



Sport, Education and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cses20>

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Published online: 30 Aug 2011.

To cite this article: Stephen Harvey & Toni M. O'Donovan (2013) Pre-service physical education teachers' beliefs about competition in physical education, Sport, Education and Society, 18:6, 767-787, DOI: [10.1080/13573322.2011.610784](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.610784)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.610784>

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Pre-service physical education teachers' beliefs about competition in physical education

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The discourse of competitive sport is, and has been, a defining feature of physical education for many years. Given the privileged and dominant position competition holds in physical education curricula, it is concerning that competitive physical education remains steeped in traditional pedagogies and that these pedagogies are constrained by teachers' everyday philosophies rather than any explicit understanding of pedagogy or the needs of pupils. This in turn affects pupils' experiences of physical education and specifically the type and form of activities that are offered to pupils. Physical education teachers' biographies generally show a profound attachment to sport, and in particular competitive sport, and the value of competitive sport is significant in the lives and identities of physical education recruits. However, there is a paucity of research specifically in relation to in-service and pre-service physical education teacher's beliefs about competition and its place in physical education. It is well documented that the implicit theories that pre-service, beginning and experienced teachers hold influence their reactions to teacher education and their teaching practice, with their beliefs acting as a filter through which a host of instructional judgements and decisions are made. Thus, it is important to understand pre-service physical education teachers' (PSTs') beliefs about competition. Thirty five (16 men, 15 women, 4 unknown) PSTs completed a reflective journal alongside their participation in a University-based module focused on models-based practice. The data generated were analysed using the procedures and techniques of grounded theory which revealed five major themes grouped in the discussion under the sub-categories of: (1) defining competition; (2) learning through competition; (3) competitive physical education and the sporting pathway; (4) competition needs to be got out of children; and (5) a little competition. The discussion challenges how we transform traditional views of competition and the competitive practices that alienate some young people from physical education.

Keywords: *Pre-service teachers; Physical education; Competition; Beliefs; Grounded theory*

Introduction

Many governments in the developed world have begun to take increasing control of physical education and youth sport (Philpotts *et al.*, 2010) through national policies such as the 'Canadian Sport for Life' movement focused on Long Term Athlete

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Development and Physical Literacy, and the recently commissioned Crawford Report to investigate the future of sport (which included physical education) in Australia. In the United Kingdom (UK), central government involvement in sports policy for physical education and youth sport has been significant for over a decade with youth sport receiving unprecedented funding between 2001 and 2010. However, in December 2010, set against a series of cut backs across UK government departments, the then Education Secretary Michael Gove set out the new Coalition Government's strategy for physical education and youth sport stating: 'It's time to ensure what was best in school sport partnerships around the country is fully embedded and moved forward to a system where schools and parents are delivering on sports with competition at the heart'.

This statement highlighted the UK government's desire to further embed competitive sport in schools across the UK and raise sport participation; a position they described as a new approach and different from that of the previous UK government's strategy. However, some question whether the new approach/radical departure of the UK Coalition government's policy is, in reality, particularly different or radical. Indeed, Flintoff (2003), Kirk (2010) and Penney (2002) argue that the discourse of competitive sport ('an essentially masculinised discourse') is, and has been, a defining feature of physical education for many years both in the UK and internationally.

The predominantly sporting ideological view of physical education represents not only a 'privileging' of sport over physical activity but also a 'hardening' of a hierarchy of activities well established within physical education which continues to feature sport and competitive games at the apex (Penney & Evans, 1999; Green, 2002). Furthermore, Penney and Evans (1999) suggest that the centrality of 'traditional' team games in the UK National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE; 1995) reflects a dominant central government view of physical education as synonymous with particular forms of sport and notion of the apparently character-building practices of sport (Coalter, 2008). This has, in the judgement of some (Williams & Woodhouse, 1996), privileged a curriculum which reflects a particular and eurocentric view of physical activity.¹

Given the enduring and contemporary context and the dominance of competitive activities in physical education, we would assume that the teaching of competitive sport within physical education would be conducted well by teachers themselves and perceived favourably by pupils. However, the literature would suggest that the delivery of competitive sport in physical education is constrained by teachers' everyday philosophies (Green, 2002; Green *et al.*, 2009; Aldous & Brown, 2010) rather than any explicit understanding of pedagogy or the needs of the pupils themselves (Williams & Bedward, 2001; Green *et al.*, 2009). This in turn affects pupils' experiences of physical education and specifically the type (i.e. activities such as team games) and form (i.e. competitive team games) of activities that are offered to pupils. Decisions on this type and form of physical education therefore serve to exclude many pupils who, in turn, possess the negative views of competition in physical education, which we examine next.

Pupil experiences of competition

Ennis (1999) maintains that competition as it now appears in school physical education programmes, both in class and in interschool competitive events, has an immutability and an inevitability about it that impedes students and teachers from considering it as anything more or different than the experience of winning and losing. For many sport theorists, as for many teachers and students, it just IS. This makes it difficult for anyone to contemplate alternatives to the common supposition that competition must consist of winning and losing and of displays of power, dominance, and control, evocatively referred to as 'the hegemonic grasp of alienating ideologies' (Birrell & Richter, 1987, p. 395 quoted in Singleton, 2003, p. 195).

