What Young People Say about Physical Activity: The Children’s Sport Participation and Physical Activity study (CSPPA)

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Abstract

The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity study (CSPPA) is a unique multi-centre/discipline study undertaken by three Irish institutions, Dublin City University, University of Limerick and University College Cork. The study sought to assess participation in physical activity, physical education and sport (PAPES) among 10-18 year olds in Ireland. This paper shares what Irish children and young people convey, using their own voices, about their sport and physical activity experiences and how such experiences may result in their feeling included or excluded in PAPES.

Eighteen focus groups (FG) with 124 boys and girls elicited descriptive data from students and were conducted with homogeneous groups of 6 to 8 boys and girls aged 12-18 years (selected for convenience) identified as male/female, primary/post-primary, and generally active/inactive.

Five themes ('being with friends', 'variety in activity content', 'experiencing fun', 'time constraints', and 'opportunity to be outside') ran across the three PAPES opportunities for young people. Overall data revealed these young people have a positive attitude toward physical activity (PA) which does not diminish as they age despite activity levels decreasing. Other choices of activity participation (e.g., debate, music), or more focused activities took the place of previous choices as young people came to realise what they most enjoyed.

If we are to encourage and provide opportunities for young people to choose active lifestyles, it is important that we address what these young people report affects their involvement in physical activity across a number of contexts. Two such developments within Irish school and community contexts are discussed: Active School Flag initiative and Senior Cycle Physical Education framework.
Introduction

The Children’s Sport Participation and Physical Activity study (CSPPA) was funded by the Irish Sports Council (ISC) who is committed to increasing the number of young people participating in physical activity and to measuring the change in that participation as part of its research programme. Associated with this research programme, the Council sought proposals from an external research organisation to undertake a study of children’s sport participation and physical activity. The intent was for a follow up the 2005 Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study of sports participation and physical activity levels among children and young people in Ireland (Fahey, Delaney, & Gannon, 2005). In response, a unique multi-centre and multi-discipline endeavour brought together expertise from physical education, sport and coaching studies, and physical activity for health through collaboration between three higher education institutions in Ireland, Dublin City University (DCU), University of Limerick (UL) and University College Cork (UCC). The CSPPA study sought to assess participation in physical activity, physical education and sport among 10-18 year olds in Ireland, assess indices of health and fitness in a sub-sample of the target population, and examine the complex interactions of factors influencing participation in physical activity, physical education and sport. CSPPA research methods replicated the ESRI (2005) study, where possible, with the addition of certain elements. The quantitative measures included a redesign of the original ESRI (2005) questionnaire and the use of motion sensors (accelerometers). Basic physical health measures were also collected to examine the relation between physical activity levels and health. These included aerobic fitness (estimated using a 20 metre shuttle run test) and systolic and diastolic blood pressure (BP, mmHg) to measure physical health. Qualitative data provided a more
complete picture of the questionnaire data by allowing participants to share their own voice
providing a more detailed exploration into why children choose / choose not to participate in
physical activity, and are the focus of this paper.

Results from the overall study reported elsewhere (Woods, Tannehill, & Walsh, 2012;
Woods, Tannehill, Quinlan, Moyna, & Walsh, 2010; Walsh, Woods, & Tannehill, 2011) should
be of interest, as well as of concern, to parents, the community, and young people. Numerous
international scholars over the past two decades have suggested that as young people
participate in and enjoy physical activity experiences, they will develop physical activity habits
and skills, and will be more inclined to choose and maintain a physically active lifestyle (British
Heart Foundation, 2000; Hallal, et al 2006; McKenzie, 2001; Twisk, 2001). In addition to family,
amenities and attitudes of the local environment, informal play, and other social and personal
influences, key to providing positive physical activity experiences and helping children and youth
develop physical activity patterns are physical education teachers, physical activity coordinators
and youth sport providers.

In their study documenting the frequency and types of activity in which young people in
Ireland participated during physical education, extra-curricular activity and out of school sport
Fahey et al. (2005) favoured quantitative measures of access and participation. Other Irish-
based studies have utilized qualitative methods to explain young peoples’ experiences of sport
and provide greater insight into why particular young people are included in, or excluded from
sport and physical activity (Collier et al, 2007; Connor, 2003; de Roiste et al, 2005; Enright &
O’Sullivan, 2010; MacPhail et al, 2009). This paper strives to complement these later studies by
exploring further, and on a larger scale, the perspectives of young people, their exposure,
experience and outlook of being involved (or not) in physical education, sport and physical
activity. It also intends to examine the relationship, interactions and consequences that
permeate across the three pillars for young people. Our literature review revealed a dearth of research in this area both in Ireland and internationally.

Opportunities for young people to be physically active in the Irish context.

