Young people’s views on the nature and purposes of physical education: a sociological analysis

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Amid the long-standing debate about the nature and purposes of physical education (PE) in schools, comparatively little research has examined the ways in which PE is viewed by young people themselves. This study set out, therefore, to explore young people’s views on the nature and purposes of PE from a sociological perspective in the belief that a more adequate understanding of the process of PE requires us to appreciate something of the ways in which the subject is viewed and experienced in reality by pupils in schools. The study involved focus group interviews with 38 15–16-year-old white British young people (17 males; 21 females) from one secondary school in the north-west of England during February 2005. The main finding of the study was that young people held an amalgam of views regarding the nature and purposes of PE that centred, for the most part, upon perceptions of fun and enjoyment and the extent to which sociability is recurrently generated in lessons. In addition, young people also offered justifications based on the role of PE in health promotion and the development of game- and sport-related skills and knowledge of a kind more in tune with conventional justifications found in academic literature. It is argued that young people’s views on the nature and purposes of PE are characterized by a number of well-understood, shared meanings that can only be adequately understood if we locate them within the networks of relationships characteristic of their lives more broadly. The paper concludes by arguing for the need to engage more in the realities of PE as practice, and to develop a more adequate understanding of what PE is for the young people involved, not least if government, policy-makers and teachers are to provide a more valuable and meaningful PE curriculum for them.

Keywords: Activity choice; Curricula; Physical education; Sociability; Sport; Young people

Introduction

Since the advent of state secondary schooling, the field of physical education (PE) has been characterized by animated debate about the nature and purpose of PE in schools; not only between teachers themselves, but also between teachers and other interested parties (such as academics, government officials, the media and sports

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As befits a school subject struggling to establish academic and professional status, the ‘history of PE has, in fact, been something of a history of struggle within the world of PE over particular definitions of what ought to count as PE’ (Green, 2003, p. 2). In England, one of the more intense waves of debate occurred, unsurprisingly, around the construction of the National Curriculum for PE (NCPE) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Like many others at this time, Alderson and Crutchley (1990) hoped that the introduction of the NCPE in 1992 would provide physical educationalists with a long-sought, universal consensus about the nature and purpose of PE. However, while the introduction of the NCPE provided some degree of direction for the PE profession insofar as it contained, among others, a long explanatory outline of the nature of PE and featured a number of aims and objectives, as well as establishing a ‘broad, balanced and relevant curriculum’ (Williams & Woodhouse, 1996, p. 202) as a statutory entitlement for all pupils in state schools in England and Wales (DES/WO, 1991, 1992), it has been argued that: ‘far from providing the basis for a consensus among physical educationalists, the NCPE appears only to have heightened the concern ... about the continuing lack of clarity regarding the nature and purposes of PE’ (Green, 1998, p. 126).

Indeed, the introduction of the NCPE (and its subsequent revision in 1995 and 2000) has, in many respects, further reinforced the debates surrounding the nature and purposes of PE – particularly among academic philosophers (see e.g. Reid, 1996a, 1996b, for example, Carr, 1997; Parry, 1998; McNamee, 2005)—so much so that there remain a variety of contested justifications for PE that have revolved mostly around the place of sport (particularly team games) in PE curricula, the ostensible role of PE in character development and the promotion of health, as well as the degree to which PE can, and should, be viewed as essentially academic (Kirk, 1992, 2003, 2005; Green, 2003). These justifications are found in the revised NCPE 2000 for England (DfEE/QCA, 1999), for example, in which it is suggested that the supposed purpose of pupils’ involvement in PE is to enable them to plan, perform and evaluate movement; make relevant connections between the development, selection and application of skills, tactics and compositional ideas; and demonstrate an awareness and knowledge of fitness and health (DES/WO, 1991, 1992; DfEE/WO, 1995; DfEE/QCA, 1999). More specifically, the NCPE 2000 makes clear the British government’s view that among the main purposes of PE for young people is the development of ‘physical competence and confidence’ (DfEE/QCA, 1999, p. 15) and the ‘ability to use these to perform in a range of activities’ (p. 15)—in particular, competitive-oriented team sports—as well as promoting ‘positive attitudes towards active and healthy lifestyles’ (p. 15) and making ‘choices about how to get involved in lifelong physical activity’ (p. 15). It also outlines the ways in which pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, as well key skills of communication and application of number, can allegedly be promoted through PE (DfEE/QCA, 1999).

Notwithstanding these formally stated policy goals of NCPE and the existence of philosophical conceptions of PE, several recent studies have examined these in relation to teachers’ views on the nature and purposes of PE and the extent to which
what teachers do in the name of PE in schools impacts upon young people’s experience of the subject (Kirk, 1992; Curtner-Smith, 1995, 2001; Green, 2000, 2002a, 2003; Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000). In short, these studies have indicated that ‘rather than reproducing NCPE legislation as practice’ (Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000, p. 32), teachers are, to varying degrees, ‘modifying, adapting and recreating it to fit with their own beliefs and values’ (p. 32) that are best conceived of as more or less ideological, more or less mythical, conceptions of teachers’ preferred practices in PE. These practices reflect teachers own personal dispositions and views on the nature and purposes of PE and the contexts within which they find themselves during the day-to-day practice of teaching in schools (see e.g. Green, 2000, 2002, 2003).

