Physical Activity Experiences of Young People in an Area of Disadvantage: 'There's Nothing There for Big Kids, Like Us.'

Eileen McEvoy\textsuperscript{a}, Ann MacPhail\textsuperscript{a} and Eimear Enright\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Physical Education Physical Activity and Youth Sport Ireland, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Limerick, Ireland
\textsuperscript{b}School of Human Movement Studies, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Through an examination of the experiences of young people in one disadvantaged area, this paper adds to an emerging body of knowledge focused on what place physical activity occupies in the lives of young people in areas of disadvantage. A total of 40 young people (21 males, 19 females) participated in focus group interviews. The research question explored the forces which enable and constrain the participation of youths in physical activity and the interplay between such forces and how they experience and exercise agency. All focus group interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. The findings remind us that young people can be seen as positioned within multiple social relations conferred by specific social identities (such as child, friend, brother or sister) and each of these identities influence the ability of youth to exercise agency in choosing whether, where and when to participate in physical activity. Institutional structures also influenced the physical activity habits of young people in this study. It was interesting to note that staying out of trouble was one of the most discussed benefits of physical activity. Young people also recorded feelings of disempowerment through the belief that no significance was attributed to their words and shared thoughts. This sense of constrained agency presents a particular difficulty when we consider that it is only through accessing the voices of young people that those attempting to promote physical activity can ensure that the range of opportunities being created are matched to the preferences of youth.

\textbf{Keywords:} Young people, physical activity, disadvantage, structure, agency
Physical activity\(^1\) promotion has been found to be particularly important for those living in areas of disadvantage, as living in such areas is associated with a decreased likelihood of regular participation in physical activity (Collins, 2004; Kavanagh, Goller, King, Jolley, Crawford, & Turrell, 2005; Lunn 2005). Richter, Erhart, Vereecken, Zambon, Boyce, and Nic Gabhainn (2009) argue that physical activity is especially relevant to young people living in areas of disadvantage, as the health risks associated with lower levels of physical activity have been found to be amplified amongst this group. In addition to the general health benefits of physical activity, it has been suggested that there are a number of other positive effects that are particularly pertinent to youth in disadvantaged areas. Physical activity has been employed as a vehicle to re-engage and rehabilitate disaffected youth (Sandford, Armour, & Duncombe, 2010), as a mechanism for community development and neighbourhood renewal (Coalter, 2000; Lawson, 2005), as a promoter of positive youth development (Fraser-Thomas, Coté, & Deakin, 2005), as a contributor to the development of social and cultural capital (Coalter, 2005; Spaaij, 2012) and as a means of reducing social exclusion (Feinstein, Bynner, & Duckworth, 2006) and social vulnerability (Haudenhuyse, Theebooma, & Coalter, 2012). In addition, Nichols and Crow (2004) and Crabbe (2007) contend that physical activity programmes also have the potential to decrease incidences of crime and anti-social behaviour in disadvantaged areas.

The elicitation of the voices of young people to inform policies and practices which affect their lives has been a growing focus in recent years (Halsey, Murfield, Harland, & Lord, 2006; McAuley & Brattman, 2002). Physical activity research has witnessed a related shift from considering and addressing the needs of young people in a distanced way to consulting the voices of youth in a more meaningful way (MacPhail, 2011; O’Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010; Quarmby & Dagas, 2013; Rees, Kavanagh, Harden, Shepherd, Brunton, Oliver, & Oakley, 2006; Tannehill, MacPhail, Walsh, & Woods, 2013; Wright, Macdonald, & Groom 2003). Sandford et al. (2010) report a movement towards the acceptance of young people as competent and skilled social agents, capable of reflecting upon, understanding and articulating their experiences. As Lee (2010, p. 14) suggests: ‘in order to understand young people’s participation in sport and physical activities, it is important to listen to how they express their own meanings and experiences’. However, the narratives of youth in areas of disadvantage have only recently begun to be privileged in physical activity research literature.

