

Physical education and school sport

Is there a wider social role?

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the (alleged) importance of physical education (PE) and school sport¹ to society. It begins with a brief sketch of the ways in which PE is said to be important (primarily by physical educationalists, it must be noted) socially. This is followed by an exploration of what have, perhaps, been the pre-eminent justifications for a social role for school PE: the (secondary) socialisation² of future adult citizens and health promotion. This leads into a critique of what is arguably the pre-condition for any wider social role for PE, such as health promotion: namely, PE as *a* (perhaps *the*) key mediator in the formation of predispositions (what sociologists might call habits or habitus) towards lifelong participation in sport. Against this backdrop, the chapter concludes by speculating on the future of PE in relation to any wider social role (Coalter, 2007) it might fulfil and, in particular, education for leisure.

A wider social role for PE?

Since the 1960s, the conventional (philosophical) justification for education has presented compulsory schooling (and individual subjects therein) as a means of providing societies with the kinds of rational, self-governing, and, as a corollary, ‘free’ individuals that has reflected the hegemonic liberal ideal of a society of autonomous citizens normative in post-war Western society (McNamee, 2005; White, 2006). In its conventional and ‘traditional’ form – the sport and sports technique-based ‘multi-activity model’ (Kirk, 2006, 2013) – PE has always struggled to stake a claim for contributing to this essentially academic educational ideal, being viewed (philosophically, at least) as a trivial pursuit lacking in educational value (Stolz, 2014). Hence, physical educationalists have continually felt obliged (whether they have, in fact, done so or not) to recognise that claims made for their subject are less academically (and, therefore, educationally) straightforward than other subjects: English develops youngsters’ ability to use language, maths their use of number, history their understanding of the past – but what does PE do, beyond develop sporting skills? To justify its existence on

an essentially academic curriculum, PE appears to need an alternative or, at least, additional social function.

Against the backdrop of the long-standing vulnerability of PE as a school subject, Bailey et al. (2009, p. 1) have suggested that, historically, claims for the value of PE [in personal as well as social terms] have been ‘made in four broad domains: physical, social, affective and cognitive’. In a similar vein, AIESEP (Association Internationale des Écoles Supérieures d’Éducation Physique/International Association for Physical Education in Higher Education) (2014) conceives of PE ‘as that which concerns the physical, affective, social and cognitive development of young people’.

Beyond the teaching of sport and sports skills for their own sake (and as a seedbed for developing sporting talent), the *physical* element has typically taken the form of health-related exercise (HRE) and physical fitness. The *social* and *affective* elements have been manifest in the supposed role of sport in the development – the aforementioned secondary socialisation – of ‘character’, otherwise known as personal and social development (PSD) (or personal and social education – PSE – as it was called in schools).³ Albeit to a lesser extent, PE has also claimed a wider social role in terms of ‘education for [active and purposive] leisure’ and, subsequently, socialisation into what McNamee (2005) has termed sport as a ‘valued cultural practice’. In relation to any ostensible contribution of PE to the *cognitive* development of youngsters – wherein sport is presented as a vehicle for informing and developing the mind – it is generally accepted (among educational philosophers at least) nowadays that practical knowledge of the kind that characterises ‘normal’ PE (i.e. beyond examinable PE) is not knowledge of the right kind to bestow educational significance on physical activities (see, e.g., McNamee, 2005). More recently, however, and following ‘rearguard’ attempts to show that PE can and does make a contribution to the cognitive development of youngsters (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2009; Stolz, 2014), in line with the dominant academic model of education (see McNamee, 2005), claims have begun to emerge for a positive effect of physical activity (PA) (in PE) on cognitive function and, as a corollary, academic performance (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2009).

The various claims for the benefits of PE – to wider society as well as individual youngsters – have waxed and waned over time. Some have been central and enduring (health and fitness, PSE), while others have been more-or-less peripheral and/or fleeting (education for leisure, talent identification), and still others more recent and tenuous (PA as a means of enhancing cognitive function and academic performance). While Bailey et al. (2009, p. 1) claim that ‘analysis of the evidence suggests that PE has the *potential* to make contributions to young people’s development in each of these domains’ (emphasis added), the evidence is far from persuasive, let alone conclusive, regarding any of the aforementioned four domains. In short, PE *may* promote healthy lifestyles, PSD, education for leisure, cognitive development, and so forth, but it *may not*! As Bailey et al. (2009) acknowledge, such claims are, in effect, contingent. They are, in other words, dependent upon other conditions being met: *if*, for example, young

people are introduced to active, healthy lifestyles as children in their families *then* PE may well serve to enhance their health-related knowledge and reinforce predispositions. The same applies to sports participation.