Young people’s perceptions of physical education

As productive as the body of work examining teachers’ and philosophers’ conceptions of PE has been, comparatively little research exists that examines the ways in which the nature and purposes of PE and physical activity are viewed by those for whom it is intended: namely, young people themselves (Goudas & Biddle, 1993; Harris, 1994; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Groves & Laws, 2000; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Jones & Cheetham, 2001; Wright et al., 2003; MacDougall et al., 2004; Macdonald et al., 2005). Williams and Woodhouse (1996, p. 212), for example, have noted that young people’s views have long been ‘a neglected dimension of research into [PE] curriculum practice’, while Biddle et al. (2004, p. 692) have also argued that ‘PE programmes should take into account both the perceived needs of young people and those expressed by young people themselves’.

This having been said, from the limited data that are available it seems that many young people tend to place significantly more value on the supposedly non-educational aspects of PE and, in that respect, consider PE as a release from the academic aspects of school life (Goudas & Biddle, 1993; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Jones & Cheetham, 2001; Macdonald et al., 2005). Cothran and Ennis (1998, p. 314), for instance, have suggested that the pupils in their sample viewed PE as ‘a break from classes, a chance to play around, and have fun’ and valued, in particular, the social element of lessons. In this regard, young people’s perceptions were, for the most part, about learning in the physical, whereas teachers, on the other hand, emphasized educating and learning through the physical in terms of, among other things, the development of so-called ‘socially responsible behaviour’ (Cothran & Ennis, 1998, p. 316). In a similar vein, Harris (1994) has noted how the young people in her study valued PE in terms of the cathartic function it provided for them, and because it was often an enjoyable subject that enabled them ‘to have fun and be with friends’ (Harris, 1994, p. 145) by playing sport (see also Macdonald et al., 2005).

Views such as these are echoed by youngsters in two more recent studies. Jones and Cheetham (2001), for example, have noted that for the young people in their sample PE was viewed as being ‘largely synonymous with games and sport’ (p. 90),
and skill development, as well as a somehow less important lesson that had a clear and definite cathartic function. While the pupils in this study ‘regarded the primary purpose of physical education to be participation in sport’ (Jones & Cheetham, 2001, p. 90), it was also widely considered to serve as a ‘break’ from the other academic subjects on the curriculum such as English and mathematics. The young women in Flintoff and Scraton’s (2001) study were also unable to articulate a clear rationale and educational purpose for PE, the ‘key purpose’ of which was widely regarded as being ‘a break from academic work’ (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001, p. 10).

It also seems that the perceived role of PE in the promotion of health and fitness that has been largely uncritically accepted by teachers and others within the PE subject-community (Green, 2000, 2003; Green et al., 2005; Kirk, 2005) has also found expression in analyses of young people’s views on the nature and purposes of PE (Goudas & Biddle, 1993; Harris, 1994; Jones & Cheetham, 2001; Macdonald et al., 2005). However, while the health-related justifications for PE and its relationship with current and future participation in leisure appears to have been accepted and understood by youngsters however (Dismore & Bailey, 2004; MacDougall et al., 2004; Macdonald et al., 2005), such an understanding appears to be a more or less superficial one. This would appear to be the case not least because several studies have suggested that pupils are often unable to outline, to any great degree, how their involvement in PE actually benefits their health and, perhaps more importantly, how this would lead to the adoption of a physically active lifestyle that supposedly results from doing so (Harris, 1994; Jones & Cheetham, 2001; MacDougall et al., 2004; Macdonald et al., 2005).

The above briefly summarizes the ways in which, generally speaking, young people appear to view the nature and purposes of PE. It is important to note, however, that with the exception of one study examining the views of pupils aged 11 to 16 (Groves & Laws, 2000), none of the aforementioned studies distinguishes between, nor account for, any salient differences in young people's views and experiences of PE in the early (key stage (KS) 1 3) and later (KS4) secondary school years. Indeed, even though Groves and Laws (2000, p. 19) claim to examine ‘children’s experiences of NCPE at key stages 3 and 4’, they do not differentiate between and explain as fully as they might the possible different experiences the pupils in their sample had of PE at each of these stages; as a consequence, they tend to over-generalize the views offered by the youngsters in their sample. Similarly, none of the studies reviewed above differentiates between the views and experiences of pupils studying GCSE (examinable) PE and those whose involvement at key stage 4 is restricted to what is often referred to as ‘core’ or ‘recreational’—that is, non-GCSE, non-examinable—forms of PE.

In this regard, it is our contention that not only has there hitherto been a tendency to fail to explore young people’s views on the nature and purpose of PE more generally, there has also been a parallel tendency to over-generalize the kinds of views offered by them and failure to examine the nature and purpose of all aspects of secondary school—that is, KS3 and KS4—PE from the perspective of pupils. The central object of this study was, therefore, to explore young people’s views on the
nature and purposes of PE from a sociological perspective. In doing so, it attempts to appreciate more adequately the possible complexities of those views by differentiating between the ways in which GCSE and non-GCSE PE pupils view the nature and purposes of secondary school PE at both KS3 and KS4. Thus, by asking youngsters to reflect on the whole of their secondary school lives, the study sought to examine the continuities and changes in young people’s views of PE in a specifically developmental and processual way. A brief description of the methodology of the study is next outlined.

