an implicit ‘golden age’:

D1m: I’ve been teaching now for nearly 30 years and the trends have changed dramatically. I would say almost 100% they have changed. When I first started teaching, of the 100 pupils in Year 11 you could expect 80 to playing and representing sport, attending extra-curricular clubs and the sports could range from rugby, football, cricket, athletics, rounders, swimming (and) hockey… you could put teams out… because the kids were that keen to play… we had large numbers of kids who wanted to play. Gradually things changed and changed dramatically towards the end of the 1980s and start of the 1990s. Kids lost interest in using sport as something to occupy them, something that they enjoyed and wanted to do… something happened in the mid-1980s in the culture (and) the environment. (emphasis in the original)

All-in-all, many of the teachers in the study tended toward low estimations of the levels of participation in leisure-sport both of their own pupils and the 15–16 years age group generally. The dominant perception among the PE teachers was that many of their 15–16-year-olds, particularly the young women, were not participating in leisure-sport at all let alone on a regular basis.

Physical education teachers’ sources of information

During the course of the focus groups, many teachers repeatedly responded to the effect that it was ‘quite difficult to answer’ questions about their youngsters’ participation in leisure-sport. As one teacher put it, this was largely ‘because I don’t know what they are doing outside of school’ (E4m). None of the teachers in the study made reference to either national data or academic and professional journals as sources of information. With one notable exception, almost all of the teachers’ drew upon ‘data’ or, rather, impressions that were the product of informal observation and
conversation with pupils. Thus, in response to questions probing what grounds they had for their impressions regarding participation in leisure-sport among their pupils, the responses tended to revolve around hearsay and day-to-day interactions:

A3f: From talking to the kids; they tell us what they do.
A1m: You also see them with balls around the school and they’ll bring things into to show you.
A3f: Yeah like (pupil’s name) with the swimming, she’ll bring in medals … and contact with parents; we also talk to them.
A1m: Yeah, for example, I found out that way about (pupil’s name) who I didn’t realise … was the captain of the Great Britain water polo team even though we knew she was a good swimmer.

Some teachers observed that they tended to be more aware of the leisure-sport participation of those pupils who were experiencing success—and those doing team sports, in particular—because they tended to be more visible:

C2m: We can measure the successful ones because we get to hear about them … we can’t measure leisure participation without speaking to the kids on a general basis.
C4f: Yeah, I know. I had no idea that lots of them went out of cycling or go to the gym at Total Fitness.
C4m: We often see lots of our kids in the (local newspaper) for things like angling!
C1m: And she was the world champion!

In this vein, a number of teachers indicated that a heightened local profile tended to be the means by which they became aware of the sporting involvement of some of their more successful pupils: ‘we’ve got this excellent dancer … we only found out about how good she really is of late because she’s going to be principle dancer at a local dance festival’ (A1m). For other teachers, their source of information was the school ground and its vicinity at the end of the school day: ‘You also see them (the pupils) on the field regularly doing sport after school or nearby and you think “Good grief, they are doing a bit after all.”’

Finally, there was a tendency, particularly among older teachers, to use personal experience as a benchmark against which to not only measure but also implicitly evaluate changes in young people’s sporting and leisure lifestyles:

D1m: We were brought up differently … it was active lifestyles then. If you take our time—back 10, 15 years—we didn’t have things like computers,
X-boxes, Game Boys, PlayStations or motorised scooters... now I think that the perception kids have of leisure time now is completely different to those pupils of 10, 15 years ago because we didn’t have these things to occupy our time. I occupied my time by going out playing football, basketball, rugby, tennis, cricket, you name it I did it... but now kids have so many other things to distract them away from their active lifestyle.

In marked contrast to the informal sources of information that most of the teachers based their impressions on, one school had generated its own, more systematic and formalized data. Having acquired SSC status, the PE department at School E had recently completed a survey of extra-curricular PE provision with the same pupils in order to generate baseline data on their pupils’ after-school (extra-curricular and leisure-sport) participation. The teachers had in mind the question of how they could adapt NCPE in order to increase participation in those sports and physical activities that the pupils most enjoyed. What they found evidently surprised them and resulted in more detailed observations on their pupils than teachers at other schools were able or inclined to give:

KG: What did you find (from your survey)?
E4m: A lot of them are doing something.
E1f: A high percentage of girls are doing dance outside of school.
E2m: Much more than we actually realised.
E3f: And football.
E4f: Some of the kids you’d look at and think ‘You’re doing nothing’ but they are.
E1m: Some are quite quiet aren’t they?
E3f: They don’t always tell you what they’re doing and don’t necessarily shine in lessons... It’s quite interesting from seeing the questionnaire what they actually do do and how many times they go.