To corroborate Ennis' (1999) assertions, O'Reilly *et al.* (2001) found that most children equate playing team games with winning and losing and that alternative elements of competition such as cooperation among teammates, the celebration of personal achievement, or focus on particular strategies and tactics were downplayed. Furthermore, they noted that due to the fact that many pupils' conception of competition is winning and losing, the teacher rarely emphasised these alternative elements of competition. In a recent paper directly focused on pupils' perceptions on competition within physical education, Bernstein *et al.* (2011) concluded that: (1) students of different skill levels perceived having fun in competitive activities differently; (2) pupils felt that having skill was a necessary part of competition although not everyone was developing their skills within competition; and (3) the structure of the various competitive activities influenced the student experience.

Despite the efforts of curriculum writers, in-service providers, university professors and various other experts who promote the inclusion of cooperative games, dance and recreational and leisure time activities, Singleton (2003) suggested that many secondary level physical education programmes continue to be structured upon a firm foundation of team games such as volleyball, basketball, rugby, team handball, football, hockey and soccer. Furthermore, in 24 focus groups conducted with one hundred and fifty three 15–16 year-olds in north-west England and northeast Wales, Smith *et al.* (2009) found that although the physical education teachers in the study provided their pupils with a degree of activity choice in later secondary school, many young people in the study, particularly girls and those from lower social class backgrounds, were dissatisfied with the over-representation of a small number of traditional team sports and activities in physical education.

In an earlier paper Ennis (1999) has argued that the dominance of the multi-activity model in physical education and the curricular structures of this model encourage highly skilled players to dominate, rewarding them socially for aggressive game behaviour (Hay & MacDonald, 2010). Previously, Ennis (1994) had argued that although physical educators have pointed to team play as a naturally cooperative environment, critique of these environments in physical education suggested that team play structured within multi-activity curricula can easily digress to negative, competitive environments where winning and losing is more than just a game (Ennis, 1994). Furthermore, Ennis (1999) found that often the African-American girls in

her study commented on the boys' intense level of competition and eagerness to prove themselves on the court or field. Conversely, the boys in the study saw the girls as a problem on their team and intimidated them by criticising their efforts.

Girls' marginalisation and alienation in sport-based physical education is particularly problematic and has been well documented (e.g. Griffin, 1983, 1984; Vertinsky, 1992; Wright, 1997; Hastie, 1998; Ennis, 1999). Girls' place within the dominant sport-based physical education programme has been constrained by a number of factors which include boys' competitive efforts to maintain sport for themselves, teachers' low expectations for girls, and by society's conceptualisation of feminism often (re)produced by girls themselves (Vertinsky, 1992; Nilges, 1998). Lenskyj (1993) suggested that many girls 'resist socialisation into sport because they do not find that they relate with its generally held values of competition' (p. 38, quoted in van Daalen, 2005). Flintoff (1996) reported that many everyday practices within physical education departments reinforce and reproduce stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity that disadvantage those who do not live up to the sporting ideal. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) found that the dominant forms of physical education are particularly off-putting for adolescent girls and low skilled pupils and that physical education was failing to provide many girls with either the experiences or resources to help them develop physical identities as other than the antithesis of men—less able, less strong and less competitive. It has been suggested that a physical education curriculum which purports to support inclusion should address the dominant forms of physical education that currently limit opportunities for girls from all ethnic groups in some schools (Williams & Bedward, 2001) as well in relation to race and class (Wright & Burrows, 2006). One way of approaching this, not yet evident in the literature, is to investigate teachers' beliefs about competition. We suggest that this may provide some indications of how teachers may conduct themselves in (re)producing notions of competition in physical education, especially given the enduring focus on competitive sport in physical education.

Teachers beliefs

A number of studies (e.g. Pajares, 1992; Placek *et al.*, 1995; Fang, 1996; O'Sullivan, 2005) have demonstrated how teachers' beliefs and, in particular, physical education teachers' beliefs have been formed early in their lives, for example, during their own experiences as pupils or from other life experiences while growing up (see also Matanin & Collier, 2003). Within this period the value of sport, and particularly competitive sport, has been significant in the lives and identities of physical education recruits (e.g. Green, 2000). Indeed, experiencing success in sport led them to valuing opportunities for competition (Curtner-Smith & Sofo, 2004; Stran & Curtner-Smith, 2009a, 2009b). This love of sport had been significant in the establishment of physical education recruits' 'subjective warrants'² a term originally used by Lortie (1975) and later adopted and defined by Lawson (1983a, b) in respect to physical education. These subjective warrants act to socialise recruits into

particular views (i.e. 'philosophies' or 'ideologies'—a *habitus*—of physical education) regarding the nature and purposes of physical education (e.g. O'Sullivan, 2005).