Perhaps the two most enduring claims for a wider social role for PE revolve around PSD and health promotion.

Personal and social development

Constituting something akin to a latter-day version of the nineteenth-century public school ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano* (or ‘sound mind in a sound body’) – believed to characterise the young ‘muscular Christian’ gentlemen of nineteenth-century English public schools – post-Second World War physical educationists in state secondary schools in the UK have persistently claimed that PE (and team sports in particular) socialises youngsters into character virtues (e.g. psychological resilience, resourcefulness, sense of moral obligation, sense of ‘fair play’) believed desirable in good citizens: i.e. learning to become a fully functioning member of society. Once again, however, such claims are typically indirect: whereas PSE and theology deal directly with, for example, the ethical dimensions of personhood and citizenship,⁴ PE can only offer itself as a vehicle *through* which social and educational goals – beyond merely learning how to play sport – might be achieved. Hence, the well-established and intuitive position adopted by PE teachers that PE educates and socialises young people *through* (as well as *in*) sport in personal and socially desirable virtues, such as being a good ‘team player’, respect for persons, viewing life (like sport) as meritocratic, recognising the contributions of others, and the like.

The tenuous and contingent nature of such claims is implicitly recognised in PE research. While stating that ‘The contribution of PE and School Sport to learning of values has been identified by teachers and researchers’, do Santos Freire, Marques and de Jesus Miranda (2018, p. 449) admit that ‘we know little about how that teaching takes place during classes’ (beyond, one assumes, a kind of osmosis) and that it often amounts to a simple act of ideological faith – ‘A belief in the possibility of teaching values in the classroom is part of the *habitus* of the PE teacher’ (emphasis in the original) – an illusion which leads PE teachers to set ‘unrealistic expectations’ and over-simplify the ‘complexity involved in the construction of value systems’ (p. 449). Put simply, while the development of personal and social skills seems a widely accepted goal of PE, PE teachers struggle with the realisation of these in their lessons (Opstal et al., 2018). We might go one step further: PE is equally likely to propagate what would be deemed negative social behaviours rather than life skills – such as bullying, violence, and body shaming – all likely to result in the marginalisation even exclusion of some youngsters from engagement with sport. Indeed, the cultivation of separate tightly knit groups, such as teams and clubs, in PE and school sport is as likely to encourage social fragmentation as social cohesiveness and solidarity: sport can bind while simultaneously dividing (Roberts, 2016a).

Despite this, and alongside ‘character development’ *per se*, sport has long been considered a suitable vehicle for dealing with problematic groups of young people (Coalter, 2007; Nicholson and Hoye, 2008) – particularly ‘deviant’ working-class youngsters. More recently, the ostensible social function of schools and PE has been taken up by the sport-based positive youth development (PYD) movement (see, e.g., Anderson-Butcher and Provenzano, 2018). PYD promotes PE and school sport as a context for personal development (Fraser-Thomas, Côté and Deakin, 2005). Claiming to ‘view youth in a positive light and focus[ing] on building personal assets’ (Côté, Turnnidge and Vierimaa, 2016, p. 244) – in the form of so-called ‘life values’ and ‘personal and social responsibility’ (Côté, Turnnidge and Vierimaa, 2016) – sport-based PYD programmes are believed to have the potential to make significant positive impacts on the social development of youngsters. With its heartland in North America, PYD has become increasingly influential in academic PE circles. Its growing popularity notwithstanding, as a branch of so-called ‘positive psychology’ (with its roots in the ‘power of positive thinking’) PYD stands accused of ethnocentrism and individualism: perpetuating a particular set of (white, middle-class and Western) values emphasising individual self-determination and responsibility (see, e.g., Hellison and Martinek, 2006) on the back of simplistic claims about ‘human nature’. In effect, the claims made for PYD become a veneer concealing the underlying structural ‘determinants’ that act as impediments to PSD experienced by, for instance, children living in poverty, those from ‘non-traditional’ family backgrounds, those with special educational needs, and some ethnic minorities. Thus, PYD pays little attention to the kinds of structural changes that those concerned with social inequities and social justice (see below) call for.