Methodology

Participants

The study was based on focus group interviews with 38 15–16-year-old white British young people (17 males; 21 females) from one secondary school in the north-west of England during February 2005. Between five and seven pupils participated in six single-sex focus groups that consisted of ‘the kinds of people with whom the participants normally mix’ (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 104), that is the friends with whom they usually do PE. Among other things, single-sex focus groups were conducted because pupils were frequently taught in single-sex groups in PE and tended to be members of largely same-sex friendship groups outside of school, and so in that sense the interviews were conducted ‘in situations . . . quite normal for them’ (Bryman, 2004, p. 358). It was also easier for teachers—in practical terms—at the study school for the pupils to be interviewed in this way. In order to help differentiate between any potential similarities and differences in the views and experiences of GCSE and non-GCSE pupils, the participants were purposively selected (Bryman, 2004), insofar as possible, to reflect this diversity of pupils. However, in the light of teaching and timetabling constraints, the resultant sample consisted of more GCSE (n = 28) than non-GCSE (n = 10) students. While GCSE PE pupils were over-represented in the study, the skewed nature of the sample of young people was not considered to be especially problematic because, as noted above, the interviews focused largely upon their experiences of PE in both the early and later secondary school years rather than their experiences of examinable PE, although this was addressed, to a greater or lesser degree, in the interviews.

Each focus group interview lasted for between 30 to 45 minutes and took place in a quiet school classroom without the presence of a teacher. All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the head teacher and the young people themselves. In order to help allay any suspicions concerning the use of the interview data, all of the pupils involved in the study were given a guarantee of confidentiality that neither they nor the school would be identified (as such, all of the names of pupils referred to below are pseudonyms). The participants were further reassured that the primary aim of the research was to provide young people with an opportunity to offer their views on what they perceived as being the nature and purposes of PE for them, rather
than what they thought their teachers would want or expect them to say. While it was stressed that the interviews were intended to be informal in this way, in an attempt to manage the interview effectively, it was also emphasized to the participants that while they should all get a chance to speak, only one person should try to speak at a time and that no one had to put up their hand to talk.

Focus group interviews

The kinds of views young people are likely to offer when describing what the nature and purposes of PE are for them can only be fully understood by locating these shared meanings within the network of social relations characteristic of their lives and, in particular, their school lives. Focus group interviews were therefore selected on the assumption that young people are not ‘self-contained and separate from other people’ but are more adequately conceived of as ‘people bonded together in dynamic constellations’ (Murphy et al., 2000, p. 92), that is as interdependent people within complex networks of social relationships. More specifically, because they can be of real benefit ‘for researchers who are primarily interested in participants’ own meanings and understandings’ (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 190), and that are shared and developed within the context of their social relations with others (Payne & Payne, 2004), focus groups were utilized in an attempt to replicate the kinds of social contexts within which young people—both individually and collectively in friendship groups—come to form, amplify, express and possibly modify their understandings of views and opinions about the nature and purposes of their involvement in PE (Wilkinson, 1998; Payne & Payne, 2004). In other words, focus group interviews were used in an ‘attempt to reflect this by obtaining information from [young] people in groups’ (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 103) and to shed light on the joint construction of shared meanings and commonly-held assumptions that underlie, and are associated with, young people’s views and experiences of PE. Thus, and as Wilkinson (1998, p. 189) has noted:

Focus group interactions reveal not only shared ways of talking, but also shared experiences, and shared ways of making sense of these experiences. The researcher is offered an insight into the commonly held assumptions, concepts and meanings that constitute and inform participants’ talk about their experiences.

While the reliability of these kinds of data is often questioned because focus groups conducted with young people in schools can replicate those kinds of group situations in which ‘teasing, joking and the kind of acting out that goes on among peers’ (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 108) are commonplace, and in which participants are encouraged to recall in everyday language terms common experiences that have shared meanings for them, this is precisely what focus groups are intended to encourage among participants (Wilkinson, 1998). Indeed, this was something that was particularly important in this study not least because these forms of communication helped to contextualize the answers given by those interviewed. It also
helped to serve as a basis from which to follow up other potentially important lines of enquiry that may have not otherwise emerged (see below). As such, it might be argued that these kinds of data may help to bolster the reliability of the views of young people and experiences they recalled, as well as helping to illuminate the contexts in which what was being said emerged.

Each of the interviews began with a brief explanation of the nature and purpose of the study in order to help outline how it was interesting and relevant to the young people’s lives (Payne & Payne, 2004). Once this had been done, based on an interview schedule that consisted of a series of carefully worded, open-ended questions, each of the interviews sought to explore and ‘focus on particular issues’ (Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 105; emphasis in original) or themes that were introduced in a more or less predetermined order. Broadly speaking, the interviews focused upon three main themes, namely: (i) young people’s views upon the nature and purposes of PE at KS3 and KS4; (ii) experiences of PE at KS3 and KS4; and (iii) the degree of activity choice available to young people in PE. However, due to the reality of the focus group interview situation, and the emphasis placed on encouraging dynamic participant interaction (Wilkinson, 1998), the young people were given considerable freedom of expression within, and ownership of, the discussions and, consequently, the particular issues of interest were rarely covered in the same order in each interview. Nor, for that matter, were the issues discussed in exactly the same way in each of the focus groups.

Content analysis of focus group interviews

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and subject to content analysis with a particular focus upon a ‘search for meaning and understanding’ (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 150) in the interviewees’ responses to ‘show something of the dynamics of social relationships among group members’ (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 75). In this regard, the analysis took the form of noting, and then analysing, the frequency of particular words, phrases or themes (Bryman, 2004), as well as identifying any enduring patterns, within the young people’s views and experiences of PE. Once the main themes were identified, they were arranged into categories of meaning based upon the key themes of the interviews such as young people’s views upon the nature and purpose of PE, their experiences of PE, and so on. These categories were then amended to incorporate other areas of concern that emerged from the interviews such as ‘enjoyment’, ‘sociability’ and the relationship between PE and lifelong participation in sport and physical activity. In this manner, all the categories of meaning were subsequently refined to ensure that all the different kinds of ‘units of analysis’ (Bryman, 2004, p. 187) were considered as a basis for explaining the data. The core themes that emerged from the interviews and were to be found within the young people’s responses are next discussed.
Findings: young people’s views on the nature and purpose of physical education

Here, we report on the data generated by the focus group interviews. In doing so, we examine young people’s views and experiences of PE and the meanings this had for them. In particular, we consider how pupils held an amalgam of views on the nature and purpose of PE in which enjoyment, fun, health, sport and education for leisure were more or less prominent themes.