Although there is a paucity of research specifically in relation to in-service and pre-service physical education teachers' beliefs about competition, Curtner-Smith and Sofo (2004) for example, found that there were no signs of alternative visions of what physical education could be at the secondary level other than a subject dedicated to the teaching of sports and games. Green (2000) previously established that even where participation was the primary concern of teachers, this tended to be participation in (competitive) sport and, frequently, team-games. Indeed, the terms 'physical activity' and 'sport' were regularly used interchangeably and seemingly treated as if synonymous by the teachers in his study. Furthermore, the importance of achieving competitive sporting success frequently appeared to dominate these teachers' 'philosophies'.

The literature reveals that the implicit theories that pre-service, beginning and experienced (i.e. in-service) teachers hold influence their reactions to both teacher education and their teaching practice (i.e. Green, 2000; Curtner-Smith, 2001; Green, 2002; Matanin & Collier, 2003), with the beliefs acting as a filter through which a host of instructional judgements and decisions are made (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Shavelson, 1983; Ashton, 1990). Curtner-Smith (2001) described how physical education teacher education (PETE) tended to reinforce many previously held values and beliefs rather than modify them. Therefore, many physical education teachers continue with their existing *habitus*es, re-creating the 'traditional' skill-orientated and sport-dominated curriculum they previously experienced when teaching physical education in their 'on the job' experiences. Where PETE does have an impact, Lortie (1975) argued that this is often 'washed out' by this 'on the job' socialisation that pre-service physical education teachers' (PSTs') experience.

Green (2002) contended that values, beliefs and therefore knowledge are primarily informed by teachers' personal biographies and acculturation leading to the development of entrenched predispositions or *habitus*es based on these previous experiences. Understanding the belief structure of individuals is therefore critical to improving both teacher education programmes and teaching practices in school (Calderhead, 1996; Behets, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2005). We maintain, along with others such as Tsangaridou and Siedentop (1995) that meaningful change in education practice may be achieved more easily when teachers' beliefs are brought to the surface and tested through reflection and analytical processes, with these reflective processes being used to challenge the subjective warrants PSTs possess.

The strong influence of physical education teachers' beliefs on the practice of physical education is widely acknowledged. However, significantly more is known about pupils' experiences of competition in physical education than is known about teacher and PSTs' beliefs about competition. Therefore, we feel that understanding prospective physical education teachers' beliefs about competition in physical

education is an essential aspect in improving pupils' experiences of competition within physical education.

Methodological considerations

The study was conducted as part of an undergraduate practical unit on models-based practice (Metzler, 2011) in which we aimed to engage students in reflection about their beliefs about physical education and specifically about competition and competitive activities in physical education. This paper focuses on the PSTs' beliefs about competition.

Participants

Participants for this study were PSTs in the second year of a four-year PETE programme ($N=41$) at a University in Northern England with a long tradition in PETE. All the PSTs participated in a module/course titled 'National Curriculum Games Activities' (NCGA) that introduced them to models-based practice (Metzler, 2011) within a net and wall games context.

The University's Ethical Committee approved the study. The PSTs 'opted in' to the research aspect of the module, provided informed consent and only submitted their journals to the researcher after submission and marking of their coursework. The PSTs chose their own pseudonyms to which they would be referred to in any reports and/or publications so as to remain anonymous to the research staff.

The first author was the teacher of the University module and the second author acted as the 'independent researcher'. This was primarily for ethical purposes, in that, it removed the first author from the data collection processes which may have led to a perceived bias in relation to module or course grades. The second author therefore collated the data (in the form of a reflective journal) submitted by the PSTs for subsequent analysis, which included the removal of any identifying material. Not all PSTs consented to allow their reflective journals to be analysed by the researchers, so the final participant population was ($N=35$; 16 men, 15 women, 4 unknown).

As the PSTs were in the second year of their four-year programme, they had already completed one 'teaching practice' or field experience in year one of their course. A second field experience was due to occur in the second semester of their second year, after completion of the current NCGA module.

Project context and data generation

The cohort had participated in a predominantly 'traditional' educational experience during the first year of their PETE programme. The first author had developed a year two module to include a progressive educational experience (Dewey, 1938), an approach which seemed 'new' to many of the cohort thus providing a means to

challenge their previously held beliefs about teaching and learning. In the module, the first author facilitated the PSTs' learning around a structured, authentic experience of sport, through a Sport Education season (Siedentop *et al.*, 2011) that incorporated Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU; Bunker & Thorpe, 1982). Both models include a primary focus on competitive activities, engaging students in competitive games and encouraging students to reflect on the competitive nature of their experiences.

Tinning (2006) noted that, in physical education, one of the major trends in teacher education and PETE over the last decade has been the rise of reflection as a dominant concept. Nonetheless, as McKay *et al.* (1990) argued it is extremely difficult to get PSTs to be reflective or critical about sport. Therefore, because of its focus on introducing the PSTs to the two instructional models outlined above (i.e. Sport Education and TGfU) which include inherent features of competition, the first author extended the NCGA module so that the PSTs were engaged in completing a reflective journal alongside their participation in the module. It was felt that a reflective journal would aid the PSTs in recording what they did and how they acted in particular events during the NCGA module (and elsewhere). It also allowed them to consider in more depth their own and others thoughts and/or feelings about these events/actions (Bolton, 2010, 2005; Towndrow *et al.*, 2008).