While there is considerable research into physical activity among the general youth population (e.g. Rees et al., 2006) and into the needs and experiences of youth in disadvantaged communities (e.g. Neary, Egan, Keenan, Lawson, & Bond, 2013), very little research has explored the space in which these two spheres of research overlap. Through an examination of the experiences of young people in one disadvantaged area, this paper adds to an emerging body of knowledge focused on what place physical activity occupies in the lives of young people in areas of disadvantage, with a particular focus on the forces which enable and constrain their participation in physical activity and the interplay between such forces and how youths experience and exercise agency.
Youth agency, disadvantage and physical activity

Research papers variously foreground structure or agency in drawing conclusions about the behaviour of individuals but it is less common to see a consideration of the interdependence between the two. In reconceptualising the dualism of the individual and society as the duality of agency and structure, Giddens (1984) warns against looking for the origins of activities in phenomena of which agents are ignorant and goes on to emphasise the skill and competence of social actors, referring to them as ‘expert “sociologists”’ whose knowledge is integral to the patterning of social life (p. 26). It is this concept that we intend to explore in the present study. Young people are prompted to share what they know about their lives, schools and communities, allowing us to examine the structural forces that enable and constrain their physical activity behaviour, and how their agency transforms and is transformed by those same forces.

According to Davies (2000), agency is never independent of social structures and process. Further, she explains that while a position of agency may be readily attainable for some it can be almost unattainable for others. This is reminiscent of the concept of ‘bounded agency’, put forward by Evans, which describes the complex interaction between individual agency and structural influences and considers the idea of ‘socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by structures’ (2002, p. 248). Lee (2010) discusses bounded agency in her comments on the conflict between, on one hand, poststructuralist imperatives to reject grand narratives such as class and gender, privileging individuality and agency, and on the other the persistent notion that class is a determining factor in youth physical activity. In her study on control and agency in youth transitions, Evans (2002, p. 266), concludes:

Young people are social actors in a social landscape. How they perceive the horizons depends on where they stand in the landscape and where their journey takes them. Where they go depends on the pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves, the terrain and the elements they encounter. Their progress depends on how well they are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and who their fellow travellers are.

This quote could also quite suitably be applied to the physical activity horizons of young people in areas of disadvantage. Where youths stand in a social landscape has a significant effect on the [physical activity] pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves. Speaking of their experience working with young people of all backgrounds, McCulloch, Stewart, and Lovegreen (2006) contend that, while youths may not necessarily be conscious of social class, class positioning nevertheless remains central to understanding young people’s lives. Following an examination of how young people express their individual and collective identities, they argued that, for example, youth in areas of disadvantage are more likely to engage in localised subcultures and that the choices available to such groups are limited by social, cultural and structural factors. Smyth, Mooney, and Casey (2014) add weight to this argument in their discussion of the class-derived obstacles, impediments and interferences experienced by adolescent girls in their physical activity endeavours.
The terrain and the elements they encounter also have a profound effect on the physical activity journeys of young people. The sense of security and freedom enjoyed by many adolescents as they pursue various forms of physical activity cannot be taken for granted in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Strategies young people employ to keep safe in such communities, according to Neary et al. (2013), can be explained by factors such as stereotyping, spatial marginalisation and social connections. They note that youth in disadvantaged areas could be seen as a marginalised sub-group, stigmatised by a perceived link to anti-social behaviour. This can lead to youths avoiding spaces frequented by negatively stereotyped groups and avoiding contact with adults who perceive the young people themselves in a negative light. Cahill (2000, p. 268) adds that youth are active in devising strategies to successfully negotiate public space and understand ‘socially mediated directives for behaviour bounded by invisible but implicit social understandings of what is acceptable’. Further, Clark (2013) points out that gendered constructions of safety can have a constraining influence on girls’ access to and experience of local spaces.