Enjoyment, sociability and the significance of friends

There was a near-universal acceptance among all of the young people interviewed—and virtually independently of gender and ability, and regardless of whether or not they were studying GCSE PE—that a more or less central aspect of the nature and purpose of PE was that it is a fun and enjoyable lesson in which they take part in the company of friends. Indeed, the central value placed upon enjoyment and ‘having fun’ by the young people was brought out very clearly by one group of non-GCSE girls in the following way:

Natalie: It’s fun.
Sarah: It’s a break from academic lessons that you have to use your head for.
Jessica: It’s different... you just have a bit of fun.
Natalie: You’re getting something out of it as well... it’s just an hour of something that’s not sat down at a desk.
Jane: Yeah, you’re not sat down just copying at a board.
Kim: You can talk with people as well as do your sport in lessons; in other lessons you’re not allowed to talk and you can hardly move... but in PE you can run around.

These kinds of views are further illustrated by one group of boys, currently studying GCSE PE, who also described how PE is as an opportunity to ‘let off steam’ (David) and a release from the academic aspects of school:

Stephen: It’s a break from other lessons on the timetable. It’s more relaxed.
James: Yeah, it’s a lesson that you can be with all your mates.
Duncan: A break from just being sat at a table.
Phillip: It’s a break from other lessons [where] you don’t have to work too hard.

The perceived interaction youngsters derived from PE by playing with friends and the greater degree of freedom to do so was also emphasized by one group of females studying GCSE PE who described what the purpose of PE was for them:

Sarah: It’s fun as well.
Jenny: Yeah, it’s something different from your other lessons.

Katie: You get to run around and do whatever you want; be with your mates and get out of your school uniform.
Becky: And, you don’t get shouted at for, like, laughing.
Hayley: It’s more exciting.
Karen: You're with your mates and you can talk and don’t have to sit there just writing all of the time.

In this regard, the perception of PE as somehow ‘less serious’ than other subjects and an opportunity to have fun and ‘interact with each other’ (Richard) in an enjoyable way is consistent with the findings of other studies which have demonstrated how young people tend to place more value on the supposedly non-educational aspects of PE and, in particular, the sociability that is said to be recurrently generated in lessons (Goudas & Biddle, 1993; Harris, 1994; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Harris, 1994; Jones & Cheetham, 2001).

Health

Reflecting current government and media concern surrounding young people’s health and its supposed relationship with participation in PE (see e.g. Biddle et al., 2004; Evans, 2003; Evans & Davies, 2004; Smith et al., 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005; Smith & Green, 2005), there appeared to be a widely held consensus among pupils that PE played a crucial role in health promotion. Indeed, the importance of exercising and ‘being active’ in PE to improve and maintain health was particularly clear in the comments of one group of female GCSE pupils:

Susie: It keeps you fit and active.
Jenna: It’s, like, exercise isn’t it? Well, it’s exercise and every other lesson you’re not really doing much . . . it’s active so it will keep you healthy and stuff [Group laughs].
Rebecca: Well yeah, if you didn’t do any exercise, then you would just be fat wouldn’t you?
Susie: Yeah, I think it’s for obesity and trying to combat it.

The perception of PE as a supposedly health-enhancing subject was not confined to girls however, for as the following comments of a group of GCSE PE students indicate, males also suggested that this is a key purpose of the subject:

Michael: It gets you fit.
Mark: I think it’s so the school looks good really.
Kevin: [Interrupts] And you don’t want a load of fat people in the school.
James: [Interrupts] I think it’s to make people more aware as well, of being fat, and that you don’t want to be it.

While pupils claimed that participation in PE was an important vehicle for health promotion—and associated this particularly with the reduction of obesity levels—statements of this kind invariably appeared as rhetorical, justificatory views based on a superficial acceptance of commonsense perceptions of the apparent link between participation in sport and physical activity via PE and improvements in health (Evans & Davies, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005). When asked about their experiences of ‘fitness sessions’, for example, and whether these helped to improve health, one group of male GCSE pupils replied:
Craig: Not really.
Michael: No one really tries.
Craig: I haven’t seen anyone in our group who, like, tries hard, or is sweating or anything.
Daniel: And when the teachers don’t look you just stop [exercising].

These kinds of views and experiences were not confined to fitness lessons, however, for as one group of non-GCSE girls noted, PE generally was not believed to be particularly effective in terms of health enhancement:

Kim: I don’t think it is about health, you could do more.
Jessica: You’d have to do it more and for longer.
Kim: Half the lesson is wasted getting in and changed; there’s hardly any time.
Sarah: I don’t think anyone works enough in PE, like over an hour to actually improve.