In this regard, the NCGA module provided an opportunity to examine the PSTs' beliefs about competition in physical education in light of the experiences of competition they were having during both their theoretical and practical participation in the NCGA module. Facilitation of this experience occurred by guiding the PSTs' entries in their journals as they were asked to respond to various 'prompts' or 'statements' in the journal throughout the NCGA module, such as 'The Government have recently announced that competition should play a key role in physical education. Outline why you agree or disagree with this position'. The 'prompts' or 'statements' were designed to stimulate 'deliberate thought and analysis related to practice' (Holly, 1988, p. 78, quoted in Bolton, 2005, p. 164) and covered a range of topics from team roles, teaching tactics and game performance assessment, to those directly related to competition. These included the use of developmentally appropriate competition in Sport Education through, for example, the use of modified games, as well as the then UK government's policies regarding competition in physical education, especially in relation to the module content they were experiencing.

The reflections were not simply restricted to the recording of events/actions that had occurred through participating in the NCGA module. The PSTs were additionally encouraged to think about and reflect on their previous experiences of physical education. It was anticipated that using the reflective journal would cause the PSTs to consider in more detail some of their previous experiences in physical education in light of their current experiences on the NCGA module. In addition, it was also felt that writing the journal would aid the PSTs in evaluating how both their past experiences and their current experiences on the NCGA module might affect their own knowledge and/or understanding and, therefore, their future teaching of

physical education and, in particular, their use of competition (Bolton, 2010, 2005). Furthermore, we believed that the process of completing the reflective journal would lead the PSTs to clarify their understandings and misunderstandings about certain issues surrounding competition in physical education as well as identifying areas for future learning needs (Bolton, 2010, 2005). To further clarify their own personal knowledge and understanding and consider the views of others, journal entries were additionally facilitated by the PSTs themselves. This was accomplished by reading and critiquing a number of journal articles on the topic of Sport Education and TGfU, as well as the chapters on these two models in Metzler's book on models-based instruction (Metzler, 2011) individually and then with their peers. While the journal was not summatively assessed, it acted as a formative assessment tool as it directed them to particular readings, facilitated discussion with their peers and focused their attention on some of the key learning outcomes throughout the module (see Towndrow *et al.*, 2008).

Overall, we felt that the reflective journal allowed the PSTs' the opportunity to reflect on some of the key issues raised by the NCGA module. As such, this encouraged them to look 'through the mirror' (Bolton, 2010, p. 104) and challenge their own beliefs about notions of competitive physical education. It was our belief that by asking the PSTs to not only reflect, but to write about these reflections and discuss them with their peers, it allowed for a greater depth of discovery about their own beliefs than would normally be the case. It is worth noting, however, that the journal reflections did not trace how their views may have changed over an extended period of time but merely recorded how their opinions may have altered over the semester-long duration of the NCGA module (Tsangaridou & O'Sullivan, 1997; Tinning, 2006).

Data analysis

The data generated were initially analysed using the procedures and techniques of grounded theory, which is an inductive methodology based on the systematic generating of theory from data, that is itself obtained from social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1975). It consists of two main operations: (1) breaking down the data into meaningful units; and (2) grouping units with similar meanings into broader categories. The objective of this analysis was to organise and interpret the unstructured qualitative data generated.

The first step involved a detailed line-by-line examination of the reflective journals and involved identifying text segments into meaningful and significant excerpts in the sections which pertained to competition to which codes were attached. This coding is highlighted by a number of authors as a highly significant aspect of data analysis (e.g. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Second, all text segments that related to a specific code were sorted in a procedure referred to as 'creating categories' which became more focused as the key themes became established through repetitive and comparative examination of the text. Using a grounded theory

approach we continually checked data against interpretation until satisfied we had grasped the key meaning (Glaser & Strauss, 1975). These main themes and their sub-categories are summarised and presented and discussed in the next section.

Results

This section examines the PSTs' beliefs about competition organised under the five main themes that emerged from the analysis: (1) defining competition; (2) learning through competition; (3) competitive physical education and the sporting pathway; (4) competition needs to be got out of children; and (5) a little competition. We begin by considering the PSTs' beliefs about winning and losing and the important relationship between competition and everyday life. In the following section we examine, in an almost contradictory manner, beliefs about the alternative opportunities that competition in physical education offers such as socio-moral education, co-operation, teamwork and fair play. In 'Competition and the Sporting Pathway' we discuss beliefs about how competition in physical education can contribute to increased participation in sport and the development of elite athletes. The elite context was somewhat problematic for some PSTs who expressed concern about the 'win at all costs' mentality and the associated unhealthy competitive practices that 'need to be got out of children' and we deal with this issue in section d. Finally we examine the PSTs' conceptions about the form competition in physical education should take and for whom competitive physical education is *most* appropriate.