It is certainly the case that progress on a journey of physical activity depends on how well [young people] are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and who their fellow travellers are. Relationships with, and levels of support from, family and friends have been seen to strongly influence the physical activity behaviours of young people. Quarmby and Dagkas (2013), examining the influence of family structure on physical activity behaviours among young people from low-income lone-parent families, suggest that youths from such families can experience financial and time constraints which impede their participation in physical activity. They go on to maintain that the shared beliefs and orientations of family members towards physical activity can strongly impact a young person’s disposition towards and experience of agency regarding physical activity participation. Focusing mainly on peer relations, Smith and Green (2005) relate young people’s wider social interdependencies strongly to their physical activity participation and suggest that an understanding of how young people attempt to make and keep friends as they go through adolescence is crucial to comprehending the influence of friends on the activities of youth.

Setting the scene

The social repercussions of the construction of large social housing estates in confined urban areas have become evident in recent decades in both the UK and Ireland (Coles, England, & Rugg, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2007). Following some high-profile incidents of crime in estates in the Irish city of Limerick, a study was commissioned by the government to address social exclusion, crime and disorder issues in particularly disadvantaged areas of the city. According to the resulting report (Fitzgerald, 2007), in terms of socio-economic status, these areas of Limerick city contained some of the most deprived estates in the country, marked by high unemployment (five times the national average), a high proportion of one-parent families, and significant educational disadvantage resulting in educational attainments well below the national norm. The
issue of violent and drug-related crime was also highlighted, with gang activity in the estates seen to have a particularly negative influence on young people residing there. While the problems were acknowledged to be rooted in poor planning and short-sighted decision making in previous decades, the need for urgent action was stressed. The report recommended the establishment of two regeneration agencies (established in 2007) which had a remit to oversee the social, economic and physical regeneration of Limerick’s poorest neighbourhoods. Social regeneration was deemed the most important regeneration element (Power & Barnes, 2011).

A recent report entitled *How Are Our Kids?* (Humphreys, McCafferty, & Higgins, 2012) provided a comprehensive picture of the lives of families and children living in the Limerick Regeneration Areas. The report conveyed that crime, violence, dangerous traffic, negative role models, unfavourable peer influences and the widespread availability of drugs were constant concerns for parents as regards the wellbeing of their children. Another report, *Feeling Safe in Our Community* (Power & Barnes, 2011), highlighted many similar issues. The deterioration of the physical environment, through the demolition and boarding up of houses (although a necessary step in the regeneration process) has also had damaging effects on the local communities and was raised in both reports. While it is acknowledged that service provision has improved greatly in recent years and that many positive and resilient people are endeavouring to make the neighbourhoods positive places in which to live, it is clear that Limerick’s Regeneration Areas are places of social and economic disadvantage in which many young people still face challenging personal and social circumstances.

**Methodology**

This research is positioned within the social-constructivist paradigm. It focuses on the voiced experiences of participants in their lived worlds and the meanings they attach to such experiences. The focus group interview was chosen as the methodological approach due to its ability to encourage a variety of viewpoints, resulting in a co-construction of data (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), and its ability to allow marginalised voices to be heard (Morgan, 1996). Following institutional ethics approval and informed consent from the young people, 12 focus group interviews were carried out among six groups of young people, most of whom lived in the Northside Regeneration Area of Limerick city. The same interviewer carried out all 12 interviews. The interviewer did not reside in Limerick and had no previous connection with the young people or the educational settings. This was considered an advantage in encouraging young people to be open and engage with the process.

A convenience sample (Patton, 2002) was selected. It was decided to interview young people both within a mainstream post-primary school and within an alternative educational setting (Youthreach²). Three groups were interviewed in a classroom in each setting. There were between three and six young people in each focus group. In each setting a staff member acted as the point of contact for the researchers and was asked to select groups to participate, according to
their availability and willingness. Each of the six groups was interviewed twice, with a total of 40 young people taking part. In all, 24 Youthreach students (13 male, 11 female) and 16 post-primary school students (8 male, 8 female) participated in the research. The participants’ ages ranged from 15 to 19 (Mean age ± SD = 16.7 ± 0.97). Due to attendance issues, not all participants attended both the initial and follow-up focus group interviews. Twenty two attended both interviews, 11 attended only the initial interview and 7 attended only the follow-up interview.