More recently, governments and schools have sought to prioritise what has become known as social and emotional learning (SEL) through PE (Wright and Gray, 2018) on the grounds that there is a need to complement the focus on the academic and cognitive in schools with development of the social and emotional skills viewed as equally important for young people to not only cope with but thrive in contemporary societies. Overwhelming evidence demands that we complement the focus on academics with the development of the social and emotional skills and competencies that are equally essential for students to thrive in school, career, and life. As with PYD, SEL competencies are said to include self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. Not only is there little robust empirical research regarding how this is implemented, if at all, in PE – let alone if it has any efficacy – SEL, as articulated by PE academics, is guilty of some of the individualising, de-contextualised tendencies writ large in PYD. It is worth making one additional point about the claims made for PE as a vehicle for personal development: the link between participation in PE and school sport and the range of good outcomes attributed to them is likely to be due mainly to the types of youngsters who take part rather than the effects of participation (Roberts, 2016b).

With the significance of context at the forefront of their analyses, academic physical educationalists sensitive to the ways in which youth cultures are divided by class, gender and ethnicity have supplemented claims for a wider socialising purpose for PE (than the development of character virtues) by advocating a pro-active role for the subject in a fight for social justice and, more specifically, social inclusion (see, e.g., Garratt and Kumar, 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Long, Fletcher and Watson, 2017; Ovens et al., 2018; Tinning, 2016).

Social justice and social inclusion

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, and most notably in the form of ‘sport for all’, access to leisure and sport has increasingly been viewed as not merely desirable but as a ‘right’ or entitlement in Western societies (Devine, 2016). Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, for example, have long treated leisure as an aspect of citizenship and thereby extended the notion of social welfare upwards to incorporate an entitlement to leisure and sports (Green, Thurston and Johansen, 2019).

Against this backdrop, concern with social justice has been steadily growing – at least among academic physical educationalists – for more than 40 years (Walton-Fisette and Sutherland, 2018), as it has in fields such as public health. A central claim among those concerned with identifying a role for PE in social justice is that social inequalities (grounded in, e.g., social class, age, ‘race’ and ethnicity, sex/gender, sexuality) are often reproduced in school PE, and sporting and leisure contexts (see, e.g., Long, Fletcher and Watson, 2017) in particular, excluding some groups (e.g. girls and particular ethnic groups) from something they are ostensibly ‘entitled’ to. The corresponding central aim of the social justice ‘in and through’ PE movement is the achievement of a more equitable PE that contributes to a more equitable society, in relation to the various social groups on the receiving end of injustices in PE, specifically, but wider society more generally (see, e.g., Ovens et al., 2018).

Integral to social justice are notions of *social inclusion* and *exclusion*. Socially excluded groups are those outside mainstream society – in the case of PE, those marginalised or excluded from PE and sport, by virtue of the ‘normal’ or conventional activities therein, the dress code, the organisation of the subject, the attitudes and behaviours of PE teachers, and so forth. Particular concern is expressed about the *de facto* formation of groups (e.g. girls, South Asian Muslims, and lower-working-class children) who can be marginalised in or excluded from PE.

Social justice and issues of inclusion/exclusion have received particular attention in terms of the consequences of a gendered PE, not only for the involvement in sport of girls and less stereotypically masculine boys but also for the reinforcement of stereotypes damaging to youngsters’ identities and self-esteem (see, e.g., Scraton, 1992, 2018). Treating PE and sport as inherently meritocratic and gender neutral is said to ‘mask a discourse of androcentrism in sport which hinders further progress towards gender justice in PE and sport’ (Devine, 2016,

p. 1193). PE teachers have had and, by degrees, continue to have ‘clear ideas about “appropriate” activities and behaviours based on notions of acceptable femininity relating to physical ability and capacity; female sexuality and expectations of motherhood and domesticity’. While there may have been improvements, it remains the case ‘that gender expectations are still very evident in PE for girls in schools’ (Scraton, 2018, p. 651). There is growing evidence, nevertheless, of change alongside the undoubted continuities (Scraton, 2018). Girls’ growing involvement in football is a case in point.