Defining competition

The majority of PSTs stated that competition was primarily about winning and losing:

Pepsi...pupils need to understand that failure and defeat are a part of life. By experiencing defeat and learning how to accept it gracefully ensures pupils have a greater social balance in their development.

Joanna I think it is healthy to include competition in PE lessons. Understanding the ideas behind winning and losing and taking part are important because they are a reflection of real life situations.

The descriptions the PSTs gave were in agreement with previous definitions of competition in the literature where it has been defined as 'achieving success or not having success, or winning and losing' (Bernstein *et al.*, 2011, p. 70). O'Reilly *et al.* (2001) previously found that children equated team games with competition and, thus, with the direct aspects of competition, namely winning and losing. Therefore, it is no surprise that this was a key finding of this study.

Aligned to their view about winning and losing the PSTs in this study described a further aim of competition which was to teach pupils about the nature of winning and losing as competition was 'a reflection of real life situations'. Indeed, many of the comments were similar to those of politicians who believe that competition should be

at the heart of physical education programmes, as echoed in Tessa Jowell (the Secretary of State for Education in the UK in 2002) stated that 'vibrant and healthy competition in school physical education is vital since learning to win and lose is an important lesson for us all' (cited by Kirk, 2002, p. 1). The importance of preparing young people for a life full of competition was certainly a recurrent theme, with 'losing' in particular being central to the learning experience:

Emily Children must understand about winning and losing; someone always has to lose.

Brendan Competition has been an integral part of my life growing up. It not only taught me how to win it also taught me how to lose which is equally important.

Coalter (2008) argues that there is little basis for the belief that competitive sport builds character and yet the PSTs almost universally explained that competition played an important role in preparing pupils for life. The PSTs repeatedly highlighted their concern that general day-to-day life is competitive and they repeatedly expressed the belief that as educators they held some responsibility for preparing their pupils for life:

Jenny In the 'real world' when the children have left school, the pupils will have to compete for jobs etc, and they will know they have to work hard, and develop their own skills in-order for them to be the best and succeed.

The belief that physical education can help young people prepare for life 'post-formal-education' is admirable but again whether competitive physical education experiences help in this respect is unresearched. They further affirmed McKay *et al.*'s (1990) belief that it can be extremely difficult to get PSTs to be reflective or critical about sport.

Learning through competition

Although Green (2002) maintained that many physical education PSTs possess similar warrants we found an almost contradictory position, where some PSTs saw the physical education curriculum as an opportunity for the promotion of alternative aspects of competition (see O'Reilly *et al.*, 2001). For example, the PSTs mentioned 'co-operation', 'teamwork' and 'fair play' among many indirect outcomes of using competition in physical education:

Gareth Competition is essential as it gives pupils the opportunity to learn key life skills that are important for everyday life...cooperation, communication and working with others are key features, all of which are also key skills that are important in life and come as a result of playing sport competitively because all of these are important factors to winning competitively.

While researchers such as Drewe (2000) have argued that there is a clear link between physical education and social and/or moral education, Coalter (2008) among others (e.g. Hellison, 2003) have been wary of arguing about physical education's potential in this regard. This is due to the fact that rarely if ever have the

social and moral aspects of physical education been articulated systematically or even less frequently monitored and evaluated (there are exceptions, see Ennis, 1999; Hastie & Sharpe, 1999; Hastie & Buchanan, 2000). Nevertheless, many of the PSTs made broad sweeping statements about the value of competition in physical education in respect to social and moral development:

Jess Competition can teach participants fair play and sportsmanship.

Damian Competition creates a unique learning environment, and can catalyse the bonding of a team.

Outcomes such as fair play, sportspersonship and teamwork have always been implicit in the ideology of sport (see Hellison, 2003) and in policy rationales. Nevertheless, only a minority of PSTs, such as Brendan, included a caveat about the form competition should take in order to build character and have positive social outcomes. Perhaps this is due to the complex position Brendan takes where he contends that competition is about winning and losing as discussed in the previous section, and also about fair play and putting in 100% effort as described here:

Brendan Having competition also helps to get the pupils enthused about physical education and as long as fair play and always putting in 100% effort is stressed it can only be a good thing for the pupils to experience.

Despite being engaged in a particular form of physical education that challenges traditional elitist competitive practices, many of the PSTs continued to reassert the belief that 'competition builds character' although there is still little robust evidence in the literature that these traits are developed through physical education and more specifically engagement in competition within physical education (see Bailey *et al.*, 2009). However, the introduction of pedagogical models such as Sport Education (Siedentop *et al.*, 2011) which aim to develop what Siedentop *et al.* (2011) call competent, enthusiastic and literate sportspersons may provide potential for researchers to begin to compile this evidence due to its emphasis on developmentally appropriate competition.