Physical education is not provided in all Irish primary or post-primary schools and the quality and breadth of provision varies. Primary teachers are responsible for the teaching of physical education within the primary school and while there is no compulsory level of physical education provision, the suggested minimum weekly time established by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) includes one hour per week for the subject. The physical education curriculum at the primary level is divided into six strands. The strands are athletics, games, dance, gymnastics, outdoor and adventure activities, and aquatics. There is an increasing trend of national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport providing coaches for particular sports within the primary school day and also providing resources and training to teachers. The expectation for post-primary physical education is that qualified physical education teachers are responsible for its delivery. The physical education curriculum at junior cycle, ‘the first three years of post-primary education’, has been developed on the basis of a time allocation of two hours per week (Department of Education and Science (DES) and National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2003). The junior cycle physical education curriculum is divided into eight strands. The content strands are the same as for the primary syllabus with the addition of health-related activity and the games strand being sub-divided into invasion games (where players invade their opponents space such as basketball, soccer, field hockey, rugby), net games (played on a court divided with goal to prevent opponent from returning the ball such as badminton, volleyball, badminton) and running and fielding games (where opposing teams play offense and defence by running to score such as cricket, rounders, softball). The general trend
of participation in physical education declines as students move through the post-primary school years.

The promotion of extra-curricular sport / after-school sport in Irish schools is fragmented. Three main groups provide some level of support for after school sport: (1) teachers providing structured opportunities on a voluntary basis, (2) NGBs, and (3) Local Sport Partnerships (where they exist) that have been created to provide a national structure to coordinate and promote the development of sport at the local level (MacPhail et al., 2008). The exposure young people have to particular extra-curricular sport is generally dependent on the interests and expertise of those offering to provide provision. Out of school physical activity opportunities are primarily administered by NGBs. While every NGB is expected to develop and implement a programme for young people in sport, building on the principles of an agreed national programme (MacPhail et al., 2008), the exposure young people have to particular sports is dependent somewhat on what is available and in their locale. NGB strategies/guidelines are interpreted at local club level, in the majority of cases these clubs are serviced by volunteers who have a range of experiences, expertise, and agendas. Also available within many communities are opportunities for young people to be involved in physical activity through adventure centres, private clubs (e.g., swimming, tae kwan do, dance), and facilities that accommodate activities such as horse riding and skate boarding.

Seeking and listening to young peoples’ voices.

Voices of young people must be sought if we are to hear their beliefs, values and perceptions on such issues as why they choose to participate in physical activity, barriers that prevent them from taking part, obstacles they encounter as they navigate physical activity environments, types of activities they find most inviting, who is most influential in their choice to participate, and how they might better be supported in their quest, to be active. Without hearing,
and most importantly responding to this collective voice, we will not be in a position to offer inviting and realistic experiences that promote and increase young peoples’ physical activity patterns.

There are diverse theoretical traditions (e.g., constructivism, post-structuralism, queer theory) and methodological approaches (e.g., narratives, ethnography, participatory action research, critical engagement) that support the gathering of young peoples’ perspectives and experiences on their involvement in sport and physical activity. Methodological approaches such as drawings (MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004) allow young people to portray their feelings about and experiences in physical activity while participatory action research (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010) strives to provide authentic sport and physical activity opportunities that meet the multiplicity of young peoples’ changing needs and interests with the ultimate goal being to encourage young people to be more physically active and to adopt a healthy lifestyle (O’Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010; Wright & Macdonald, 2010). There are examples of how values and beliefs sought from young people have informed the development of effective practice in physical education (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010) and identified enablers and barriers to involvement in sport (Rees et al., 2006; Sit & Lindner, 2005). By encouraging young people to share the reality of their exposure to, and involvement in, sport and physical activity experiences, we may be in a better position to acknowledge and address how such contexts can most effectively work together to motivate young people to choose active lifestyles. It is important to recognise that participation in physical activity and sport is constrained by a multitude of individual, social and economic factors, however, it is important to recognize that some findings may be more prevalent in some social groups. No findings apply in the same way to all members of such groups and the issues discussed are not an exhaustive list of what young people share about their experiences in sport and physical activity; in other words, the picture that emerges is complex (MacPhail, 2011b). Young peoples’ voices are always positioned within a range of
physical, social, geographical, and economic factors and, moreover, some of the potential inclusion/exclusion factors may not yet have arisen due to the young person’s age and exposure to particular life opportunities. What young people convey about their experiences of sport and physical activity will therefore, to some extent, be positioned by their exposure to, and experience of, different stages of sport participation, the interpretations, agendas and interactions of researchers, and commissioning agencies and policy makers (MacPhail, 2011b).