Those who frequently refer to themselves as ‘critical theorists’ (see, e.g., Hill et al., 2018) want to go one step further, however, in relation to social justice, inclusion and the ‘equity agenda’ (Lawson, 2018). They invite us to not only question the taken-for-granted values and ‘knowledge’ underpinning the practice of PE (and, therefore, the secondary socialisation of youngsters through PE), but argue that PE, sport and leisure can be sites of resistance as well as oppression. They advocate ‘emancipatory practices’ intended to help PE teachers (especially those relatively recently qualified or in teacher education) to challenge and transform the existing inequities and injustices often said to have resulted from ‘the worst excesses of new Right populism’ (Evans and Davies, 2017, p. 684). Consequently, ‘critical’ academics have advocated the use of PE teacher education to develop forms of critical consciousness among future generations of PE teachers in order that they might act to enhance equity, inclusion and social justice not only *in* but also *through* PE (Tinning, 2016) – particularly with regard to the hidden or informal curriculum, manifest, for example, in taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the abilities of particular groups, such as girls, South Asian Muslims, Afro-Caribbean boys, and youngsters with disabilities.

In this vein, it is argued that despite historically tending towards the indirect repression of disadvantaged groups via ‘male and pale’ forms of conventional (games-oriented) PE, the subject has the potential to promote positive social change. In the process, PE has the capacity (or so it is claimed) to shed light on the wider experiences and struggles of marginalised or excluded groups, such as Muslim girls and LGBT young people, thereby contributing to the ‘civic integration’ of particular groups ‘including their leisure practices’ (Lenneis and Agergaard, 2018, p. 1). Put simply, in the interests of social justice and social inclusion, sport must aspire to be egalitarian – accessible to all social groups in principle and in practice, thereby eliminating direct and indirect discrimination in the practice of PE and sport. It is clear, nevertheless, that those advocating a social justice agenda for PE face significant difficulties in turning the intuitively conservative sporting young people who continue to constitute the bulk of PE teacher trainees into ‘critical pedagogues’ (Gerdin, Philpot and Smith, 2018, p. 203).

The notion of social justice implies impartiality in, for instance, the provision of opportunities (e.g. to play sport) and the treatment of people, such as youngsters with differing sporting abilities and physical conditions. The difficulty arises in determining what counts as just and impartial, not least because values and

a corresponding sense of justice – regarding whether particular practices and outcomes are fair and equitable (e.g. the content of PE curricula favouring particular forms of ‘national’ games that appeal to some ethnic groups more than others) – vary between cultures. There is no one form of PE that can be said to be objectively and without question “just”, independently of the cultural context in which it occurs and the values that this prescribes. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that some groups may, to all intents and purposes, be marginalised if not excluded by virtue of the fact that sport may not be especially valued within their culture (e.g. South Asian Muslims) to the same extent – or even as much as PA *per se* – as it is, for example, in Nordic countries (see, e.g., Green, Sigurjónsson and Skille, 2018). It is necessary, in other words, to determine whether we are dealing with individual and cultural differences rather than inequalities as such, and whether these simply reflect individual or group (cultural) predispositions as opposed to being generated by social processes such as school PE and sport. Particular uses of leisure, including sport, are part of what it means to be a particular kind of young person (e.g. male/female, English, Muslim). Although the removal of constraints, if possible, might make the same leisure (e.g. music, dance) and sporting activities (e.g. kabbadi, Parkour, rugby league, pole fitness, synchronised swimming) equally accessible to everyone, the appearance of open access or ‘sport for all’ simply obscures the many and varied, non-meritocratic ways in which leisure and sporting groups are formed socially and culturally (see Roberts, 2016a). Another difficulty lies in establishing just how realistic it is to imagine that spheres such as school PE can become sites of more widespread political and social emancipation; in other words, a ‘liminal space’ where normal expectations can be suspended and discriminatory practices and stereotypes challenged.

Cultural differences and priorities notwithstanding, it is nevertheless important to reiterate the point that exclusion is typically a by-product of disadvantage (e.g. material deprivation resulting in a lack of suitable sports clothing or equipment or even early life experiences) and disadvantages tend to cluster, often from an early age.

