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Youth voices in physical education and sport: what are they telling us and what do they say they need?

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'Chasing a ball around a pitch seems pretty futile to me. In basketball or a sport like that, someone jumps up for a ball and, even if they don't catch it, everyone cheers. All very strange! It's at these times that I really do feel as if I come from another planet and, to be quite honest, I like mine better. Beam me up, Scotty! (...) Now I am in secondary school, this sports issue is even worse. I am in a private school and here it seems we are now expected to love talking about rugby or golf. Well, whoopee doo...I would rather watch paint dry. Quite literally. The thought of doing games really makes me feel ill, I can't even think about sleeping at night when I have games the next day. I can't concentrate on the lessons before as my worst nightmare is slowly approaching. When it is time for the lesson, I genuinely do feel sick and have a headache from all the worrying. Of course I am told that I will be able to run it off or just ignored completely. It is my worst time at school and I have done all I can to avoid it' (Jackson, 2002, p. 130).

Introduction

The opening extract is from Luke Jackson, a thirteen-year-old boy who has Asperger's Syndrome which results in heightened sensitivity to particular physical activity

environments. Although it is negative, and clearly there are many young people who feel differently, the extract does encourage us as teachers or coaches to critically review our awareness of the views and attitudes held by children and young people in physical education and sport. Young people's attraction to and engagement with physical education and sport is complex, varying from those who embrace being physically active whenever the opportunity arises to those who are negative about both. Moreover, youth voice in physical education and sport is compounded by young people's construction of what these activities entail, and also the current positioning of each young person in the context of their family and friends, community and popular culture (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009). By listening to and reporting what young people tell us about their experiences of (learning in) physical education and sport, this chapter recognizes young people as diverse and complex learners with a multiplicity of needs and interests. Listening – and hearing – in this way has implications for teachers and coaches, and these are considered throughout. To be effective, teachers and coaches need to recognise / diagnose individual learners' needs and interests, consult young people about them, and reflect on their personal and professional capacities as teachers or coaches to meet those learning needs (Armour, in press).

A young person's multifaceted relationship with physical education and sport can be lost when young people are only considered as a group.

Youth voices in physical education and sport

There are diverse theoretical traditions and methodological approaches that can be used to focus on youth voice in physical education and sport (O'Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010). It is argued in this chapter that by listening to youth voice, there is the potential to understand the reality of physical education and sport experiences for young people. Such listening has consequences however, and may lead teachers and coaches to question cherished aspects of provision. In other words, if a decision is taken to find out about young people's views, it is important to decide what will happen if those views suggest that pedagogical changes are required. It is also important to note that finding an authentic youth voice on physical education and youth sport is a complex process (Long & Carless, 2010).

While considering student consultation and how and what to consult students about specific to physical education is documented elsewhere (MacPhail, 2010), the focus in this chapter is to focus on what young people are telling us about physical education and subsequently what they need from the subject. Youth conceptions of sport vary from experience in self-organised and informal to adult-organised and community-based sport. In addition, for many young people, media representations of sport are likely to have influenced their knowledge and understandings (Lines, 2007). Added to this, social status characteristics (such as gender, physical skill ability, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity) may influence young people's interaction, participation and performance in both physical education and sport. So, while the next two sections report what young people say about their experiences, it is important to recognize that a) some findings may be more prevalent in some social groups and b) no findings apply in the same way to all members of such groups and c) the issues discussed are not an

exhaustive list of what young people share about their experiences in physical education and sport; in other words, the picture that emerges is complex. In recognition of the contextual differences (and similarities), the chapter is organized into the following sections: young people's voice in physical education, young people's voice in youth sport, and the relationship between effective learning environments in physical education and youth sport.

What young people tell us about their experiences of physical education

The physical education curriculum

The physical education curriculum is one of the most important influences on young people's participation in physical education and there is evidence to suggest that positive attitudes, once established, remain consistent across the transition from primary to secondary school (Dismore & Bailey, 2010). Young people report liking physical education when the curriculum has relevance to their lives, has variety and choice, encourages social interaction through team sports, and provides opportunities for fun and enjoyment (Dismore & Bailey, 2010; Smith & Parr, 2007). Some young people report choosing to participate in physical education to improve and maintain health;

'Susie: It [physical education] 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.'