Competitive physical education and the sporting pathway

Kirk and Gorely (2000) highlighted that the connection between physical education and sport performance has taxed physical educators since the beginning of the era of sport-based physical education in the 1950s. Green (2000) also noted that physical education teachers continue to be complicit in this way of thinking. Only two PSTs in this study gave any indication that they thought the purpose of competitive activities in physical education was linked to an elite sporting pathway and in the development of future elite athletes:

Simon I agree that competition is a vital part of physical education, if there is no competition in schools then there will be a lack of elite athletes in sports. However competition is not everything and it needs to be fair when it is used in schools.

Stuart Other countries seem to just produce winners, whereas we don't and this is partly due to a culture of second best is good enough, when it's really not. In days gone by, competition was freely promoted in PE and it is strangely circular how this has been brought back to the fore.

The link between the production of 'winners' in sport and the teaching of physical education is not a new phenomenon. For example, Metsa-Tokila (2002) advocates for combining competitive sports with education as a way of keeping top-level sports at an international level. This production of 'winners' in the UK was also at the heart of the previous 'New' UK Labour Government's *Playing to Win* policy (DCMS, 2008). However, the majority of PSTs in this study made no reference to elite sport and the competitive pathway to which they referred was that of general participation:

Rupert Competition supplies a key motivation for all pupils, gives them an attitude to perform at their best and to the maximum of their own capabilities. Competition also gives pupils enthusiasm to further their sports outlet, such as joining clubs outside of school at a competitive level.

Although the teachers were engaged in studying Sport Education and TGfU models, it was surprising that only three PSTs referred to the authenticity of experience that pupils would not receive if they did not experience competitive sport in physical education. The PSTs wrote comments suggesting that without competition practising sport in physical education is meaningless and will not entice pupils to continue along a sporting pathway:

Jess Competition can give practices meaning . . . and . . . allows for more authentic sports experiences, because competition is a large part of sport in the real world.

Jason Competition is a main aspect of all sports and including competition in PE lessons will allow pupils to develop competitive skills but at the same time allow students [pupils] to build the philosophy of playing hard but fair. Also it makes the PE lessons more realistic. This is because without the element of competition, sports are not played for anything and therefore students [pupils] may not play with as much effort as when there is something to play for.

Drewe (2000) maintained that not only is competition naturally present in physical education, there *must* be competition present in order to make physical activity meaningful. Situated learning theorists argue this point in explaining their conception of physical education as helping pupils move from the peripheral to full members of a sporting community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kirk & Kinchin, 2003).

An interesting paradox is that while these PSTs extolled the importance of competition to make physical education meaning and authentic in relation to sport, many highlighted that it is the competitive culture of sport, and in particular elite sport, that physical educators need to be wary of in the classroom context (see Siedentop *et al.*, 2011), an issue which is further developed in the next section.

Competition 'needs to be got out of children'

The analysis revealed that a minority of PSTs believed that competition in schools could be problematic, with a particular concern that for some pupils the 'win at all costs' mentality would have emerged as their central conception of competition. It is evident that the PSTs felt some professional responsibility for stimulating moral attitudes to sport in their pupils assuming, it would seem, that like previous research physical education makes a difference in the lives of young people (Singleton, 2003; Larson & Silverman, 2005):

Charlie [healthy competition] ... is the opposite of the win at all costs mentality in which competitors are prepared to do whatever it takes to win. There are many examples of this like drug taking, blood doping, match fixing, and abusing or cheating the referee to win advantage. A teacher needs to reinforce the rules if this kind of behaviour is to be stopped and pupils are to be accountable for their actions. Examples of fair play should be highlighted and again rewarded to reinforce the positive values.

Others clearly and repeatedly articulated a concern that a focus on winning and a 'win at all costs attitude' may be associated with unhealthy competitive practices and should be balanced with 'good healthy competition'. It is perhaps unsurprising that the PSTs should focus on the value of healthy competition given their exposure to pedagogical models such as Sport Education and TGfU which are modelled on sporting practices and culture while actively seeking to redress the balance in these practices (see Penney & Clarke, 2005):

Joanna children need to be taught that winning is not the 'be all' and 'end all'.

David I think it's about a balance between good healthy competition and a win at all costs attitude that leads to gamesmanship and cheating and is not helpful to anyone and needs to be got out of children from a young age.

A number of PSTs indicated that they believed that experiencing competition in physical education would help their pupils learn 'healthy' forms of competition and that the emphasis of competitive activities was particularly important:

Rupert I understand the term 'healthy' competition as the form of competition that comprises of the positive styles of sport such as sportsmanship, no cheating and gestures such as 'good game' or shaking hands after every game. It is important that these types of positive styles are embedded into pupils by teachers in order to produce fair play compared to that of poor gamesmanship (bad language, over reacting etc.)

Learning how to win and what it means to win emerged repeatedly and it is clear that the PSTs felt a responsibility for developing 'appropriate' attitudes to winning in their pupils:

Michael competition is important in PE as it is an outline for pupil's futures. They need to learn how to win and how to lose in the correct manner and competing in the correct spirit.