In this vein, many of the young people in the study clearly recognized that, as Biddle et al. (2004) have noted, the nature of, and time available for, PE lessons are not really sufficient to make any demonstrable impact on their health. In other words, although it was recognized by pupils that PE is often ‘an important site for physical activity accrual’ (Biddle et al., 2004, p. 689), they were also aware that ‘it does not provide sufficient activity for [them] to achieve recommended levels of activity’ (Biddle et al., 2004, p. 689). It is also worth noting that while many pupils suggested that participation in PE played a key role in combating growing levels of obesity and overweight among youth, they often ‘had difficulty in going beyond superficial explanations’ (Harris, 1994, p. 145) and, in that respect, the health-related justifications they offered for PE were based upon a lay-understanding of the relationship between health and exercise. Indeed, these views on health were, for the most part, based not on pupils’ practical experiences of PE, but on conversations with teachers and the impressions they had formed from mass media and government pronouncements (DCMS, 2000; DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002).

Skill development and performance improvement in PE

An additional theme evident in young people’s views was the extent to which they considered PE as a vehicle for learning game- and sport-related knowledge as well as developing physical and social skills. The comments made by one group of GCSE girls are illustrative of these kinds of perceptions:

Rachel: It’s [PE] about learning how to play sport and knowing the rules and skills.
Lucy: You learn how to play in a team and the skills of different sports.
Leah: It’s not just playing it [the activity].
Sam: [Interrupts] But the way you do it too.

The following extract from an interview with a group of GCSE boys reinforces the way in which pupils viewed PE as a context in which they developed knowledge of skills and rules by playing sport:
Stephen: Skills and stuff.
Duncan: Yeah, like leadership skills and things like that... social skills.
James: Understanding different sports and being able to do them.
Duncan: [Interrupts] And knowing the rules.

It is important to note, however, that although young people expressed views that suggested that their introduction to sport and physical activity via PE encourages them to learn performance-related skills and knowledge, this was something that most pupils closely associated with PE at KS3. More specifically, when reflecting upon their past experiences of PE, pupils suggested that lessons at KS3 were more often than not characterized by a greater degree of skill learning (Andrew, a GCSE pupil: ‘You learn all the skills in Years 7–9’) and the development of game-related knowledge (Philip, a non-GCSE pupil: ‘In Years 7–9 they just teach you the actual games’), both of which were achieved primarily by participating in team games, such as football and netball, in particular. Moreover, in light of these kinds of views, it is clear that young people consider PE, for the most part, to be about learning in the physical, that is developing knowledge and skills related to the performance of specific sports and physical activities rather than learning through the physical which lies at the heart of the academic rationale underlying the concept of ‘teaching games for understanding’ (TGFU) (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982).

For some pupils, PE at KS3 was especially enjoyable not, it should be noted, because the focus of these lessons was the improvement of performance and skills (although this was important), but because PE enabled them to play those sports and physical activities in which they perceived themselves to be more or less competent (Harry, a non-GCSE pupil: ‘if your good at it, you enjoy it’) (Carroll & Loumidis, 2001), and in which they were able to participate with friends (Harris, 1994; Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Jones & Cheetham, 2001). In other words, for some pupils, PE (and sport) was a more or less central life interest and aspect of their personal identities (Jenna, a GCE pupil: ‘It’s just a part of my life, sport, I enjoy it all, and PE is sport’) and, in this vein, was enjoyed regardless of its sport and skill development focus. There were variations, of course, and other pupils were critical of the almost exclusive use of KS3 PE for the development and learning of skills and, correspondingly, were more likely to suggest that they enjoyed PE less as a result (Rosie, a GCSE pupil: ‘It’s boring until Year 10, you have to learn all the skills and do the same stuff over and over again’). These concerns were further exacerbated when many pupils reflected on the lack of choice of activities in which they could participate at KS3 and, as the next section illustrates, these concerns were brought out very clearly when pupils juxtaposed past experiences of PE with their present experiences as Year 11 pupils.

‘Activity choice’ and the changing nature of secondary school physical education

When asked to compare their experiences of KS3 PE with those of KS4, almost all of the pupils in this study commented upon the benefit, as they saw it, of the introduction of a degree of activity choice, particularly in core PE. Indeed, almost all
pupils viewed core PE lessons at KS4 as more enjoyable than lessons in the early secondary years not least because they had ‘more opportunity to choose’ (Jessica, a non-GCSE pupil) from a range of sports and activities. That such value was placed upon the ability to ‘choose’, whenever possible, was emphasized by one group of girls who were involved in core PE only:

Kim: There’s more freedom when you get to years 10 and 11.
Rachel: Your lessons are more fun as well.
Sarah: Because you’ve chosen it yourself, so it’s something you’re going to enjoy.
Rachel: You want to do it more.

In similar fashion, one group of GCSE boys also commented positively on the activity choice available in core PE:

Michael: We get to choose, don’t we?
David: Yeah, we just have matches and stuff, we don’t go through and do different skills and stuff. We have one big match and a bit of fun.
James: It’s better.
Matthew: You do more of the things that you want to do.
Craig: Yeah, because if you’re not happy, you’re not going to give your best.
Neal: You just mess about then.

Michael: It’s better.
James: Yeah, it’s better.
Neal: I don’t think it’s better for people who don’t do GCSE PE ’cos they don’t learn anything from it, just having a match.
David: Yeah, ’cos we learn all other stuff in GCSE PE so non-GCSE is just a bit of fun really.