Health promotion

The relatively recent focus upon social justice notwithstanding, of all the justifications for the social, as well as personal, benefits to be derived from PE over the past 60 years or more, one remains pre-eminent: health promotion. The origins of a health and fitness focus in PE are rooted in the emergence and development of physical training (PT) in the nascent elementary schools (Kirk, 1992) around the turn of the twentieth century. This was PE (or, rather, PT) as a form of restorative public (population-based) health intended to compensate for the negative consequences of living in unhealthy (urban and industrialising) environments. Responding to the substantial growth in so-called lifestyle diseases (e.g. cardio-vascular disease, diabetes) during the final decades of the twentieth century and the perceived need for more physically active populations – and,

as the editors of this collection put it, ‘the likelihood that children and young people will adopt *sedentary lifestyles* being greater than at any other point in history’ – school PE world-wide has wittingly and willingly claimed for itself a (preventative) public health role in the form of HRE: ‘The promotion and development of a physically active lifestyle is a universal goal of PE in many countries’ (Iserbyt et al., 2018). Thus, ‘internationally there has been a call for schools to be sites of physical activity promotion’ (McMullen et al., 2018) with the main goal of PE becoming the development of ‘physically literate’ youngsters (Martins et al., 2018). Health-educating and promoting initiatives in schools have taken a variety of forms, ranging from HRE in PE through to ‘a more comprehensive, multi-component approach (i.e., physical activity before and after school, physical education, physical activity during school)’ (Chalkley et al., 2018).

The ‘growing expectations on schools to promote health and physical activity’ (Cale, Harris and Dunscombe, 2016, p. 526) tend to overlook, or at least underplay, several issues, however (see, e.g., Harris et al., 2018). The first is the weight of empirical evidence that HRE in PE has very little impact upon youngsters’ enduringly simplistic knowledge and understanding of the relationship between health, fitness and PA. It thereby fails to penetrate their abiding preoccupation with appearance, shape and size, let alone close the persistent gap between their health knowledge and health-related behaviours. Advocates of a wider social role for PE in health promotion tend to believe that if youngsters are made aware of the benefits of sport and PA, they will surely take part – it is, after all, in their self-interest. Translating health-related knowledge into health-related behaviour, however, is never so simple. Youngsters know the benefits of HRE but frequently fail to act in accordance with the health advice. Second, the health and fitness discourse perpetuated in PE presents the production and maintenance of healthy bodies by youngsters into a personal responsibility, thereby tending to sideline or, at the very least, downplay the social determinants of health, as well as the fact that sports participants run the risk of injury as well as wear and tear on the body. Third, while PA and sport may deliver social and psychological (alongside physical) health benefits, the same applies to any form of leisure that is active and social (Roberts, 2016b). The final issue is one of adherence to PA – rather than the failure of theoretical knowledge to penetrate youngsters’ attitudes and behaviours – and the realisation that PE must have an effect beyond merely the here and now of youngsters’ school lives if it is to have any meaningful role in combatting the health effects of sedentariness, for example. Put another way, any health benefits (including savings on health-care costs) depend on participation being maintained for life in order to gain lifelong benefits. Because PA needs to be continual if it is to have an ongoing health effect then PE must impact young people’s lives in the longer term, over the life-course. More specially, PE must have an impact during the transitions from childhood to youth to adulthood when young people’s leisure (and sporting) lives can, and often do, unfreeze and reform: ‘some leisure activities are dropped or done less frequently, and are replaced by other pastimes (generally home-based)’ (Roberts

2009, p. 275). It must, in other words, impact youngsters' dispositions towards lifelong participation in sport (including physical recreation and PA).

Lifelong participation

Whatever claims are made for the various contributions PE and school sport might make to the wider social good (e.g. health promotion), it seems indisputable that an *a priori* aim must be facilitating the kinds of sporting habits or habitus likely to result in *lifelong participation* in PA, sport and physical recreation. Whether implicitly or explicitly, school PE is often portrayed as a vehicle for enhancing young people's engagement with physically active recreation (typically but not exclusively in the form of sport) in their leisure and, in the longer run, over the life-course. Despite this, there remains a dearth of evidence demonstrating the supposedly crucial role that PE is assumed to play. Indeed, the precise nature of the relationship is seldom explored other than in implicit, often speculative and discursive, ways that simply treat as a truism the positive effects of the former (PE) on the latter (youth and adult participation in sport and physically active recreation). It remains to be demonstrated, however, that PE, in itself, has any, let alone a significant, role to play.