The initial focus group interviews, which lasted an average of 30 minutes, focused on finding out about the participants, i.e. who they were, how they spent their time, what was important to them and how they understood and perceived physical activity and physical inactivity. An aim in the initial focus group interview was to build trust between the interviewer and the participants in order to ensure the follow-up questions were answered as fully as possible. The follow-up focus group interviews were, consequently, slightly longer in duration, lasting an average of 36 minutes. Follow-up focus group interviews, cognizant of what had been shared during the initial focus groups, investigated the physical activity habits and experiences of young people and attempted to explore the barriers and supports for participation they perceived or experienced.

All focus group interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically analysed. Data were analysed inductively (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) relying on the constant comparative method (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Analyses of the study data consisted of three phases of coding: open, axial and selective (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Open coding involved revisiting the focus group interview transcripts and segmenting them into categories of information, somewhat dependent on the types of questions asked in each focus group interview, e.g. the young people’s lives, schools and communities. This was followed by axial coding, in which connections were made among categories and related concepts. The final phase was selective coding, in which the researchers related the central phenomena of examining the enablers and constraints on young people’s physical activity behaviour to other categories and validated the relationships, e.g. the relationship between the reality of their lives and involvement in physical activity. Regular peer debriefing meetings were held during the data analysis stage to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of findings. The names of the participants were replaced by pseudonyms.

Findings

The findings revealed a number of structural forces at play in enabling and constraining the agency of young people as they assess, engage with, reject or create physical activity opportunities. The support and influence of family, friends, peers and school culture are first explored. This is followed by an outline of findings related to how life in their community affects their physical activity habits with particular reference to the feeling of being monitored, the imperative to stay out of trouble, and the mismatch highlighted by some young people between
type, location and timing of available physical activity options and what the young people themselves would choose. Finally, the degree of autonomy experienced by young people in influencing the range of physical activity opportunities available to them is explored.

Support and influence

Smith and Green warn us that ‘it would be extremely misleading to attempt to make sense of [young people] and their activities in isolation from the actions of those with whom they form very complex relationships’ (2005, p. 246). The most important people in the lives of young people in this study were family and friends. This was consistent throughout the focus group interviews.

When asked if they had anyone that they looked up to, most young people mentioned members of their families. Family members also represented a valuable form of support for participation in physical activity, both in the positive influence of family on young people and in the positive influence young people exerted on younger siblings. Annette described the importance of the support she and her brother received from family members in participating in dance competitions: ‘My mother and my sister go everywhere with us, like, you know, they’re very supportive’. Her mother had encouraged Annette to try out various activities as a child until she found one that she wished to continue. The following is an account shared by Annette of recent thoughts she had about giving up dancing:

I think, like, as you get older, like, around our age as well you don’t really want to be doing it any more. Like last, like this time last year now I lost interest in dancing, I was leaving. And then my mother was like ‘there’s no point’, and all, d’you know, ‘cos I’m going into the adult level now, d’you know, so there was no point really in leaving, like, so. She had a point then so now I kind of help out with classes as well.

Annette’s case allows a glimpse at the decision-making process for a girl who was faced with the decision of whether or not to drop out of her chosen physical activity and elected to remain active. The support of her family, the feeling that she had a choice of whether to stay or go and the fact that there were alternatives as to how she might continue to be involved, all influenced her decision to continue participating. We also note that from the beginning, while supporting her daughter’s involvement, Annette’s mother offered her choices of different activities and allowed her daughter to exercise autonomy in her physical activity participation.

Peers and friendship groups have often been found to positively influence young people’s motivation to participate in physical activity (e.g. Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald, & Aherne, 2012; Tannehill et al., 2013; Wood Baker, Little, & Brownell, 2003). A similar positive influence was evident in this study in the supportive peers with whom young people associated. Jeremy, speaking about how children first become physically active, illustrated the positive effect the example of others can have: ‘Just watch other people play and then just join in and play with them’. One summertime activity which young people were enthusiastic about was going down to
a local river to swim. When they were asked to explain further, it was clear that it is a favoured activity because young people spontaneously organise it themselves, exercising collective agency, and ‘everyone’ does it together.