As already outlined a cluster of issues have emerged in relation to the PSTs' beliefs about the impact of competitive activities in physical education on students experiences of physical education. Of equal importance are the PSTs' views on how to teach competitive activities in physical education and, in particular their views on how to teach 'healthy competition', which are examined in the next section.

A little competition

Our analysis indicated that a number of PSTs were hesitant in their views about competition stating that they felt that it was not appropriate to include competitive activities in physical education except in a highly modified fashion:

Charlie I agree that competition should be a part of physical education as long as it is carefully managed. Just allowing pupils of differing abilities to play each other at the full versions of activity will inevitably turn pupils away from PE. This would create a situation in which the high skilled pupils will dominate and this would reinforce strong masculine stereotypes that are associated with many sports and activities. Anyone (male or female) who does not live up to this 'sporting ideal' will clearly be denied any positive educational experiences in PE.

A cluster of issues emerged in relation to the way teachers manage the competitive environment in the classroom to cater for mixed ability groups. Charlie's reference to not allowing pupils of differing abilities play full versions of the game was mirrored by others who suggested that it is often the less skilled pupils who experience competition negatively and as such a number of PSTs commented that more and less able pupils should experience competition differently and in some cases separately:

Dave I think every pupil should experience some degree of competition...but I think that we have to be careful because competition highlights weak performers who might not really like sport in the first place, I believe this would be unfair to single them out. However if a school has a class of gifted and talented sports people in PE and they are elite performers then competition is very important and they should be competing against one another to better themselves.

While recognising that every pupil should 'experience some degree of competition', analysing the reflective journals revealed a common view that the numerous positive impacts of sport were only available to those who could sometimes achieve success. Although Howard identifies outcomes such as hard work and team work below and identifies that 'a little competition is important for everyone', he also later asserts that pupils who are 'not as able' do not access the positive impacts in a comparable way to their talented peers:

Howard I believe that there are both positive and negative impacts from competition but I feel the positive implications outnumber the negative. Some positive aspects gained from competition are learning of beneficial values such as hard work and teamwork etc. I personally feel that a little competition is important for everyone ... But obviously the negative impacts such as competition can lead to

learning of negative values and gamesmanship as well bullying of pupils who are not as able.

There was some consensus that pupils needed a certain amount of skill to gain the most benefit from competitive opportunities but while many indicated that this should influence which students should experience competition and in what way, few identified that skill level or ability should influence when pupils experienced competitive activities. Naomi was one of the few exceptions in this regard:

Naomi I believe earlier stages are a time for developing the skills for the pupils to become more competent before engaging in game situations

The hesitant views the PSTs expressed about the place of competition for low-ability pupils echoes the findings of O'Reilly *et al.* (2001) that the teachers in their study de-emphasised winning and losing by, for example, not keeping score. That PSTs may restrict competitive opportunities to the most able pupils is concerning as it further reinforces Evans (2004) contention that high-ability students are privileged in terms of achievement possibilities while low-ability students are marginalised in terms of access to contexts in which capital may be acquired and/or displayed, resulting in their enduring low-ability identification. While Hay and Macdonald (2010) suggest that sport and the competitive context it created are fundamental to practice in senior physical education for all students, it appears that ability is mediating PSTs' beliefs about the appropriateness of competition for all students. Prevailing notions of ability need to be further considered alongside PSTs' beliefs about competition in order to challenge educators to reconsider how the potential of students in and beyond physical education is viewed.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate PSTs' beliefs about competition. This was achieved through engaging one cohort of second year physical education PSTs in completing a reflective journal alongside their participation in a university module which exposed them to pedagogical models such as Sport Education and TGfU. This provided an avenue to foster the development of PSTs' beliefs about competition in physical education due to the inherent features of competition built into both of these models.

The emphasis upon sport and team games from both within and from outside the subject-community of physical education has allowed some teachers to maintain preferred views of physical education (as oriented towards sport and performance) whilst, at the same time, constraining the development of alternative conceptions of the nature and purposes of the subject. Therefore, the need for PSTs to become aware of their beliefs, and in particular their beliefs about competition, through exposure and participation in university modules such as the one described in this paper is critical to challenging the subjective warrants of PSTs, which are resistant to change. Kirk (2002) noted that there needs to be a critical approach to educating PSTs, a view which is shared by Light (2008) who argued that teacher education

needs to challenge 'pre-service teacher's embodied, unarticulated beliefs and assumptions about learning' via 'getting pre-service teachers to consciously think about and discuss their own beliefs about learning and the ways in which they relate to the assumptions about learning that inform constructivist practice and theory' (p. 26). As previously noted in the recent study of 17 PSTs by Sofo and Curtner-Smith (2010), examination of teachers' subjective warrants was critical to improving PETE and, thus, the pedagogical practices which are employed by physical education teachers.