In an attempt to critically examine and clarify the questionnaire data, CSPPA sought young peoples’ opinions, attitudes and views on the factors they deemed important in influencing their involvement in, or avoidance of, physical activity, physical education and sport. This paper foregrounds what young people convey, using their own voices, about their sport and physical activity experiences (i.e., what they construct to be sport and physical activity experiences) and how such experiences may result in young people feeling included or excluded in youth sport. We will share the insights gained from this qualitative aspect of the CSPPA study and hopefully cause each of us involved in providing physical activity opportunities for young people to consider how young peoples’ voices might influence best practice with the aim of potentially increasing young peoples’ motivation to participate in physical activity and sport.

Method

For the larger CSPPA study a one-stage cluster sampling procedure was used to obtain the representative sample of schools. Based on a Department of Education database of schools clusters were based on school-type (vocational/community etc.), school location (urban/rural), school gender (male/female/mixed), school socioeconomics, and school classification (public/private). From these clusters a representative sample of schools were chosen and invited to take part in the overall study. All participants, 4122 students from 70 schools across
Ireland, completed the self-report measures and a sub-sample of 3% (N=124) took part in focus groups (FGs). These FG (N=24) were divided among the three research institutions conducting this study with each institution being responsible for three post primary schools (one all boys, one all girls and one mixed), and three primary schools (one all boys, one all girls and one mixed) (table 1). To be as representative as possible a convenience sample of schools was chosen to include boys/girls/mixed, high socioeconomic/low socioeconomic, and geographical location. Primary students were those in 5th-6th class (10-12 years of age) while post primary included students across all grade levels from 1st year to 6th year (12-18 years of age).

Focus Groups.

FG were used to elicit descriptive data from students and were conducted post self-report and objective data. The research team examined the narrowly focused theme/topic of young peoples’ involvement or lack of involvement in physical activity as the focus of the FGs. FGs and questions were developed following review of the survey. Groups of between 6 to 8 students (selected for convenience) were gathered for a group interview/discussion on students’ opinions, attitudes and views on the factors they deem important in influencing their involvement in, or avoidance of, sport, physical education and physical activity was accessed through the FGs. With written consent of all participants FGs were audio taped for transcription and analysis.

These FG lasted between 30 and 50 minutes (average length 42 minutes) depending on numbers and age of students in the group as well as how interactive the students were with one another. The research team focused their emphasis on the interaction between and among the participants (Morgan, 1988) in each group. With the exception of posing guiding questions, probing by asking an additional question or refocusing the group in order to sustain the interaction, the researchers were listeners focused on learning from the participants’ voice.
To prevent our questions from being confusing or young peoples’ responses being misunderstood, when starting the interviews we ensured that the students understood the difference between the three opportunities to participate, i.e., physical education, sport and physical activity by discussing, clarifying and answering questions they posed for clarification. It was explained to students that physical education is done with a teacher during timetabled physical education class at school, sport is done when taking part with a club or after school programme, and physical activity is any activity or exercise such as play, games, and informal activity that is done (outside of physical education class and sports clubs) such as at lunch, on the way to school, in the evening or on weekends.

Krueger and Casey (2000) advise selecting participants who are similar in some way specific to the research allowing them to have something to say to one another, and who would be comfortable talking to each other. With this in mind, FGs were conducted with homogeneous groups of boys and girls who were identified as either generally ‘active’ (regular physical activity) or ‘inactive’ (sporadic physical activity) by their classroom (primary) or physical education (post primary) teachers. While this form of sampling is not the ideal, we believe these teachers knew their students and were familiar with their activity involvement; FG teams followed up with the students at the start of the interviews. As Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest, it was felt that these ‘like’ groups might provide a safe environment in which students would feel comfortable sharing their views and feelings without being ridiculed. It should be noted that teachers at the primary level, who have close contact with the students had difficulty identifying any 5th or 6th class children as inactive, especially among the boys. Once students were identified as ‘active’ / ‘inactive’, the class was asked for students to volunteer to take part in the focus groups.

FG teams included masters and doctoral students studying sport, physical activity, physical education and/or coaching in the three research institutions responsible for conducting the study. One of the lead researchers designed a full-day workshop to train interview teams.
from all institutions on strategies for conducting FGs. Training involved a full day workshop that
included demonstrations, explanations, trials and mock interviews with each institution being
responsible for further development of these facilitator and and moderator skills prior to their
being released to collect data. In addition, a handbook of guidelines was developed and made
accessible to all members of the research teams.

Each FG was conducted by two researchers, one assigned as facilitator and the other as
moderator, each with a specific role for which they were trained. The facilitator's role was to
stimulate interaction among participants toward the theme/topic through direct or indirect
methods by overseeing group discussion and encouraging all participants to respond. A set of
FG questions guided discussion although these were not used to limit the facilitator probing or
asking follow-up questions. The facilitator used probing techniques both these were posed
within a non-threatening and supportive environment. The moderator kept a record of the
discussion as it evolved to add details for instances where the recording was not audible and to
reflect participant behaviours and expressions that do not come across through the audio tape.
While field notes taken by the facilitator are generally used for purposes of the discussion to
highlight additional questions or topics to probe, the recorder plays a key role in keeping track of
central points in the discussion, meaningful quotes, and observations of body language or
discussion climate. While FGs were audio recorded to obtain the detail and nuances of the
participants' voices, in accordance with the Research Ethics Guidelines approved by all three
institutions for this study, participants were informed that all recordings would remain
confidential and pseudonyms used if they were referenced.