The negative influence of being with friends who were not interested in physical activity, or who engaged in health-risk behaviours, was also noted in the present study. Smoking, drinking and taking drugs were barriers to physical activity participation emphasised by many young people. This was closely related to peer influence, as David described: ‘Eh, what’s it called, looking at someone else smoking joints and you copy them, peer pressure’. Jessica mentioned having participated in various forms of physical activity (basketball, camogie, soccer and dancing) until second year in school, but then described what happened when she changed schools:

Em, when I was in [post-primary] school, all my new friends then there, like none of them were interested in sports, they all, like, smoked and hung around corners and everything, and I just didn’t bother doing anything anymore ‘cos I just preferred to be with them.

In many cases school provided the introduction to physical activity for young people, both in formalised physical education and after-school activities. The majority traced their earliest memories of physical activity back to school and had happy memories of physical education in primary school. Other research in an Irish context has also indicated that the primary school is a significant site for the socialisation of children into activity, both within and outside of the curriculum (O’Sullivan, 2000). The positive attitude towards physical activity during primary school years evident in this study mirrors findings in other studies among Irish young people (e.g. Collier, MacPhail, & O’Sullivan, 2007).

The importance of the positive support, which can be provided by a school, is evidenced by the change in participation rates noted by those who moved from a ‘sporty’ school to a less ‘sporty’ one. Tim explained how changing schools affected his behaviour: ‘Yea, I was in [name of one school]. Played rugby all the time, I didn’t even smoke, went to the gym all the time until I went to [name of another school]. Just stopped going’. This highlights the importance of the influence of the school experience on a young person’s behaviour. When the group were asked what might cause this change in behaviour from one school to another, Christine offered: ‘Different schools, like, different ways, different ways of people, different teachers’. The implication here is that social rather than environmental factors were the main constraining influence on physical activity behaviours in the school context. Tim did not elaborate as to which aspects of the two schools had this affect and, certainly, this change in behaviour could not occur without his consent, but the circumstance does illustrate the point made by Brann-Barrett (2011, p. 276) that ‘all free choice is not created equal’.
Surveillance, control and staying out of trouble

When discussing their school, young people in the post-primary school felt strongly that the rules in the school were too strict, with regulations guiding all details of school life (e.g. uniforms, food, use of phones), cameras keeping students under surveillance and students required to scan their fingerprints on entering the building in the morning. Charlie stated ‘you can’t do nothing, there’s cameras on every corner’, while Sarah explained ‘we’ve to press our finger in on the scanner, now Limerick Prison don’t even have that. I’m not joking.’ Youthreach students who had previously attended the post-primary school also characterised it as ‘a prison’. This comparison to a prison brings to mind Giddens’ discussion of the ‘dialectic of control’ in carceral institutions and his notion that there are contexts in which agents experience a severe reduction in their ‘capability to have acted otherwise’ (1984, p. 156).

In line with opinions expressed in relation to the tight security and control experienced in school, some young people complained about the feeling of being watched and controlled within the community setting and the effect this had on how they spend their time. The nature and level of criminality experienced in the Regeneration Areas have made standard approaches to policing insufficient (Fitzgerald, 2007). However, the constraining effect this is having on the freedom of movement of young people and their activity patterns was highlighted in this study:

Noel: I could walk out my door, go take about ten steps, get pulled, [the Guards (police)]’d search me...
Paul: Tell you get in home again.
Noel: Tell you get in home, I won’t go in home, then I walk up to the top of the hill, the same guards pull in again, search me, and then, just can’t go nowhere like, and they’re watching and the cameras following you.
Interviewer: But I’m just talking about the way you spend your time, like, how, what you would do in your spare time.
Anne: There’s nothing you can do in your spare time and them [the guards] following you everywhere.