(15-16 year old girls, Smith & Parr, 2007, p. 45)

Enjoyment of physical education is, at times, linked to the change of learning environment and context that physical education offers in comparison to a classroom subject, with young people reporting that they enjoy getting out of the classroom and moving about (Cothran & Ennis, 1998; Smith & Parr, 2007);

'Natalie: It's [physical education] 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.'

(15-16 year old girls, Smith & Parr, 2007, p. 44)

On the other hand, having to change and shower within a shared space with peers can act as a barrier to participation in physical education, as can an aversion to sweating

and having to go to the next class feeling 'sweaty', particularly when sufficient time is not allocated to changing and showering (Rees, Kavanagh, Harden, Shepherd, Brunton, Oliver & Oakley, 2006). Young people also report that they dislike physical education when the curriculum repeats the same activities every year, does not relate to their needs, is boring and is too competitive;

'We do the same thing [in physical education] every week, over and over exactly like there's no difference...first of all he [teacher] gets us warmed up and so we go like that [rotates arms] to warm up and then makes you run like ten laps like up and down up and down and you're not allowed stop' (Amy, 5th class primary school student)
(McMahon, 2007. p.).

There is evidence to suggest that young people appreciate having opportunities to co-construct the physical education curriculum with peers and teachers, such that their opinions inform curriculum development (Oliver, Hamzeh & McCaughtry, 2009). The opportunity to share their physical activity preferences, inform the focus of learning within, influence the pace at which they work and their preference for choosing to work with particular peers are also appreciated. However, Smith & Parr (2007) warn that it is not necessarily the kinds of sports and activities that are provided as part of the physical education curriculum that is of particular concern for students but rather the range and ways in which those activities are provided. The attributes of a teacher or coach should not, therefore, be underestimated.

Young people have much to say about their learning experiences and they value opportunities to contribute to the development of physical education programmes.
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Attributes of a physical education teacher

Physical education teachers play a key role in determining young people's attitudes and feelings towards physical education. Young people identify a number of teacher attributes that encourage a positive relationship with the teacher and positive learning experiences; for example being thoughtful and considerate to students' needs, having patience, and possessing an 'appropriate' sense of humour (Mulvihill, Rivers & Aggleton, 2000). Conversely, young people perceive that some physical education teachers lack a pedagogical interest in less able pupils, preferring to focus on those who are more proficient and may play in schools teams;

'Well we're not the best and we aren't in the important school teams. If you're in one then ... You know it's like Mr. Evans does the football team and he spends the lesson with the good players and he's not bothered about us' (Andy) (young physically disabled boy, Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 47).

Young women, in particular, record very definite and often negative opinions about physical education teachers, suggesting they tend to spend more time and give more attention to boys, allow no choice in the activities, convey a lack of sensitivity and respect, are insensitive to the need for privacy when changing, and can 'pick on' less physically able students (Mulvihill, Rivers & Aggleton, 2000);

'Sometimes they [PE teachers] are really horrible to people that can't do things. They don't realise that they just can't do things. They don't believe and then they embarrass them on purpose (female, 15 years, white)' (Mulvihill, Rivers & Aggleton, 2000, p. 193).

Body image

Young people going through puberty are particularly conscious of body image and can be sensitive both about wearing required physical education kit and sharing changing facilities with their peers (Laws & Fisher, 1999). Research has found that most teenage girls, when asked, describe their physical education kit as uncomfortable and embarrassing (Sport England, 2005). Evidence from adolescent boys suggests that their body esteem grows as they progress through each school year, whereas for girls the reverse is the case, resulting in young people with body image concerns avoiding participation in physical education due to embarrassment or weight-related teasing (Duncan, Al-Nakeed, Nevill & Jones, 2004). However, while girls consistently report greater body dissatisfaction and lower body self-esteem compared to boys, boys also face challenges in taking part in physical education when they are overweight;

'PE didn't make me good at anything. It just made me realize how slow I was and how fat I am. Yeah, I always dreaded PE classes. I really dreaded it because I could never do a push-up [or] a curl-up (Lucas)' (young boy aged between 13 and 18 years of age, Trout & Graber, 2009, p. 277).