It is particularly noteworthy, however, that in contrast to the findings of MacPhail et al.’s (2003) study, the majority of young people in the present study did not always relate their dissatisfaction about elements of PE to the over-representation of a small number of traditional sports in which they were taught. Indeed, while pupils recognized that the choice of activities on offer were often constrained by their peers and teachers, they supported, by degrees, PE programmes dominated by traditional activities and argued that it was the shift away from the emphasis that was placed upon the development of skills at KS3, towards the provision of a range of sports and physical activities from which they could choose in the later secondary school years, that was particularly appealing to them (Scraton, 1992; Roberts, 1996; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Green et al., 2005). One group of females, for example, who were not studying GCSE PE at the time of interview, expressed their dissatisfaction with the repetitive nature of PE at KS3 in the following terms:

Sarah: It’s pretty rubbish.
Natalie: Yeah, it’s just sort of standard sport, isn’t it?
Kim: [Interrupts] Yeah, there’s nothing different about it. It’s all about skills.
Jane: It’s like football and netball [laughs].
Jessica: That’s it basically. Just skills.
In a similar vein, a group of male GCSE pupils commented on how, while PE curricula in the later secondary school years continued to be heavily dominated by team sports such as football or rugby that characterized their earlier experiences of PE, it was the ability to choose what they wanted to do from this limited range of activities in core PE that was important to them. As they expressed it:

Duncan: You have to do exercise [in Years 7–9].
Phillip: [Interrupts] Two games, then exercise and athletics.
James: But you can’t pick what you want to do! You have to fit into a group. If someone wants to do rugby or football, then you have to do it.
Duncan: We do the same thing now [in Year 11], but we don’t have to do what you don’t want to do. It’s better that way.
Andrew: You do more of the things that you want to do!
Craig: Yeah, ’cos if you’re not happy, you’re not gonna give it your best, are you?
Stephen: You just mess about then.

More specifically, following the development of skills during the early part of secondary schooling, core PE at KS4 was viewed more positively by pupils because lessons became less skill learning dominated (Ben, a GCSE pupil: ‘We already know the skills, now we just practice by playing games’) and more social and game orientated in nature (Hannah, a GCSE pupil: ‘It’s more laid back now, we just have one big match and a bit of fun’). In this regard, it was almost universally accepted that the purpose of core PE was about ‘just playing the game’ and having fun and, in many ways, these lessons tended to resemble more recreational forms of involvement evidently popular among some pupils—especially males—during break-times at schools and in leisure as well (Chris, a GCSE pupil: ‘Non-GCSE PE is kind of, like, just playing football at lunch or something like that’). These points were brought out very clearly in an interview with a group of GCSE boys who suggested that core PE was about ‘playing the game’:

Ricky: Yeah, all we’re doing is playing a game; that’s basically it . . . if you’ve got PE, it’s good.
Daniel: I have learnt some new things, like when you’re doing a new sport you learn how to play that game, but once you’ve had your first lesson of being taught it . . . that’s it.
Michael: You just play the game from then on.
Ricky: I think we’re always supposed to be learning something but we can’t always take it away . . . so usually it’s just playing the game.

Another group of non-GCSE girls also noted how the emphasis upon ‘playing’ was the main defining characteristic of these kinds of lessons:

Natalie: You get into more games and practice yourself, whereas before you’d do new skills every week and you’d have to do what [teachers] wanted.
Claire: Yeah, you used to learn all the skills and footwork and stuff but all you do now is play a game.
Leah: Usually in core you’re with just your mates and can play and prat around really.
For many pupils this degree of choice was strongly associated with the process of maturing and getting older and, in particular, the growing tendency for teachers to treat them ‘more like adults’ (Claire, a GCSE pupil) and responding to their ever-changing lifestyle preferences in relation to sporting involvement. When speaking of this, one group of non-GCSE boys commented that:

Matthew: You’re treated differently aren’t you?
Ricky: You’re treated more grown up, it’s not like they’re watching you all the time.
Paul: Your teachers let you get on with it don’t they? They’re not always there.
Simon: I mean, like, they teach the skills in the first and second lessons but after that you can get into more games.
Daniel: [Interrupts] And practice yourself.
David: You just seem to enjoy it more that way.

These kinds of views were also expressed by a group of GCSE girls who described their feelings in the following way:

Lucy: It’s letting you grow up a bit isn’t it? Making the decision?
Emma: Yeah.
Gemma: They have to show all the sports don’t they, like in Years 7–9, but then it’s good that you get to choose.

This having been said, it should be noted that, as Flintoff and Scraton (2001) observed in relation to the young women in their study, while pupils strongly supported the provision of a greater choice of activities as part of core PE curricula during KS4, ‘in practice this was limited—because of the nature of the activities on offer, but also because of the context and environment in which these were offered’ (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001, p. 11). That this was the case is clear from the extract of an interview with a group of non-GCSE males who suggested that:

Paul: It’s a group decision.
Simon: Yeah, we get put into groups and, like, supposedly decide as a group [group laughs].
David: So, if some people want to do this sport and others don’t, we just do what the majority wants [to do].
Interviewer: Who decides what sports or activities you can choose from?
Paul: [Interrupts] They [teachers] put a list down of what you can do.
David: Yeah, you kind of do everything in years 7–9 and then in years 10 and 11 you can pick which ones your favourites are.

Another group of females (non-GCSE) commented on the extent to which activity choice was constrained by teachers throughout the secondary school years and the implications of this for their experiences of the subject, in the following way:

Sarah: It’s boring until Year 10.
Kim: You don’t want to do it until you get to do what you want and you like it.
Natalie: I think you should have the choice from Year 7 ’cos in Year 7 you have to do things you don’t like, like cross-country that you really, really hate.
Jessica: You should try it for one session or something, but if you don’t like it after
one or two sessions, I think you should be able to... change it.

...Jane: You’re forced to do things like netball, cross-country and stuff. I didn’t enjoy those much, ’cos I was more into football and that, and you couldn’t do football.