Therefore, having the PSTs in this paper engage in critical reflection alongside their participation in a University module which employed two models where competition is an inherent feature is a first step in initiating change in their subjective warrants. Although Green (2002) previously noted that PSTs possess similar warrants or what he termed a 'group habitus' (p. 79), in this study there were some individual differences about PSTs' beliefs about competition, especially with regard to how PSTs understood competition in physical education and how they interpret ideas about developmentally appropriate competition, for example. Assisting PSTs in making sense of their conceptions of competition in relation to their own biographies and personal experiences of competition as both pupils and now as PSTs is therefore crucial as a first step in initiating change and/or transformation. And while we did in this paper note some possibly simplistic, and polarised, definitions of competition as either: (1) winning and/or losing (Bernstein *et al.*, 2011, p. 70); or (2) a very limited *experience* where having fun was the teachers' goal for the students (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2001), some of the PSTs' conceptions of competition did move beyond these simplistic definitions and/or polarisation. Journal entries showed how a number of the PSTs had begun to consider developmentally appropriate competition (i.e. the use of modified games), possibly due to their engagement in the NCGA module and completion of the reflective journal. The challenge, as we see it, is in the next step—if PSTs have begun to modify their views about competition, how do we maintain this transformation in the PSTs' beliefs about competition? This is no easy task, as outlined by MacDonald (2003) as she noted 'entrenched knowledge and practices often override the innovative ideal' (p. 139).

Concurring with Light (2008), Sofo and Curtner-Smith (2010) warned of the need to maintain the theoretical aspects of the teacher education programme so as to 'flag-up' specific instances where critical thinking could be developed. This critical thinking is an attempt to override PSTs' subjective warrants. However, as we have alluded to above, transformation must go one step further and changes in beliefs must be enacted in practice. Therefore, once change has been achieved in the University context via reading, reflection, dialogue and discussion, PSTs should then be provided with opportunities to apply this new knowledge and understanding in school-based settings during early field experiences and/or 'teaching practices' with appropriate support from both the University tutors and in-school mentors.

We understand that modifying PSTs' beliefs is only an initial step in the transformation of their approach to competition progressing to the utilisation of

developmentally appropriate competition practices for all pupils when undertaking field experiences during PETE and beyond. As Bernstein *et al.* (2011) recently highlighted, the way that physical education teachers' structure competitive activities can affect the nature of the experience for the pupils. For that reason, encouraging the 'alternative' aspects of competition (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2001) and focusing on a mastery climate (Bailey *et al.*, 2009) may provide ways in which pupils can *learn through competition* and challenge the polarised nature of competition highlighted earlier. Metzler (2011) offered additional examples of various task presentation structures that can be used to promote developmentally appropriate competition within a mastery climate in his recently updated text including Team Game Tournaments and Student Team Achievement Divisions.

We acknowledge that some research indicates that a wash out effect occurs when teacher education is undermined by the requirements of the school-based context and the key agents within this context (i.e. pupils, parents, other teachers, etc.—see Green, 2002). Delivering these models within an actual school context on their field experiences would increase their knowledge and understanding of how models such as Sport Education and TGfU could be used to foster developmentally appropriate or alternative aspects of competition. Moreover, field experiences where PSTs may be required to make contextual modifications (Metzler, 2011) to these models in respect of its competitive structure could foster further development in this knowledge and understanding. Utilising the model in this way, with continued critical reflection, may also aid in reducing cognitive dissonance and, consequently, the epistemological gap (Butler, 2005).

Nonetheless, this is not without further challenges. If the PSTs' subjective warrants are so entrenched in terms of a particular view or definition of competition, then the epistemological gap will be greater and it may result in these models being delivered in a cafeteria or watered down (Curtner-Smith *et al.*, 2008) manner or physical education being simply re-branded (McCaughy *et al.*, 2004). Thus, the pupils' experience of physical education would remain unaltered due to this teachers' interpretation of the model as a result of their underlying beliefs about competition. For example, the Sport Education model may be delivered simply as a tournament with persisting teams, but without many of the awards and rewards for fair play and teamwork, for example. Therefore, there is a need to maintain the fidelity of the model and ensure the PSTs are appropriately supported when utilising the model in field experiences to prevent 'slippage' between learning the required content on the university module and the local context of implementation (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001).

Further research could look to supplement modular delivery such as the one highlighted in this paper with appropriate field experiences where the PSTs could discuss and critically evaluate specific 'teaching moments' together with teacher education and/or school-based staff. PSTs could then not only have to complete a reflective journal while at university but also when on field experiences and research data collection could be supplemented with additional interviews and documentary analyses (i.e. of unit/lesson plans, etc.). This would add to our understanding of

PSTs' beliefs about competition in physical education and how they possibly change over an extended period time and with additional experiences. In addition, future research could also examine beginning and in-service physical education teachers' beliefs about competition so as to allow for developments in our collective understanding about the nature of physical education teachers' beliefs about competition and how these affect the experiences they offer their pupils.

Notes

1. Eurocentric—focused on European traditions such as team sports/athletics rather than for example eastern traditions such as martial arts.
2. Lawson (1983a) defined this as 'a person's perception of the requirements and benefits of work in a given profession weighted against self-assessments of aspiration and competence' (p. 13).

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