E2m: What was surprising was the number of girls who do different activities like boxing.
E3f: And a few do judo as well and self-defence.
E2m: Yeah, tai-chi, things like that.
E3f: It’s like (pupil’s name), she does kick-boxing and is a black belt, we didn’t even know. (emphasis in the original)

All told, many PE teachers’ perceptions of their pupils’ participation in leisure-sport tended to be serendipitous and impressionistic and often based upon pupil anecdotes rather than being systematic and deliberate. Nevertheless, as we indicate below, while some of these impressions did not correspond with the self-reported leisure-sport participation of their pupils, some were in fact quite accurate.

Physical education teachers’ perceptions regarding the changes they have (or have not) made to physical education curricula

On the basis of their perceptions of 15–16-year-olds’ leisure-sport participation, a number of teachers indicated that they and their colleagues had made relatively
substantial changes to their PE curricula, particularly in terms of the forms of activity made available to pupils. In other words, the changes teachers had made to curricular PE tended to reflect changes in forms of youth participation in leisure-sport (that is, a shift away from games towards ‘lifestyle activities’):

- **B1f:** As they move through (secondary school) they tend to move away from the games side of things a little bit onto trampolining, dance and lifestyle activities.
- **B2m:** ...we’ve introduced aerobics, trampolining and outdoor education activities which was more appealing to girls than the more traditional games like netball and hockey.

In this vein, discussion in several groups encapsulated the various ways in which the curriculum had or had not been developed in response to the changing demands and requirements of their older pupils, and especially older girls:

- **C2m:** The girls’ curriculum has changed a lot more over the last 10 years than the boys. We (me and C3m) have been here over 20 years and we’re still teaching the same kinds of lessons now as we did then for the boys whereas for the girls we’ve introduced basketball and football. They used to do predominantly two team activities ... now they do four. We’re lucky here because we’ve got a pool that our kids can have access to so we do water-based things with them. We have started doing snorkelling ...(and) canoeing as they get older for boys and girls.

Many of the teachers were quick to point up the manner in which they had felt constrained to adapt to their pupils’ interests in order to sustain acceptable levels of participation:

- **D1m:** We have difficulty here getting a lot of them to take part. We are having to continually change our programme to offer them activities which we think they might enjoy and actually participate in. If you put the traditional PE curriculum in you would actually preclude 80–90% of the pupils (from participating).
- **D2m:** Yeah, easily.
- **D1m:** But if we put on activities such as step-aerobics, trampolining, dance—but not dance as we understand it—but the dance as they understand it then a majority of them will take part. (original emphasis)

At the same time, a number sought to explain the adaptations to the PE curriculum that they had made in terms of a response to a supposedly significant drop-out from sports participation at the end of compulsory schooling:

- **C1m:** I think that ever since I’ve been here we’ve always tried with Key Stage 4 kids to combat the post-education drop-off in sport by giving them a variety (of activities) ... we’ve always tried to give a choice and broaden their range of experiences.
- **C6f:** We now do step aerobics, water aerobics and aqua-fit for the girls.
- **C2f:** And the fitness suite, squash, basketball, badminton and volleyball for both sexes.
It was those who had taught PE the longest, however, who were especially likely to talk of significant changes over time not only in the participation patterns of youngsters in leisure-sport, but also in the PE curriculum:

A1m: There’s been a big change because when I first started (teaching 35 years ago) we used to do just simply football in the winter with the cross-country and then in the summer it would be cricket ... they used to just play in those two sports (in their leisure time) ... we’ve moved on now to more indoor things like badminton and tennis.

E4m: There have been a lot of changes (during my time as PE teacher). In the old days we didn’t offer as many activities as we do now; it was then purely PE games ... the opportunities they’ve got now are much wider ... they’ve got a lot more choice now.