These experiences notwithstanding, overall our data suggest that it is perhaps not always the kinds of sports and activities that are provided as part of traditional sport-based PE curricula—especially at KS3, which continues to be the focus of much criticism (see e.g. Penney & Evans, 1999; Penney & Chandler, 2000; Kirk, 2004, 2005)—that is of particular concern for young people, but rather the range and ways in which those activities are provided for pupils that is more important. This appears to be the case, not least because, from the comments of the young people in our sample at least, it is the degree of activity choice that they are afforded by teachers at KS4 that they find particularly attractive, rather than rejecting and expressing dissatisfaction with all the kinds of activities they experienced in the secondary school years. Thus, while there are real constraints upon teachers during their day-to-day lives in schools, might it be that providing youngsters with PE curricula and experiences that are more congruent with their actual present-day sporting and lifestyle preferences—i.e. providing them with a greater degree of activity choice and enabling them to do what they want and with whom they want—will help improve the degree to which pupils are able to derive greater satisfying experiences from PE (Green et al., 2005)?

In addition to these issues that were mentioned by virtually all pupils, those studying GCSE PE also claimed that there was an extra dimension to the nature and purpose of PE at KS4, namely the introduction of examinable PE that constituted the learning of theoretical knowledge (Christian: ‘It’s about the muscles, bones and skeletal system’; James: ‘You learn about the body and stuff’). In this context, when speaking of GCSE PE lessons, one group of girls suggested that:

Emily: In Year 9, I just used to think it was a fun lesson, so I just used to muck about but now there’s the theory bit and you actually have to learn.

Jade: But you’re actually going for a GCSE aren’t you, so you have to learn?

Adrianna: You actually have to work and it’s different.

Emily: Yeah, you put effort in, don’t you?

Kim: Now you have to know, like, the muscles you’re using for each sport and stuff.

Lucy: It makes it more interesting... because you think about things more when you’re playing it, so it makes it better.

It is noteworthy, however, that although pupils mentioned the development of theoretical knowledge as an aim of GCSE PE, these were often presented as ex post facto justifications or rationalizations for the purpose of examinable PE (Green, 2003). Indeed, although GCSE pupils often suggested they took PE ‘more seriously’ at KS4 and that their practical experiences of PE could be improved by the abstract theoretical knowledge they developed in GCSE lessons, such knowledge was rarely viewed as impacting upon what they valued about PE: their actual practical involvement (Natalie: ‘You don’t think about why you do stuff when you’re playing,
you just play'; Duncan: ‘You don’t, like, run around and think, “My gastrocnemius is hurting”’). It was not unsurprising, therefore, that these—indeed, all—pupils were only likely to justify PE in more academic terms after they offered the kinds of non-educational justifications outlined above.

**Education for leisure and lifelong participation**

In the light of the taken-for-granted perception that a key role in PE is to help educate pupils for post-school leisure and increase their likelihood of lifelong participation in sport and physical activity (Harris & Penney, 2000; Green, 2002; Fairclough et al., 2002; Kirk, 2004, 2005; Green et al., 2005), in response to the other views that they offered throughout the interviews, pupils were asked to comment on the degree to which the kinds of sports and physical activities they experienced in PE matched those in which they were currently involved in leisure.

With regard to their current leisure sport and physical activity participation, some youngsters suggested that PE served as an introduction to the sports in which they were currently involved in leisure (Marcus, a GCSE pupil: ‘It’s [PE] good because if you like playing it, then you’ll pursue it and do it after school'; Sally, a GCSE pupil: ‘It helps you in what you do outside [of school]’). Others, however, were much less certain and offered a more diverse range of views. For example, when discussing the relationship between PE and leisure, one group of GCSE girls suggested:

Adrianna: Usually if you like something, that’s why you took it, so you’re usually the sort who would want to do PE anyway.
Sarah: I think it gives you the different choices of what you can do, so if you did volleyball and didn’t like it, then obviously you’re not going to join a team when you’re older.
Lucy: Yeah, it lets you know what you like and what you don’t like.
Adrianna: Yeah, but I don’t think PE’s the main reason why people do sport after school.
Kim: No, you might enjoy sport and do it, but when you get out of school, I don’t think that’s the main reason why people do it.
Adrianna: If you’re going to do it when you’re older you’re going to do it, if you’re not, you’re not.
Michelle: Yeah, your parents encourage you, if they’re into it you might want to carry it on, if not, you won’t.

This diversity was evident in the views of the majority of young people, for some of whom PE was the context in which they first experienced various sports and physical activities, so much so that they had continued because they had positive experiences of participating in those activities (Ben, a GCSE pupil: ‘I play rugby now . . . I played it in Year 7, then I joined a club’), while others, particularly girls, were involved in sport and physical activity despite what they considered as negative experiences of PE (Leah, a non-GCSE pupil: ‘Dance in PE put us off, it was rubbish but we still do it [in leisure]’) (see e.g. Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). The leisure involvement of other pupils, however, was an extension of what they had been doing for some time prior to
their involvement in PE (Rachel, a GCSE pupil: ‘I go swimming quite a bit but I’ve been doing that since I was little’; Greg, a non-GCSE pupil: ‘Say if you already did a sport out of school [before doing it as part of PE], like I did, it’s just another chance to do it, isn’t it really?’).