Due to the practical, physical and shared environment of a physical education lesson, young people's awareness of issues related to body image is heightened.

Perceived physical competence and social competence

Research suggests that males tend to have a higher level of physical self-perception than females, and this may be partially explained by the fact the girls are generally less physically active than boys (Fairclough & Stratton, 2005). There is a tendency for girls to focus more on social competence with the desire to be popular, socially accepted and to have high social status, with peer interaction and friendship being extremely important to girls (Garrett, 2004). Flintoff & Scraton (2001) present data from 15-year-old young women that convey the heightened awareness they experience, with respect to their perceived physical competence and social competence, if confronted with mixed physical education lessons;

'... it [mixed PE] depends on what we are doing. Gym and aerobics are not good mixed 'cause it is like the boys are there, they are watching you and if you are on your own you can do what you want to ... you just feel just small around them ... on your own you can do things without making people look small and that. You can be yourself. When the boys are there you change, you are quieter than you usually are – you don't say owt, they just take over. You know that they are immature and you know that they will say something to make you feel embarrassed. (Karen, School 1) (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001, p. 15).

While males tend to have a higher level of physical self-perception than females, it is imperative that we are also conscious of the feeling of vulnerability that young boys can experience in physical education contexts that foster hyper-masculinity;

'They pretty quickly realised I was hopeless and one kid, who was really good at it, seemed to get a kick out of watching me fumble, drop and miss most of what came my way. He started to deliberately give me difficult passes and then bag me when I stuffed it up. Other kids joined in with him. I remember just wanting to get the hell out of there but I couldn't.' (Mark, 12 years-old, Hickey, 2008, p. 153).

While there is ambivalence to the value of providing single-sex physical education to accommodate the interests and needs of girls, opportunities for a mix of single-sex and mixed participation in sport are desirable from the perspective of young people (Rees et al., 2006).

What young people tell us about their experiences of sport

Attraction and barriers to sport

The most prominent reasons young people report for participating in sport are intrinsic in nature: making friends and meeting people, developing physical competence, feeling included, gaining encouragement from positive feedback and reinforcement, and enjoyment. Extrinsic values, such as success in competition and a desire to perform better than others, are less often reported than intrinsic values, such as enjoyment and mastery of a new skill, as reasons for participating in sport (Sit & Lindner, 2005).

Barriers to young people's involvement in sport include an overemphasis on elite

performance, competition for time with other activities, appearing incompetent and, especially among girls, a general feeling of inertia linked to feeling embarrassed and self-conscious about the body (Rees et al., 2006). A range of structural and financial barriers to young people's participation in sport include poor access to quality coaching and facilities, transport difficulties and limited resources and support services (MacPhail, Kirk & Eley, 2003). In addition, socio-economic status has been demonstrated to be a factor in participation, and middle-class children are often found to be overrepresented in sport clubs (Kirk, 2004). There is also concern that culturally-appropriate sporting opportunities for black and minority ethnic communities are limited (Sporting Equals and Sports Councils, 2009).

Diverse social and cultural backgrounds result in young people accessing and experiencing sport in a variety of ways.

Pervasiveness of sport

The pervasiveness of sport in young people's lives appears to be stronger in primary school than in secondary school, as evidenced by the ways in which primary students report the frequency of their participation and the variety of sports in which they engage through written narratives (Collier, MacPhail & O'Sullivan, 2007);

'I have lots of hobbies: they are skipping, football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, swimming, and chicken limbo. My favourite hobby [sic] is swimming. We go swimming during school time' (girl aged between 10 and 12, Collier, MacPhail & O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 199).