The extent of change notwithstanding, some teachers (especially those in schools in ‘disadvantaged’ catchment areas) pointed to what they saw as the need for the PE curriculum to change more dramatically than it already had, in order to enable them to engage their older pupils:

D2m: I think we do face curriculum issues where the curriculum is not modernised enough; it’s not kept rolling if you like. Times change and the curriculum doesn’t, that’s what we’re faced with these days. We’re finding that ... 15-year-old girls think they’re 21-year-old girls and if you have PE on a Friday afternoon, like we do, the girls are not going to want to get changed into PE kit and go out and then go home sweaty or wrecking their make-up for a Friday night on the ale.

Some schools appeared better placed to make more substantial amendments to the content and form of PE than others. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that they had recently conducted their own survey, the teachers at School E were especially able to respond to questions about how their perceptions had impacted upon the practice of teaching PE in their school:

E6m: It certainly has. We’ve adapted it (the NCPE) much more so that the girls are doing a lot more time trampolining and dance and outdoor education for boys and girls.

E1f: I think because the curriculum has changed—talking from the girls’ point of view—towards this more dance, aerobics side of things, the participation in lesson has increased because the girls want to do it.

E4m: They’ve got a better attitude towards it haven’t they?
E1f: Because they want to be doing it and they want to be involved.

... 

E7m: We’ve offered a range of activities, certainly, some (boys) go to the (golf) driving range ... We cater for larger numbers of kids now rather than just those who do football.

E2m: It’s because they might have different needs. They might not just want competition but non-competitive situations as well. They want the social thing as well. It’s to provide more opportunity for kids to come along and do what suits them.
Physical education teachers’ perceptions regarding the influence of physical education on young people’s leisure-sport participation

When asked about the perceived contribution of PE, if any, to pupils’ participation in sport and physical activity in their leisure-time, a number of teachers cited a variety of direct and indirect effects. Direct effects took the form, for example, of directing students toward sports clubs and sporting opportunities:

C2f: We nudge them in the direction of the hockey club, for example. We’ll say to them ‘You need to go to the hockey club because you’ve got some skills in that.’ Over the years we have directed more kids to clubs because that’s where they need to go to continue their sport; we foster their interest in that.

C5m: We’ve got good links with the clubs . . .

C2f: I’d say that we’ve made an impact on a very small number who have gone on to excel . . . we’ve had some go on to reach national standards.

Indirect effects tended to be described in the more general terms of creating an environment conducive to encouraging adherence to sport:

B2f: I am sure that we foster their participation in leisure activity because if were poor at what we do and we weren’t encouraging them or being very supportive then surely that would have a knock-on effect on what they would do in their leisure time. Hopefully we foster the spirit to participate and . . . that would encourage them to take part outside of school.

Some teachers were, however, rather more sceptical about the potential impact of PE on the leisure-sport lives of youngsters:

C4m: Their leisure is something that we can’t really have an influence over.

C6f: Their peers have more influence there.

. . .

C2f: That’s the hardest one for us to measure isn’t it?

A good number of the teachers perceived a continued mismatch between the PE curriculum and the leisure-sport interests of their pupils, particularly as they moved from the lower to the upper secondary years. One of the most significant areas of mismatch in teachers’ eyes arose from the tension between the constraints of NCPE and pupils’ leisure-sport preferences:

D1m: PE and National Curriculum needs to change and needs to change fast because it’s stuck in the 1960s and 70s where it was expected that they follow the traditional netball, hockey, bit of badminton, a little bit of fitness and that’s it. Their (pupils’) beliefs have changed . . . They’re now rebelling against that kind of system. And yet, of course, as a school, and with the Head and the National Curriculum, we have to fulfil the requirements and quite often that creates a conflict, a clash, because the pupils do not want to do that. So, I’m having to continually go back (to the Head) and say ‘Look, we can’t offer this because it doesn’t fit in with our pupils.’
Given the limited and often indirect contribution curricular PE was viewed as making to the leisure-sport lives of 15–16-year-olds, there was widespread belief that if PE for older pupils was to match their leisure-sport interests more closely and, in the process, be more appealing to them then it needed to become more recreational in nature and lifestyle-oriented in content:

D1m: It’s leisure activities isn’t it? Basically what we have to offer is a leisure recreational time where, unfortunately, we do not do much teaching but we are in fact becoming baby minders in a PE sense. As long as we set up a badminton court, a basketball, a trampolining, a dance session and we’ve got a member of staff in front of them, then they’re quite happy to go and play and take part to whatever standard they think they are at, which in a majority of cases is very low. They do not want to be taught as they were in Years 7, 8 and to some extent Year 9. They’ve had enough of the traditional netball, football, hockey—those kinds of activities—rammed down their throats since they were in Years 5 and 6.