The perception of physical activity as a vehicle for keeping out of trouble was the most common incentive, both for participating in physical activity and for encouraging others to participate. Christine noted: ‘my sisters go to, my sister’s twelve and the other is fourteen and they go to club every day and it keeps them out of trouble’. Cody explained further:

Yea, ‘cos you could be around the roads now and the Guards could pull you and blame you for something you didn’t do or just pull you, you’re still getting pulled by the Guards or around an area that you’re not supposed to be in but if you’re doing sports then or if you’re at a youth club or something like that, you’re supposed to be there so you’d be grand. So you won’t get in trouble.
Hanging around

‘Hanging around the roads’ appeared to take up a large proportion of the free time of young people and seemed to be considered an acceptable form of activity. When this was probed more deeply and young people were asked what exactly this meant or how it would look to a passerby, the clearest response came from Katie: ‘Us sitting down by the church in our pyjamas, smoking fags, reading everyone’. The practice of young people ‘hanging around’ estates has been mentioned in various research papers and reports (e.g. Coles et al., 2000; Neary et al., 2013) with the attendant concern that this can be intimidating for other residents in the community and is associated with criminal activity. However, young people in this study attributed the prevalence of ‘hanging around’ as an activity option to a lack of appropriate alternatives rather than being a matter of preference. All had participated in physical activity of one form or another as children, but there was a general feeling that there were fewer attractive options available as they got older. Charlie summarised succinctly: ‘There’s nothing there for big kids, like us’.

Given that half of the participants reported being regularly active, two even competing at international level, it is clear that physical activity options do exist for young people in the area. Additionally, inactive young people in this study enthused about games they played as children and displayed positive dispositions towards physical activity. It seems, therefore, that the nature of the available options is the core issue. Young people voiced a wish for more variety of activities and more suitable facilities available at appropriate hours. This mismatch between available options and the stated preferences of youth betrays a sense that young people have not been meaningfully involved in decision-making processes regarding what activities should be made available to them in the neighbourhood. Perhaps moving away from what Hickey (2010) refers to as ‘adult-mediated experiences’ is an important first step in working toward facilitating appropriate, varied and accessible physical activity opportunities which are linked to the preferences voiced by young people themselves.

Youth voice in decision making

When asked how they would go about motivating others of a similar age to become physically active, some participants emphasised the importance of allowing young people to have a voice in decision making so that plans can be shaped by what they indicate they would like. At the end of one focus group interview, however, when the voice recorder was switched off, participants began to express the view that it did not matter what they said to the interviewer, as their voices would not be heard. When the voice recorder was switched on again, with the participants’ agreement, the following extract was the first exchange recorded:

Charlie: Our, our words don’t matter, like, so
Annette: Nothing, like, it’s not going to make a difference even if we do say anything anyway, d’you get me?
Charlie: It’s not going to change anything. Same as poor people, like, their words don’t matter.
This exchange echoes the ‘frustrated agency and struggle’ Evans (2002, p. 262) noted in the day-to-day lives of youth in disadvantaged situations. Following the above exchange, Charlie went on to describe an occasion when a group of young people had approached representatives of the local Regeneration Agency to request, unsuccessfully, funding to erect goal posts in a local field. This circumstance illustrates Evans’ point that ‘there are a number of boundaries or barriers that circumscribe and sometimes prevent the expression of agency’ (2002, p. 262). Undeterred however, Charlie and his friends approached Youth Bank, an organisation that funds projects designed and run by young people, and were successful in obtaining funding for the goal posts. This eventual success supports Giddens’ stipulation (1984, p. xix) that ‘the circumstances in which generalisations about what “happens” to agents hold are mutable in respect of what those agents can learn knowledgeably to “make happen”’. While the decision of the Regeneration Agency not to provide funding in this instance could have been allowed by the young people to constrain their agency, instead they actively pursued alternative options until funding was secured.

Discussion

In this study, social structures were seen to strongly influence the ability of youth to exercise agency in choosing whether, where and when to participate in physical activity. Family members were the important influences prompting the original initiation of physical activity and were crucial in supporting those young people who continued to stay involved both in practical ways and through general encouragement. However, the absence of peer support was often cited as a justification for physical activity cessation among young people and it appears that if friends are not involved, or do not value involvement, participation is less likely to occur.