As young people move through the school years, sport competes with a growing range of competing interests (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009). Young males, however, tend to remain familiar with sporting role models, become consumers of as well as participants in sport, tend to specialize in a smaller range of sports, and privilege sport over other activities;

'Sport plays an important part in my life. I like nearly every sport but there is one sport in the world that is my favourite and that sport is soccer. I love everything about soccer. I even love hearing about the transfer gossip on the papers and on t.v. I would watch every match that would be on the tele but I would not watch it if Rangers, Man. Utd were playing because I dispise them two teams, the only team I would watch with attention would be Liverpool. The reason why I support Liverpool is because they are a good team with lots of potential they are being held back by Man. Utd and Arsenal. Every Liverpool fan is a true fan unlike the so called Man. United fans who start supporting them after they won the premiership. The sport's that I participate in are soccer with (name of village), Gealic Football with (name of town) and I also coach handball with the young people of my estate which is very enjoyable. This goes to show that sport has a huge influence on my life.' (Written narrative from a 15/16 year old boy (coded BCS45) contributing to the Write Now (1999) project that asked school students to write a page describing themselves and the Ireland that they inhabit)

There is a wealth of research to suggest that young females tend not to name sporting role models, limit their involvement in sport participation and report a wider range of leisure time options (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009). It is not necessarily that girls are disinterested in being involved in sport or physical activity but rather that they are

disengaged from the nature, structure and opportunities available to them (Sandford & Rich, 2006).

Gendered socialisation

The decision to participate in sport can be linked to the ways in which young people perceive their feminine / masculine role in society and, for young women, appearing overly masculine can be a barrier to participation;

'Sev: I think it is fashionable to be good at sports...The majority, well em,...or most girls think it is...Girly girls wouldn't want anyone to know that they were good at sports and they would hide it' (teenage girl, O'Donovan & Kirk, 2008, p. 79).

Gender socialization in sport is a two-way relationship between the sporting opportunities that are available and the positioning of the young person.
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It is particularly evident that adolescent girls participate in lower levels of physical activity compared to adolescent boys, taking part in a wider range of social and cultural activities (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009);

'My friends and I go out every weekend. We go to each others houses, to the cinema, to the arcade and bowling alley, to discos & to partys. (...) I love to sail, play sports but I'm not a sports fanatic and I absolutely love to go to the beach or out with my friends'

(Written narrative from a 15/16 year old girl (coded GSS52) contributing to the Write Now (1999) project that asked school students to write a page describing themselves and the Ireland that they inhabit).

If they do participate in sport, research suggests many girls prefer non-competitive, individual sporting activities (Williams, Bedward & Woodhouse, 2000). Boys, on the other hand, are reported to focus on team sport participation and on their skillfulness and sporting accomplishments (reference). Boys also tend to be involved in physical activity pastimes, either as an active participant or as an invested supporter, and are followers of a particular sport, team or sports personality, as illustrated in the written narrative (coded BCS45) reported earlier in the chapter. While there are more opportunities for boys to be involved in sporting activities, there is also evidence that there may be less diversity in the sporting / leisure choices of young men compared to those available to young women, fewer competing options for leisure time as compared to girls (Wright, Macdonald & Groom, 2003). As with the (lack of) involvement in physical education, concerns about body shape have been reported as the main reasons for the non-participation of young girls in sport (Sport England, 2005).

Support structures

Relations with family, community and school are the main arenas which mediate critical support structures for young people's involvement in sport (Wright, MacDonald & Groom, 2003). Leisure-time sports participation among adolescents has a tendency to be socially stratified, related to the sports participation of family members (and less to the parental socioeconomic status);

'My favourite sport is boxing and I have been boxing for a year. My brother has been boxing for fifteen years (...) He trained me for a few years and the I joined a club and I sparr him most of the time' (Written narrative from a 15/16 year old boy (coded BCS45))

contributing to the Write Now (1999) project that asked school students to write a page describing themselves and the Ireland that they inhabit)

As teachers and coaches, in order to plan and deliver a meaningful physical education curriculum and / or sporting context, it is essential to be prepared to respond to the particular learning needs reported in this chapter. That is, once young people's needs are established, find out what motivates them to take part and consider the reality and impact of their involvement in physical activity in their everyday lives. There is a close connection between what young people note as encouraging / discouraging participation in physical education and sport. The chapter concludes by asking teachers and coaches to consider the relationship between effective physical education and sport environments and how best they can contribute to each.

There is a close connection between what young people note as encouraging participation in physical education and sport.