The upshot is that as physical educationalists we need to confront some uncomfortable truths. There is little substantial evidence – let alone 'killer facts' (Coalter, 2007) – that PE has had or is likely to have an impact on regular levels of PA in the short-term, let alone medium- and long-term sports participation rates. By contrast, evidence is growing that many differences in sport participation rates that are commonly attributed to circumstances and experiences during the secondary school years already existed by that age and that family cultures are the source of the crucial predispositions to participate which appear to have lasting effects. On this view, whether or not young people start or stop participating in sport – or, for that matter, increase or decrease their levels of participation as they approach and negotiate adolescence and adulthood – may have little to do with any well-meaning interventions such as school PE.

School compels more children to take part in sport than would otherwise be inclined to do so. Hence, the reason why childhood is the life-stage when mass recruitment into sport occurs and many simply drop out as soon as they are able to in order to do something else with their leisure-time, something they prefer. So, although, 'the vast majority of young people enter the post-child life stage with foundations in sport already laid' (Roberts, 2016b, p. 20), 'these foundations are not all equally strong' (p. 20) and whether youth remain in sport in the face of the competition from alternative leisure activities tends to depend on whether such strong foundations were laid in childhood (Roberts, 2016b), often in sports-active families (see, e.g., Birchwood, Roberts and Pollock, 2008; Quarmby, 2016). If these foundations are not put in place during childhood and sustained throughout youth, it is unlikely that individuals will become lifelong participants (Roberts, 2016b). Against that backdrop, it is by no means

self-evident that PE can be a substitute for the power of family socialisation during childhood. All in all, family socialisation into sports participation appears a far better bet than PE as a major ‘cause’ of an enduring propensity to engage in sport among young people. In short, we may simply have to accept that there are strong, relatively determinant influences on involvement in sport and physical recreation generally (beyond, as well as including school PE) that simply lie outside the scope of formal PE interventions (Evans and Davies, 2010).

If there is a role for PE in supplementing and/or substituting for sports socialisation in the family then it seems most relevant during the primary school years. While extra-curricular sporting provision tends to be widespread in the primary schools of the mid- and upper-middle-class youngsters (see, e.g., Wheeler, Green and Thurston, 2017), this may be of little consequence if, as appears increasingly apparent, the leisure-sport habits of many middle-class (especially mid- and upper-middle-class) youngsters are more likely to be established from an early age. Extra-curricular sporting provision for these groups may merely be the ‘icing on the cake’ and neither necessary nor sufficient in terms of impacting upon their long-term adherence to sport. That function is likely to have been usurped by parents and family, beyond school. By contrast, extra-curricular school provision could have profound significance for working-class children and even the lower-middle classes. This is because it is these groups who are largely or almost entirely reliant upon school provision of sporting opportunities (and a range of activities in particular) for their sport participation. Thus, primary school provision may be crucial for under-class children – while many middle-class youngsters are likely to have their sporting repertoires developed by their families (see, Quarmby, 2016; Wheeler, Green and Thurston, 2017), very many working-class and under-class youngsters in particular are not. By default (and often of necessity), under-class parents rely upon what the primary school has to offer in sporting terms.

The future social role(s) of PE and school sport

Claims for a wider social role for PE in health promotion continue unabated. Recent concerns regarding ‘the emergence of social media as an increasingly prominent source of health-related information for young people’ (Kirk, 2018, p. 1) are only likely to fan the flames of advocacy for a continuing role for PE in combatting the health/obesity crisis. Whether or not the current context is likely to lead to a strengthening or diminution in the place of HRE in PE is difficult to anticipate. On the one hand, the conditions appear set fair for an increased focus on PE as a vehicle for health promotion in the form of:

- The increasing prevalence of physical and mental illnesses for which more exercise is offered as *a*, if not *the*, main antidote.
- The fact that sport and PE offer a relatively cheap and easy health-related policy ‘solution’ for governments as well as a ready-made justification for the existence of their subject among physical educationalists.

- The existence of a vibrant lobby for PE as a vehicle for health promotion (among PE teachers and academics alike, as well as among governments and the medical profession) and the pervasiveness of the view that ‘physical educators can play a role in developing young people’s critical health literacy’ (Kirk, 2018, p. 1).
- Successive generations of PE teachers with an ideological and, to some extent, practical grounding in HRE.