This is an unsurprising finding as we know that social norms play a role in adolescent decision making about physical activity through the influence of such social norms on attitudes. Wood Baker et al. (2003) reported adolescents who perceive their activity behaviour is unimportant to peers and parents, or that their friends and parents do not demonstrate healthy physical activity habits, are less likely to have positive attitudes or intentions about physical activity. However, Smith and Green (2005) suggest that young people are only ‘relatively free’ to choose how and with whom they spend their leisure time and that friendship groups have a profound impact on their behaviour choices. They go on to explain that as young people endeavour to assert their independence they are simultaneously constrained by their interdependence with others. The findings here remind us that young people can be seen as positioned within multiple social relations conferred by specific social identities (such as child, friend, brother or sister) and each of these identities carry with it a range of ‘prerogatives and obligations’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 84) which may affect, or be affected, by how they experience and exercise agency.
Institutional structures also influenced the physical activity habits of young people in this study. It was interesting to note that, while previous research has indicated that making friends, enjoyment, positive feedback, building confidence and developing physical competence are among the main motivations for participation in physical activity by young people (MacPhail, 2011), in this study staying out of trouble was one of the most discussed benefits of physical activity. Originally a prevailing discourse among adult policy makers (Crabbe, 2007; National Crime Council, 2002; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004), the concept of physical activity as a deterrent from negative behaviour patterns, and as a vehicle for re-engagement of disaffected youth, appears to have penetrated into the mindsets of young people living in areas of disadvantage. This finding is a curious one. Although, in this case, young people exercise agency in choosing to participate in physical activity, which seems a positive result, this participation is extrinsically motivated by negative social circumstances rather than having a positive extrinsic motivation (such as being with friends) or, better still, a positive intrinsic motivation (such as enjoyment or challenge), both of which would make continued participation more likely (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It would be interesting to investigate whether the nature or meaning of physical activity experiences for such young people are affected by this negative motivation.

Young people in this study recorded feelings of disempowerment through the belief that no significance was attributed to their words and shared thoughts. This sense of constrained agency presents a particular difficulty when we consider that it is only through accessing the voices of young people that those attempting to promote physical activity can ensure that the range of opportunities being created are matched to the preferences of youth. Participants in this study believed that they should be consulted on how to effectively promote physical activity amongst young people, how to ‘clear their own pathways’ (Evans, 2002, p. 266). Sandford et al. (2010) provide examples of how young people’s involvement in the evaluation of physical activity interventions among at-risk youth can positively influence the programmes being evaluated. Duncan, Rivis, and Jordan (2012) go further, suggesting that increasing adolescents’ perceptions of control over their physical activity behaviour may lead to increases in physical activity. In examining youth projects in various social housing estates in Britain, Coles et al. (2000) found that consulting young people during the planning stage allowed youths to gain a sense of ownership of projects and a feeling that they were part of the decision-making process. Lawson (2005) emphasises the efficacy of having young people spread the word about programmes and activities, allowing social networks and peer influence to work to the advantage of physical activity endeavours.

Research has gradually moved from a practice of consulting young people to one of actively engaging them in the research process (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012a; Oliver, 2010). The findings of this study suggest that a similar shift may be necessary in the field of youth physical activity. Perhaps it is time to allow young people to have a more central role in the development and promotion of physical activity initiatives (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012b). Tapping in to the knowledge and expertise of young people could be the key to ensuring opportunities available to
them for physical activity are relevant and meaningful. If such involvement is well supported, and not tokenistic, it is likely to provide a youth insight that ensures planned activities match current physical activity trends. Such action would also have the potential to harness peer influence and empower young people, giving them a sense of autonomy and control over their own physical activity habits.

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1 This paper utilises the broad definition of physical activity employed by Cavill, Kahlmeier, & Racioppi (2006). Physical activity is understood to encompass all forms of exercise including organised sport, recreational activities, and fitness activities.

2 Youthreach is an education and training programme directed at unemployed young early school leavers aged 15-20. While Youthreach is a national programme, centres are locally managed and programmes reflect the particular social, economic and cultural environment in which they operate.

References