Data Analysis

FG data on the individual, pre-labeled interviews were first transcribed. Analysis of the
transcription was conducted manually by comparing it with notes taken by the moderator to fill in
inaudible phrases or gaps in the recordings. Three researchers were involved in the analysis of FG data.

The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to analyze the qualitative data which involved finding, highlighting and comparing themes across FGs for similarities and differences to establish patterns within the data (Berg, 2009). This process involved manually breaking the text down into manageable sections, attaching keywords to sections of text and then finding other segments of text to which the same keyword had been given (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Following this, a content analysis (Reinharz, 1992) of the keywords was undertaken with thematic codes given to text to allow categorizing of all data. In this way, codes represented the link between interview data and the researchers’ theoretical concepts. Two researchers worked independently to code the data, which was then cross-checked by the third researcher. Consensus meetings were held regularly to discuss and clarify any disagreements, determine rules for making judgments, and to reach consensus. As is typical, and the most common method for data analysis of FG, the group, rather than the individual, was the unit of analysis (Knodel & Pramualratana, 1987). While some researchers (Goldman, 1962; Hess, 1968) indicate that group interviewing provides more information that is qualitatively better than individual interviews, they also suggest it provides greater synergism, stimulation and spontaneity, as we found in this study. A summary of the interviews was developed through repeated reading of the narratives for their underlying meaning. When the researchers had a clear sense of what the participants were attempting to say, quotations of key points were selected from the transcript and shared with an accompanying narrative explanation. Before the analysis was complete, the entire text was re-read for additional clues to assist in the most complete and detailed interpretation of the data.

Results and Discussion
Throughout the results section we utilize two of the reporting styles outlined by Krueger (1998) to share our findings, providing summary description with illustrative quotes and in some instances summary description with illustrative quotes followed by interpretation. As noted in the methodology, to prevent our questions from being confusing or young peoples’ responses being misunderstood, when starting the interviews we ensured that the students understood the difference between the three opportunities to participate, i.e., physical education, sport and physical activity by discussing, clarifying and answering questions they posed for clarification. Table 2 denotes the themes identified by young people as influencing their level of involvement in physical education, sport and physical activity. We have chosen to focus on the five themes (‘being with friends’, ‘variety in activity content’, ‘experiencing fun’, ‘time constraints’, and ‘opportunity to be outside’) that ran across all three opportunities for young people to be active. If we are to encourage and provide opportunities for young people to choose active lifestyles, it is important that we address the comments that young people report affects their involvement in physical activity across a number of physical activity provision contexts.

Themes that ran across all three opportunities of physical education, sport and physical activity

(1) Being with friends

In reviewing previous research, young people have reported liking physical education when the curriculum encourages social interaction (Dismore & Bailey, 2010; Smith & Parr, 2007). In addition, there is a tendency for girls to focus more on social competence in physical education lessons, with the desire to be popular, socially accepted and to have high social status, with peer interaction and friendship being extremely important to them (Garrett, 2004). In the current study, whether primary or post primary, boys or girls, active or inactive, students enjoyed being with friends during physical education. It was interesting to note that many inactive boys shared the same perceptions as their active peers, including the wish to spend
time with friends during physical education. A variety of responses were received when inactive boys were asked about their friends’ involvement in sport and the encouragement they received from them. Fewer inactive post primary boys had friends who participated in the same activities yet, when they did, feelings of support and enjoyment were reported. Many indicated none of their friends played any sport, suggesting that they had ‘quit’, or that they were ‘too lazy’. Those who did indicate participating with their friends suggested that this ‘made it great craic, ya know…have fun with them, they defend your back.’ (PP IA B)

Many acknowledged the place of friends in their desire to train and compete in sport and one male youth noted, ‘Like, my friends keep me going. More likely to be with my friends to have a laugh and all. I don’t care if I win or lose as long as I’m having fun and my friends are playing, so.’ (PP A B) Many of the girls indicated beginning their involvement in sport through friends’ birthday parties such as one young primary active female who shared, ‘A friend had her birthday at the kickboxing club. It was great craic, you know, so I joined after’. (P A G) In discussing winning and how the pressure to win impacts their participation, girls noted that while they participate in sports clubs to win it is also nice to have friends on the team to support them. One inactive young teenager admitted, ‘My friends are really inactive, they wouldn’t do, like sport, they do dancing and stuff, but that would be it and not organised like’. (PP IA G) Another supported her by stating, ‘yeah, all my friends are not into the whole team thing, I think.’ (PP IA G)