In addition to these views concerning the relationship between PE and current leisure involvement, youngsters also reflected upon what sports and physical activities, if any, they perceived themselves to be doing in the future. While some suggested that they ‘might do sport’ (Sarah, a non-GCSE pupil) and continue to participate in the kinds of sports and physical activities characteristic that they had experienced as part of PE (such as traditional sports and games), nearly all young people envisaged themselves participating in more individualized, less competitive lifestyle activities such as ‘joining the gym’ (Chris, a GCSE pupil) or ‘going for walks and bike rides’ (Rosie, a GCSE pupil). Moreover, although a number of pupils suggested that they might continue their involvement in sport (often alongside these lifestyle activities), this kind of involvement was often envisaged as being more recreational in nature (Andrew, a GCSE pupil: ‘I’ll still go out with my mates and play 5-a-side football but not like as a big team as we do now’).

In this regard, there appeared to be a degree of mismatch or relative autonomy between the kinds of activities pupils experienced as part of PE and their current leisure involvement, as well as the kinds of activities they perceived themselves as doing in later life (Roberts, 1996; Kirk, 2004, 2005; Green et al., 2005). More exactly, while Dismore and Bailey (2004, p. 2) may be correct in saying that it is ‘reasonable to suspect that positive or negative associations with the subject [PE] are indicators of current and future participation in physical activity out-of-school’, and notwithstanding the concern that there is ‘little or no link between school based activities, and those engaged in out of school settings’ (Flintoff, 2005, p. 35; see also Kirk, 2004, 2005), many pupils viewed their potential future leisure involvement in sport and physical activity as being more heavily circumscribed by the unavoidable lifestyle changes they associated with growing older. Foremost among these constraints, they observed, were the time constraints associated with getting a job and starting a family (Richard, a non-GCSE pupil: ‘When your working and stuff, you won’t have as much free time’; Emily, a non-GCSE pupil: ‘You might have a family or be working’) (Harris, 1994).

**Conclusion**

The central object of this study has been to address what has hitherto been a largely under-researched area, namely young people’s views upon the nature and purposes of PE. While we are aware that the findings outlined in this paper are based on the comments of pupils from one secondary school in England, we hope that we have begun to shed light on some of the ways in which young people appear to view the nature and purposes of PE and outlined, in a preliminary way, how these correspond with their actual experiences of the subject. The central finding, and one that
supports many of the findings of earlier studies, is that pupils held an amalgam of socially constructed views on the nature and purposes of PE that centred, for the most part, upon the supposedly non-educational purposes of PE. In this regard, we noted that there was a near-universal acceptance among pupils that PE served as a break from other ‘academic’ aspects of school life and was a context in which they can have fun and enjoy themselves by participating and interacting with friends. It was noteworthy, however, that since we sought to differentiate between pupils’ views of the nature and purposes of core PE at different points of their school lives, it became clear that these kinds of views regarding the purposes of PE were further reinforced when youngsters described the shift away from more skills-based forms of PE at KS3 towards the increasingly more sociable and game-oriented nature of PE in the later secondary school years. Indeed, this process which involved, among other things, the provision of a greater degree of activity choice and the tendency for lessons to become more recreational, was evidently favoured by pupils not least because they began to resemble more closely their actual present-day sporting and lifestyle preferences both in terms of the activities offered and the form in which they were provided; and more crucially, because they were social situations in which they could ‘hang around’ and have fun with friends in a more informal setting in school.

We also noted that although these views were widely recognized, they also incorporated a number of other justificatory views or ‘surface-level answers’ (Goudas & Biddle, 1993, p. 148) that served to bolster pupils’ preferred conceptions of PE but which were rarely congruent with their everyday experiences of PE. Foremost among these views was the role that pupils believed participation in PE played, or should play, in the promotion of health and the extent to which this also enabled them to learn, to varying degrees, sports skills and knowledge of games in, rather than through, physical education, a point that was most strongly associated with the purpose of PE at KS3. In this regard, it was clear that although pupils—in a similar way that teachers do (see e.g. Green, 2000, 2003)—were able to offer the kinds of rhetorical justifications to be found within the academic and professional literature about what the nature and purposes of the subject ought to be on a rational level, these bore little resemblance to their deeper-seated beliefs about the supposed worth of PE to them—nor, for that matter, were such justifications entirely compatible with their actual lived experiences of PE.

Indeed, from a sociological perspective, it is evident that there are a number of complexities involved both in the ways in which young people’s views are socially constructed and the manner in which they are articulated by groups of youngsters. In this regard, we argue that young people’s views on the nature and purposes of PE are characterized by a number of well-understood, shared meanings that can only be adequately understood if and when we locate them within the networks of relationships characteristic of their lives more broadly; in particular, those in which they find themselves within the school—especially PE—context. This is important not least because some appreciation of the significance of young people’s networks of relationships, personal biographies and dispositions may help us to explain how they come to view and experience PE in the ways in which they do. We would argue,
therefore, that limited though our data are, the findings indicate that if an aim of government, teachers and policy-makers is to provide young people with PE curricula that is valuable and meaningful to them in the belief that this will ‘enhance our capacity to exercise control’ (Dunning, 1999, p. 240) over an important aspect of young people’s educational experiences, then it will be important to engage more fully in the realities of PE as practice, and give rather more thought to the complex ways in which PE is viewed and experienced by the very young people for whom it is intended.

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Note

1. The Programmes of Study that set out what young people should be taught and how they should be formally assessed in NCPE in England are arranged around four key stages. Key stages 1 and 2 refer to the primary school years of education (ages 5–7 and 7–11 respectively), while secondary education is similarly divided into KS3 (ages 11–14) and KS4 (ages 14–16). Of particular significance for the present study is that while competitive team games as one of six areas of activity that comprise NCPE are compulsory throughout KS3, young people are now supposedly able to choose other activities instead of competitive team games at KS4, should they wish to do so (DfEE/QCA, 1999).

References


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