Nonetheless, many of the teachers in the study were quick to comment upon the desirability of adapting curricular PE toward the preferred leisure-sport styles of their older pupils up to a point. It was evident, for example, that many of the PE departments had amended their PE curricula at Key Stage 4 by adding a limited number of activities that not only more closely matched young people’s sporting preferences but also, equally importantly, they believed they could staff adequately. Consequently, where a choice of activities was made available, this often appeared somewhat limited and was strongly related among other things, to the particular enthusiasms and preferences of teachers, the ‘types’ of pupils which they taught, the ‘kinds’ of schools at which they worked, available facilities, and other school-related priorities (Smith et al., 2009; see also Smith & Parr, 2007).

It was noteworthy that, having conducted their own survey, PE teachers at School E were not only able to offer more detailed observations on their pupils than teachers at other schools but had also developed their PE curriculum towards the leisure-sport preferences of their 15–16-year-olds. They (and, for that matter, some of the other groups of teachers) also appeared, to some extent, to have amended the ‘style’ of participation, in addition to the content of the PE curriculum, toward a slightly more recreational style of delivery.

The accuracy of physical education (PE) teachers’ perceptions

All-in-all, PE teachers’ perceptions of their youngsters’ leisure-sport lives could be said to be characterized by a blend of myth and reality. When their perceptions of the leisure-sport participation of their 15–16-year-olds were juxtaposed with the youngsters’ self-reported data generated by the parallel Young People, Sport and Leisure (YPSAL) study (see, for example, Smith et al., 2007a, 2007b) and national surveys (see, for example, Sport England, 2003a, 2003b), it was apparent that there were some significant discrepancies. According to many of the teachers, the leisure-sport participation of older pupils resembled the shape of a lop-sided dumbbell rather
than the bell-shaped curve apparent in both the YPSAL survey (Smith et al., 2007a) and national survey data (Sport England, 2003a). In this vein, many of the teachers in the study tended to underestimate the levels of participation in leisure-sport both of their own pupils and the 15–16 years age group, generally. The more pessimistic estimates of participation were particularly in evidence among teachers at schools from working-class regions and were, indeed, more likely to be closer aligned to the self-reported levels of participation of their pupils. These underestimations were, nevertheless, commonplace among teachers from all schools irrespective of their socio-geographic locations. Such pessimistic views notwithstanding, it was worthy of note that a number of teachers held a more optimistic view and one, indeed, more closely correlated with the self-reported data of their pupils. To some extent, School E provided a noteworthy exception. The perceptions of the PE teachers at School E tended to be more consistent with each other and more in tune with both the self-reported levels and forms of participation of their 15–16-year-olds. Interestingly, there also appeared a higher level of correspondence between the changes the PE teachers at School E claimed to have made to their PE curriculum in relation to increased levels of activity choice (Smith et al., 2009) and their youngsters’ desire for such a development (although, as Smith et al., 2009 note, the extent and nature of activity choice in all schools in the study still failed to meet the demands of the 15–16-year-olds).

The teachers’ perceptions of a sex/gender dimension to participation—with boys far more likely to be at the ‘sporty’ end of the continuum and girls at the disengaged pole—were largely accurate. However, there was a tendency for the teachers (especially the male teachers) to overestimate the levels and forms of difference. Many were not as aware of the changes in young women’s leisure lifestyles that the YPSAL survey and, for that matter, national survey data point to. They were inclined to exaggerate the decline in participation in leisure-sport among their young women and appeared unaware of the extent of the growth of participation and the shift in forms over several decades. That said, the female PE teachers’ perceptions of girls’ participation tended to be more circumspect and considered and, in fact, more consonant with their girls’ self-reported data than the perceptions of their male counterparts in relation to the boys.