A few inactive girls noted physical activity opportunities outside of physical education and sport as they discussed guides activities such as canoeing, rock climbing, and adventure that were fun and let them meet different people. Several other groups of inactive girls suggested that they would play around the neighbourhood with friends that lived close by, ‘you know it’s not so formal and you can just run and jump around’ (PP IA G). It appeared that for these girls pleasurable physical activity was linked to socialising with friends in whatever
activity they chose to do, ‘like, we just walk around the shops and talk’ (PP IA G), ‘I like the company’ (PI A G), ‘much better than chores’ (PI A G), or ‘after school I probably walk up to my horse and that’s far’ (PI A G), ‘walk my dogs or something around the fields. Gives us something to do’. (PI A G) A common thought among many of the girls seemed to be spending time with friends in active, yet informal kinds of settings as conveyed by one active girl, ‘Going out with friends. I just get bored watching tele or sitting at the computer. I usually play the Wii because there’s not many people. I have a nine-year-old sister, so I feel ashamed of myself if I’ve been sitting inside all day and I didn’t do anything.’ (PP A G)

For boys, relaxed play was the most prominent type of physical activity whether it involved sports, swimming, the gym or cycling. For some there was more access than others but they seemed to enjoy the same types of activities with friends, ‘like we only have a hill n street and cul de sac but it can be pure rapid, that’s where I go with my mates and em my mate was on top of the hill and he just chipped a ball and it bounced on the concrete and he put a window in...just no room ya know but we had great craic’ (PI A B) while another group talked about going to the gym, or the pitch as, ‘everything is local...like everything is about fifteen minutes away. The classic [facility] is about half an hour away so it is easy to get to’ (PP A B). They indicated that it did not matter where you went as long as you were with your friends, ‘The gym is the gym like, the lads would just say here are you coming to the gym? like doing it together’ (PI A B).

Primary and post primary youth, whether male or female, active or inactive, and regardless of the geographical area in which they had access to activity, all talked about wanting to be physically active with friends as one of their main reasons for participating. They indicated the fun involved in physical activity, that it prevented boredom, and let you be with friends, ‘Friends...you know, you play with your friends and it gives you a boost up’ or ‘yeah, motivates ye’ (PP A G)
Variety in activity content

Young people report liking physical education when the curriculum has variety and choice (Dismore & Bailey, 2010; Smith & Parr, 2007), reporting that they dislike physical education when the curriculum repeats the same activities every year. A number of active boys, at primary and post primary, did talk about other types of activities, other than games, they enjoyed in physical education such as fencing and swimming. One boy liked fencing *because you’re trying to look out for yourself* (PP A B). An inactive primary boy in a mixed school thought swimming was good because, *everyone can take part* (P IA B) and the entire group responded, *yeah, so everyone can play* (P IA B). Active boys from numerous schools suggested they would like to try boxing, running track, and gymnastics in physical education, although boys in one mixed school and several post primary schools suggested that gymnastics was not enjoyable and was for girls; *gym? No, girls do gym* (PP A B), *only girls do that* (P IA B). One group of inactive boys indicated a lack of interest in playing football during physical education as they played this regularly outside of physical education, suggesting that, *hey, we only do football...and who cares?* (PP IA B). The biggest problem for the inactive boys when it came to participation in physical education was *boring warm-ups and the bleep test* (PP IA B). One group of active boys felt that games [activities] needed to have a purpose in physical education or they were boring, *you know, we can play much better games... like in third class we did gymnastics and we had like monkey bars and big poles and mats and a horse and that was the best PE we’ve ever done* (PP A B). The transition year is an optional year of schooling situated after the first three years and before the final two years of post-primary school in Irish education. Boys in this year of school re-enforced the desire for physical education to offer variety and novel activities that were new to them and which some already enjoyed such as tai
chi, judo and hip hop dance; ‘more variety of activity would be better’ (PP A B), ‘would like more
choice of what to do in class’ (PP A B) and ‘we do only what the teacher likes’ (PP IA B).

Young peoples’ continued requests for access to a wide range of sports further
highlights the importance of ensuring young people can find a sport to which they are attracted,
in which they can remain involved, and that caters for their individual abilities and interests
(MacPhail, 2011b). Less active youth, whether male or female, made suggestions for having the
opportunity to participate in organized alternative activities outside of school such as boxing,
Tae-Kwan-Do, dancing, and skateboarding. One male youth noted that, ‘I started tag rugby but
quit when it was too rough then Nanny phoned this thing up that she knew the website and it
told you where it was and all and then told you how much it was every month and all so I started
singing…it is good fun’ (P IA B). Both active and inactive girls had a wider range of sport type
clubs and activities in which they participated than the boys and included invasion games
(camogie, soccer, basketball), swimming, fitness, dancing, horse riding, cross country running
and tennis.