The relationship between effective physical education and sport environments

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 education and sport should ideally be multi-leveled and differentiated (Mulvihill, Rivers & Aggleton, 2000). Matching young people's views and attitudes towards positive experiences in physical education and sport with

provision will hopefully provide meaningful, relevant and worthwhile opportunities for young people to be involved. Combining physical activity with opportunities for socializing, being sensitive to the needs of less confident young people, modification of the organization and provision of physical education, improving access to a diverse range of opportunities for physical activity and involving young people in the development of appropriate provision are all well-founded opportunities to increase a young person's commitment to being physically active.

In asking over 600 14-18-year-old sport leaders to elicit responses to the question 'What can be done to help young people participate in sport?' the notion of school and club provision together attracted by far the largest support (MacPhail, Kirk & Eley, 2003). If physical education is to instill in young people an appreciation of physical activities and promote a positive attitude towards establishing and sustaining an active and healthy lifestyle, the physical education teacher needs to establish the pathways that physical education and the school can provide to establish this, as well as deliberate the associated role of the physical education teacher. This results in the physical education teacher's remit extending beyond the school site in actively promoting involvement in, and at times delivering, extra-curricular sport and community sport opportunities. In establishing what is meaningful and relevant to the current and future lives of young people, the physical education teacher needs to establish a curriculum, in consultation with young people, which will complement the physical activity opportunities that are available for young people external to the school. Suggestions have been made that physical education be integrated into school-wide positive youth development programmes (Wright & Li, 2009), encouraging the physical education teacher to

integrate youth development principles and practices committed to helping children and youth reach their full potential.

In England, the 'PE and Sport Strategy for Young People' encourages those involved in promoting physical education and sport to work together to offer all young people aged five to 16 the opportunity to participate in five hours a week of physical education and sport. The 'Guide to Delivering the Five Hour Offer' (Sport England, YST and PE and Sport for Young People, 2009) outlines the vision for the strategy and the five hour offer in particular, providing case study examples illustrating how the school and community would interact to provide the five hours of physical education and sport. There is an acknowledgement that the roles and responsibilities of the providers need to be shared and that providers make physical education and sport more accessible, attractive, affordable and appropriate to the needs of young people.

The link between physical education and sport opportunities outside school time is crucial to encourage continued involvement in physical activity.

The complexities in identifying how best to instill in young people an appreciation of physical activities, and promote a positive attitude towards establishing and sustaining an active and healthy lifestyle, is compounded by the individual experiences one has towards physical education and sport. Young people's experience of physical education and sport is not necessarily attributed to a sole defining criterion but is affected by the interaction of factors, such as gender, age, (dis)ability, ethnicity and social class, which shape their experience. The challenge is to identify the complex and diverse cultural, social and demographic contexts in which individual young people engage with physical

education and sport and understand the meaning of physical education and sport experiences to these young people. By doing this, one would hope, as teachers and coaches, we can inform a more relevant, meaningful and worthwhile experience in physical education and sport that is cognizant of the changing contexts of young people's lives. Such realities of young people's lives should inform evidence-based initiatives and policy-making whether it be at a curriculum, school, club or national level.

Learning tasks

(i) Individual learning task:

Young people advise us that one aspect of creating a positive learning environment in physical education and sport is fostering a sense of value of the body and bodies in a bid to enhance body image. Thinking back to your own experiences as a young learner in physical education and / or youth sport recall the extent to which you were conscious of your own body image and those of others. Subsequently, what proposals would you make to address adolescents' body image concerns? Do adolescents direct us to consider these proposals separately for young females and young males?

(ii) Key resource

O'Sullivan, M. & MacPhail, A. (eds.) (2010) *Young People's Voices in Physical Education and Sport*, London: Routledge.

(iii) Group task:

Young people suggest that for physical education to be most effective it needs to be able to reflect the changing times and unique interests of young people. Central to this is the need to offer a variety of physical activities to optimize student participation, taking into consideration alternative activities to those traditionally associated with physical education. As a physical education teacher, how would you propose to implement this suggestion in a bid to optimise student participation? In what way is the extent to which females and males in your group approach this task affected by dominant discourses within physical education and sport?

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