In terms of forms of participation, very many of the teachers accurately (that is, when compared against the data from the YPSAL survey) pointed to the dominance of football among the boys and individual activities among the girls, the broadening and diversification of participation and the shift toward ‘lifestyle activities.’ However, when comparing PE teachers’ perceptions with the YPSAL data it was apparent that while many teachers correctly identified many of the activities undertaken by young people in their leisure, they often misunderstood the relative significance of the different activities in their youngsters’ leisure-sport profiles. In other words, while they identified many (but by no means all) of the self-reported activities they tended to misplace these in relation to their reported popularity among the 15–16-year-olds. In addition, many teachers held a different view of the supposed ‘dominance’ of sport in young people’s leisure lives. More specifically, although many teachers were broadly aware of the shift (not only between generations but also during adolescence) away
from competitive sports and toward non-competitive activities, they appeared not to fully appreciate the prominence of lifestyle activities in their leisure-sport lifestyles or the extent of young people’s preference for more recreational and informal styles of participation. Nevertheless, the teachers’ observations regarding what amounted to growing and diversifying sporting repertoires among their pupils were, to a greater or lesser degree, commensurate with the profiles reported by the pupils, and with wider trends associated with the changing lifestyles and preferences of young people; that is, with ‘youth’s new condition’ (Roberts, 1996).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have begun to explore the development of PE teachers’ professional knowledge in relation to their understandings of young people’s patterns and forms of participation in leisure-sport and the ways in which this knowledge is used to inform their practice. For the most part, the teachers’ perceptions of the leisure-sport lifestyles of their 15–16-year-olds were based upon hearsay and impression, formed and developed ‘on the ground,’ so to speak, in the day-to-day contexts of teaching and interacting with their pupils. Only in the case of one group of teachers was their knowledge of the similarities and dissimilarities between the curricula they offered, and the leisure-sport participation of their 15–16-year-olds informed by systematically collected information. Consequently, the content and form of PE for Year 11 pupils at the six schools in this study was, to a greater or lesser extent, informed by the common-sense, everyday knowledge of PE teachers rather than by evidence from national or local surveys of young people as a whole, or studies of their own pupils.

It was noteworthy that the longer-serving teachers within and across schools were more likely to believe that young people’s levels and rates of participation in leisure-sport (and, for that matter, PE generally) were higher at some time in the past than contemporarily. They also appeared more likely to bemoan what they viewed as an inappropriate shift away from ‘traditional’ sports. Nonetheless, this was a matter of degree, for younger teachers were also quite likely to express such views. The main difference between them was that the younger teachers expressed a greater awareness of the trend toward lifestyle activities. More significant, perhaps, was the tendency of female PE teachers in general to hold more circumspect, considered and accurate perceptions of girls’ participation than those of their male counterparts in relation to the boys. In this regard, we might tentatively hypothesize that there may be gender differences in the extent to which PE teachers seek and/or are constrained to listen to their pupils. The more pessimistic estimates of participation were particularly in evidence among teachers at schools from working-class regions and were, indeed, more likely to be closer aligned to the self-reported levels of participation of their pupils (see Smith et al., 2007a, 2007b). That said, underestimations of youngsters’ levels and rates of participation, as well as misperceptions regarding forms of
involvement, were relatively commonplace among teachers from all schools irrespective of their socio-geographic locations.

As with ‘knowledge,’ generally, the PE teachers’ beliefs about the leisure-sport participation of the young people they taught represented an amalgam of realistic observation and collective fantasy (Elias, 1987). In this regard, PE teachers’ perceptions of their youngsters’ leisure-sport lives featured a blend of myth and reality: of what they had good reason to believe to be true and what they were inclined to believe was the case, in stereotypical and common-sense terms, and more so in some schools and among some teachers than others. The PE teachers’ views tended to be realistic insofar as they identified the dominance of football among boys; the shifts in preferred sporting styles away from competitive team games and toward so-called ‘lifestyle activities’ (particularly among girls); and that drop-out and drop-off was less pronounced among boys. The school at which the teachers’ perceptions tended to be most accurate was, perhaps unsurprisingly, School E where the PE department had conducted its own survey. The teachers’ perceptions tended to be more mythical in terms of the beliefs among many teachers that a majority of their, 15–16-year-olds, were highly inactive in leisure-sport terms and that their youngsters took part in less sport and physical activity in their leisure than previous generations. A good example of the blend of myth and reality in PE teachers’ perceptions was to be observed in their perceptions of girls’ participation: while the teachers were justified in pointing up a clear sex dimension to participation many had not grasped the extent to which many of their young women were actively engaged in sport and physical activity in their leisure-time.