Differences between boys identified as generally active and inactive were revealed
through their comments. When discussing the types of physical activity they would choose to
participate in away from school and club sport, active boys suggested similar games and
activities that they play in clubs and physical education, i.e., soccer, rugby, and Gaelic games
with the difference being that each would be played informally in the park. On the other hand, it
was interesting to hear the inactive boys speak of physical activity describing a much wider
range of activities in which they choose to participate, including cycling, climbing trees/walls,
pitch and putt, go-carting, passing the ball and going outside and hanging with friends. One
group of inactive primary boys talked of ‘Running around, probably racing each other, probably
going around hiding, playing hide and seek, or playing tag or something’ (PP IA B).
Young people report liking physical education when the curriculum provides opportunities for fun and enjoyment (Dismore & Bailey, 2010; Smith & Parr, 2007). In this study, active boys at both levels confirmed that any competitive game, and all invasion games, were what they enjoyed most in physical education, identifying bumball (invasion game where you move by sitting on your bottom), basketball, soccer, rugby and hurling, with one primary boy excitedly reporting, ‘yeah, in sixth class we can do rugby contact sport’ (P A B). A group of active boys from an all boys’ school agreed with a peer who commented, ‘Well…I quite, I pretty much like the games that you are teamed up with other people cause then like you can all work together and then it wouldn’t be as hard as you’d think it would’ (P A B).

Previous research notes that enjoyment has to be prevalent in sport experiences for continued participation (Foster et al, 2005). More active boys at both the primary and post primary level tend to report positive sport experiences that are fun, team based, require a certain level of physical competence and entail (Woods, Tannehill, Quinlan et al., 2010) while girls tend to report positive sport experiences where they are fun and encourage friendships (O’Connor, 2009, p. 115).

The two main reasons cited by boys and girls for participating in sport in the current study were fun and competition, ‘The fun. The fun and competitive, both. You have to have a laugh. If it’s not competitive then there is no point playing football. To enjoy it. You wouldn’t say you play football to have a fight over it. If it wasn’t competitive you wouldn’t really bother, it’s better like winning matches (PP A B). It doesn’t matter with me. More competitive, yeah. You get something out of it’ (PP A G). Many youth talked about the importance of competition in sport as ‘giving you the drive to work hard’ (PP A B), but at the same time emphasised that participating must be fun as noted by one boy, ‘serious yeah, but I mean, it has to be fun…have a laugh and good craic when there, and win too’ (PP A B). Winning seemed to be the focus in
the clubs in which these young people had been involved, and they felt, ‘winning would make you happy, but winning’s not everything. Just play for fun, that’s all I do. I just play for fun, for the laugh’ (PP A B).

While competition was an important reason why young people enjoyed participating in sport, for some, the idea of winning was not as critical and could even spoil the fun. One girl reported, ‘well like I don’t really care if we lose or win, like it’s just the point of enjoying yourself and playing the game and like no pressure…you don’t need all the pressure on you of everyone saying ‘oh come on win this game’ and there’s people shouting all that, cos my mam’s never like that…’ (PP A G). Many of the inactive boys felt there was too much pressure on them to participate in club sport as one boy reported, ‘I don’t like parents and teachers telling me what to play, like, you are built for rugby so why not give it a go? Is it good to be built for rugby?……no. I want to have fun’ (PP IA B). One group of inactive boys discussed how they would be more interested in playing if it was fun and if someone could/would help them improve their skills, with one boy commenting, ‘like if you are no good…like….I was in soccer, but, well, and they all kept picking on me so I just dropped out of it’ (PP IA B).

Enjoyment and pleasure were key for all youth in choosing to take part in physical activity. The boys seemed to enjoy the fun involved in physical activity suggesting that it prevented boredom, and let you be with friends. They also shared what they disliked about physical activity that made it less enjoyable including the fatigue caused by too much activity, getting sweaty, being active in the rain, getting injured, or the expense of some activities, ‘I don’t like the way it costs so much money…’ or ‘ye like if I break my arm in a match, like you can’t do anything, like you can’t even go to sleep for a few weeks. Like you couldn’t play sports for a few months like…’ (PP IA B). Active and inactive girls revealed remarkably similar responses to the questions about physical activity. These girls indicated the desire to be physically active both on a daily basis and also if they were forced to choose between activity and being sedentary
saying that being active can be more fun ‘play is more fun than sitting’ ((PP IA G) and ‘when you feel good about yourself it makes you realise that activity is fun, or maybe has fun results’ (PP A G).

Boys talked about various forms of physical activity including cycling or walking to school, walking the dog, or doing activity for fitness like sit ups at home or running laps on the track. In all cases, these boys described physical activity as being relaxed and enjoyable. One boy noted that, ‘it’s like you don’t notice who is good and who isn’t like just have a laugh’ (P A B) and another noted, ‘if you’re with a mate you can have a laugh while doing stuff, but I think if you’re on your own then it can be real boring. You get more done when you’re on your own but...’ (PP A B).

One inactive girl noted that she would not choose organized sport as a form of physical activity because, ‘I just don’t think doing sports would be fun’ (PP IA G). Another girl who felt similarly, said, ‘Well...like, my sister would kind of, do you want to play some B-ball my homie, and I’m like, OK, yeah sure. Because if I play video games too long I get all dizzy’ (PP IA G). A group of inactive primary girls from a mixed school suggested that on weekends, ‘At home, sometimes, you play like man hunt or tag or something and it’s like we’re, you run after someone and catch them and they run and there’s loads of people like running away...it is just playing, it’s fun’ (P IA G).

(4) Time constraints

Students have previously noted a particular dislike of taking part in physical education being related to insufficient time being allocated to changing and showering (Rees et al, 2006). The current study reported that youth were adamant that they did not get enough time for physical education to make it worthwhile and enjoyable. Most of the girls indicated that the time allowed for each physical education class is too short and the frequency of taking part in
physical education every two weeks is not enough ‘to make you get exercise and feel good’ (PP A G).

When discussing what influences their choice to participate in sport the inactive girls cited time (‘it takes too much time’ PP IA G), the nature of sport (‘screaming, shouting, and all the sweating, like not worth it’ (PP IA G), less keen on training and playing (‘boring’, ‘always the same’ P IA G) and getting bruised and hurt as reasons for quitting sport or starting other activities. Other youth, male and female, noted not taking part in sport outside of school because their parents were too busy to transport them to training/matches and the huge time commitment expected to participate.

Whether discussing physical activity on weekends, the choice between being active or sedentary, or how their physical activity levels had changed since they were younger, both active and inactive girls reported limited time for physical activity due to babysitting or other jobs, studying, chores, being tired or not in the mood, or safety issues in their neighbourhoods. An array of responses from various FGs revealed similar reasons for girls’ choices across all settings and age groups.

(5) Opportunity to be outside

Whether primary or post primary, boys or girls, active or inactive, students enjoyed being released from what they perceived as school academic commitments / lessons. One boy shared his thoughts on physical education as, ‘Well its not fun but I like it because it’s something to get off work and school, and you get to burn off the energy that’s inside you when you’re at school doing (inaudible), and you can get more fit’ (PP IA B).

When discussing the types of sports in which they liked to participate and why they chose them, one post primary active boy remarked, ‘I really like playing the tennis because you
get lots of fresh air and you have lots and lots of fun and it is never like a chore to go to it, it’s actually pleasurable when you go and you make lots of new friends’ (PP A B).

Similar to the boys, girls suggested that socializing was what they liked about physical activity, along with being out in the fresh air better than being indoors. One active girl noted, ‘it clears your head’ (PP A G) and an inactive girl suggested, ‘it gives you freedom to experiment’ (PP IA G). Two groups of girls, one active and one inactive, emphasised that physical activity on its own, ‘gives you choice’ (PP IA G), ‘like options, you know’ (PP IA G) which they felt was something lacking in their other activity opportunities.

Conclusions to Inform Moving Forward

Perhaps most exciting, it appears that these young people have a positive attitude toward physical activity which does not seem to diminish as they age despite their activity levels decreasing. They also appear positively disposed to discussing how best to maintain or encourage an interest in physical activity for themselves and their peers. Similar to the findings of Wright, Macdonald and Groom (2003) while time, or lack of time became an issue, other activities, or more focused activities, took the place of previous choices as young people came to realise what they most enjoyed. As physical education teachers, sport providers and physical activity supervisors we are encouraged to work with young people to design programmes that reflect the attributes and experiences young people have shared as contributing to relevant and exciting programmes. Young people are requesting (1) fun opportunities to interact with friends, (2) activities that are both competitive and non-competitive, focused on sport and other forms of movement, (3) linking activity to options that can be done with parents or other family members, (4) opening facilities that welcome and encourage young people, (5) setting up travel options so young people can access activity, and (6) setting up free options for those who face financial issues. MacPhail (2011a) prompts us that, ‘such listening has consequences, however, and
may lead teachers and coaches to question cherished aspects of their provision and practice. In other words, if a decision is taken to find out about young peoples' views, it is important to decide what will happen if those views suggest that pedagogical changes are required (p. 106).