As a study of professional knowledge, this research is located in the sociology of knowledge—‘an empirical theory of the actual relations of knowledge to the social situation’ (Mannheim, 1960, p. 257). In this regard, and although we are keen not to over-reach the data reported here, the study appears illustrative of two particular aspects of the sociology of knowledge: first, how views are derived from a particular milieu (Mannheim, 1960); and, second, what Elias (1987) termed involvement-detachment. In the first instance, and above all else, the data reflect the fact that PE teachers’ professional knowledge (as with knowledge in general) is social. In other words, it was formed in and through (and tended to be reliant upon) their day-to-day interactions with their pupils and their colleagues. In the case of impressions they gleaned from pupils, PE teachers’ professional knowledge also tended to be serendipitous. On the other hand, the professional knowledge that emerged and developed between colleagues—sometimes casually (for example, through playing sport) and sometimes deliberately (through mentoring, for example)—appears illustrative of the process of professional socialization by which people in occupations acquire shared values and learn to become members of their ‘profession.’ In this regard, the ways in which individual members of a group such as PE teachers make sense of issues such as youth sport depends upon the conventional or standard ways in which such topics are understood in the world of PE; and this tends to be against a
backdrop of common-sense perceptions of a ‘golden age’ of participation and performance, as well as preferences for the sporting forms conventionally associated with ‘traditional’ PE. In similar vein, Rich (2004) has commented upon the ways in which teachers’ predispositions together with the dominant discourses and practices of PE have served to shape and influence the assumptions and perceptions of a cohort of newly qualified female PE teachers toward their female pupils.

In addition, in one area of their professional knowledge (that is, the leisure-sport lifestyles of their pupils), PE teachers’ perceptions and judgments bore the hallmarks of the impact of emotion as well as reason. In this regard, the data suggest that conceptualizing PE teachers’ perceptions in terms of degrees of involvement and detachment provides a more adequate conception of (professional) knowledge than the more conventional dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity, wherein things are either factual or arbitrary and personal. All-in-all, the study provides direct and indirect evidence to support the view that PE teachers’ knowledge is an amalgam of their predispositions (or habituses) and their practical experiences (Green, 2003; Rovegno, 2003). Such knowledge ‘is rarely made explicit by teachers and most of the time teachers are not conscious of using it’ (Tsangaridou, 2006, p. 504).

Through this paper we have sought to contribute to a more adequate appreciation of PE teachers’ understandings of their subject and, by extension, their perspectives on curriculum development in PE. In policy terms, the findings appear to suggest that a more systematic evidence-based approach to curriculum planning at the local level of the school and, more importantly, at the national level in the form of the NCPE, might hold out the promise of PE curricula more commensurate with young people’s leisure-sport interests and, as a consequence, more likely to reinforce any leisure-sport predispositions they may have (Roberts and Brodie, 1992; Roberts, 1996; Coalter, 2004). This may be crucial if, as Scheerder et al.’s (2006, p. 427) recent research suggests, ‘a highly diverse sports pattern during late adolescence carries better opportunities for active participation in sport as adults.’

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Notes

1. The term leisure-sport is taken to include non or, at least, less competitive physical activities, of the kind associated with the term ‘lifestyle sports’ (Coalter, 2004), as well as conventional sports.

2. For readers not conversant with the National Curriculum for Physical Education in England and Wales, it is worth pointing out that by the ‘confines’ of NCPE we are referring to the requirements for PE teachers to ensure that their pupils experience a prescribed content—including a selection of ‘activity areas’ (Programmes of Study)—and, ostensibly at least, achieve a range of prescribed outcomes in the form of learning objectives ‘Attainment Targets’.

3. The data on the 15–16-year-olds’ leisure-sport participation will be reported elsewhere.
4. The present study involved only the English schools from the main study.
5. Free school meals are offered to children of families who are in receipt of Income Support or Income-based Job Seekers Allowance, and to those of families who are in receipt of Child Tax Credit only, but who are not entitled to Working Tax Credit, and whose annual income does not exceed £13,910. The IMD 2004 score is a SOA level measure of multiple deprivation that relates to income deprivation, employment deprivation, health deprivation and disability, education, skills and training deprivation, barriers to housing and services, living environment deprivation, and crime.

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