Cothran (2010) indicates that recently teachers are increasingly interested in gaining the insights of young people about many aspects of their learning and experiences in school, including what they value about physical education. Numerous studies have examined the link between students' values and the physical education curriculum, unfortunately confirming that physical education is often not valuable to young people (Cothran & Ennis, 2001; MacPhail, Kirk & Kinchin, 2004; Mowling, Brock & Hastie, 2006). One important finding reveals young peoples' desire to be involved in choosing, or at least having input into, choices on the curriculum (Courturier, Chepko & Coughlin, 2005; Stinson, 2993). Carlson and Hastie (1997) introduced the idea of students and teachers working together to identify commonalities between them to create learning experiences and curricula to which they could both find benefit and value. Oliver (2010) encourages teachers and researchers to consider 'what might be' by involving young people as co-researchers seeking their insights and perspectives on their own experiences to reform physical activity practices. Enright and O’Sullivan (2013) suggest that allowing students’ choice and the opportunity to negotiate the curriculum allows them to link their physical education experiences to their daily lives in meaningful ways. While the debate about the place of student voice in the curriculum is beyond the scope of this paper, it does link to some of the findings and implications of this work.

Physical education teachers, physical activity coordinators and sport providers need to respond to young peoples’ physical activity related needs and desires if they are to be best positioned to encourage and maintain young peoples’ involvement and investment in physical activity. Acknowledging that the young peoples’ experiences and perceptions of physical activity are noted as being similar to international data, we share two particular developments in the
Irish context that are best placed to link schools and community working cooperatively to offer challenging, appropriate and meaningful activity experiences for children and youth.

One such initiative is the Active School Flag (ASF), launched by the DES in 2009 (http://www.activeschoolflag.ie). ASF is a non-competitive initiative that seeks to recognise schools (both primary and post primary) that provide quality physical education, co-curricular physical activity and sports programmes for their students. Key to this initiative is the partnership approach which the ASF encourages, empowering schools to become proactive in approaching such groups as National Governing Bodies (NGBs), Local Sports Partnerships, Health Service Excusive (HSE) and Education Centres about working together to promote physical activity (individual and team) for all young people, regardless of ability. An important aspect of the ASF is the school setting up an ASF committee that involves all stakeholders, especially students in the decision making process related to type of provision and promotion of physical activity. i.e., using student voice to design appropriate programmes for their participation and enjoyment. This is consistent with those who encourage us to involve young people in the design of innovative and challenging curricula that will stimulate their interest and involvement (Collier, 2006; Glasby & Macdonald, 2004). To achieve the ASF there are a number of required criteria that schools must achieve that fit quite closely with the issues that young people in this study identified; minimum of a double period of physical education per week to all students, a range of co-curricular activities for all students, individual and team activities, encouraging students to walk/cycle to school, informing students about physical activity events, facilities and opportunities in local community, accessing local facilities that promote physical activity opportunities, and demonstrating involvement of staff, parents and members of the community in provision of physical activity.

Another development worthy of discussion is senior cycle physical education (SCPE), proposed by the NCCA (2011) and composed of two distinct courses, a non-examination
curriculum framework and an examination syllabus. The non-examination framework is to be accessible to all students and open to student choice through an innovative set of instructional models. The aim of SCPE is ‘to encourage learners’ confident, enjoyable and informed participation in physical activity while in senior cycle and in their future lives’ (NCCA 2011a, p. 13). The focus on the learner and lifelong learning is key to the SCPE framework as it strives to develop skills in young people that will aid them in leading long and healthy lives. Through SCPE teachers invite young people to be involved in designing the physical education curriculum making choices on the activities that will serve as the medium through which they learn about physical activity and how it might impact their lives. This notion of partnership in the SCPE framework is consistent with recommendations made by Kirk and Macdonald (2001) in planning physical activity opportunities for young people. The SCPE framework recommends that objectives and key skills be achieved through use of multiple instructional models in conjunction with physical activities chosen by both the students and the teacher together. Inclusion is highlighted in the framework as every student irrespective of their ability and/or commitment to physical activity should be encouraged toward active participation in SCPE. Further, the document highlights the potential for creating community links through allowing students to reflect on the community and societal factors that can ease their lifelong participation in physical activity or make it more difficult (NCCA, 2011a). The use of an activity portfolio as a form of assessment in SCPE allows students to investigate and learn what activities are available to them in their local area, increasing the chance of students choosing to be active outside of school. The framework could have a positive impact on the relationship between schools and the community, as young people discover links between various physical education content areas and sports clubs or activity venues in the community. The acknowledgement that young people are complex learners with a multiplicity of needs heightens the expectation that programmes and interventions to encourage higher levels of
participation in physical activity, physical education and sport should ideally be multi-leveled and differentiated (Mulvihill & Quigley, 2003). To be effective, all those tasked with providing opportunities for young people to be physically active need to recognise and diagnose individual learners’ needs and interests, consult young people about them, and reflect on their personal and professional capacities (as teachers, physical activity coordinators, families, coaches, sport development officers, national governing bodies and/or youth workers) to meet those learning needs (Armour, 2011; MacPhail, 2011a).
References