On the other hand, however, the future of a health orientation in PE (and HRE itself) may be uncertain for the following reasons. Claims by physical educationists for a central role for PE in promoting health provide a significant hostage to fortune. Hitherto, physical educationists have been able to respond to criticisms that their subject appeared unable to combat sedentariness and, by extension, obesity by pointing out that it had never been given a realistic chance in the form of the necessary resources for carrying out such a mission. Substantial sums of money have been allocated to PE in recent decades, however (in the UK, for example), in the expectation that this would result in changes in levels of PA and, consequently, an improvement in the prevalence of overweight and obesity, among other things. However, such grand expectations have not been realised and the obesity/health crisis continues seemingly unabated. It is becoming clear that no matter how much money is ‘invested’ in PE and school sport, the subject may be powerless to countervail a problem that is considerably more complex in its origins than merely the promotion of PA.

Although a good deal less overt in the justifications offered for PE and school sport among PE teachers nowadays, claims for a role for PE in the personal development and socialisation of youngsters remain prominent among politicians and policy-makers as well as in the academic PE literature. Such claims are deeply rooted in the PE and sporting communities and will doubtless persist, surfacing regularly – after all, ‘Sport has a multitude of vocal supporters and hardly any visible opposition’ (Roberts, 2016a, p. 22) – in the shape of calls, not least in political rhetoric, for more (competitive team) sport in schools.

So, the prominence of health promotion and competitive sport in PE seem relatively assured in the short-to-medium term. In the light of the increasingly prominent social and political issue of delayed (and de-standardised and individualised, in the sense that there is no longer a single, normal sequence; see Roberts, 2016a) youth transitions (such as those from education-to-employment and family and housing transitions), and the implications for their leisure and sporting lives, we may find that PE is once again called upon to play a role in education for leisure and the ‘choice biographies’ that seem inevitably to be the lot of contemporary youth.

Education for leisure may amount to socialisation into what McNamee (2005) has termed sport as a ‘valued cultural practice’, with a focus upon the development of the kinds of wide sporting repertoires and predispositions (or habitus) likely to sustain lifelong participation and ‘serious’ long-term leisure

careers (Roberts, 2016a; Stebbins, 1992) in PA, sport and physical recreation. In the context of the increasingly splintered tastes and lifestyles characteristic of contemporary youth, there would also be a case for focusing upon the kinds of so-called ‘lifestyle sports’ – i.e. less competitive more recreational activities (e.g. all forms of cycling, swimming, gym-based fitness, and outdoor pursuits) – that seem to fit more neatly into the increasingly individualised leisure and sporting careers of youth and adults. This ‘education for leisure’ motif is, after all, what appears to lie behind calls for ‘exposing them [youngsters] to positive individual and collective learning experiences where they develop knowledge, skills and dispositions that allow them to be informed and responsible decision makers relative to engagement in physical activity and sport in their lives’ (AIESEP, 2014).

Summary

In the context of an academic orthodoxy, the ‘crisis of legitimation’ (Stolz, 2014) – and attendant marginalisation of PE within the school curriculum – has been a persistent threat throughout the history of state secondary schooling in the West. Hence, articulating the (alleged) social as well as educational value of PE has been something of a holy grail among physical educationalists for over half a century. Local and national political constraints notwithstanding, physical educationalists must decide (and they remain collectively undecided) whether PE is primarily for fun, the identification of sporting talent, health promotion, personal development, social justice (or mix thereof), or some other justification that cloaks the subject with a higher social purpose than merely sport for sports sake. Although many PE teachers advocate sport for sport’s own sake – intuitively believing that no further justification is necessary – advocates of PE have always alleged instrumental benefits. Such instrumental claims tend to have three common features, however: first, they can be quite implausible and are usually unproven (we have little evidence about which PE activities and which PE processes produce which social outcomes); second, they tend to ignore the fact that other school subjects (e.g. drama, dance, PSE), let alone other uses of leisure (e.g. volunteering), may offer the same or superior social benefits; and, third, they tend to reflect the ideological commitment to PE of their advocates.

There is a related point to be made here. While PE teachers may undoubtedly concur with many of the claims made for a wider social role for PE, for the most part it is PE academics articulating such claims – claims that often seem to amount to ideologically laden assertions rather than empirically based claims (n.b. some claims would prove immensely difficult to find anything other than indirect evidence for). Indeed, they amount to the arguments of what Richard Lapchick (1982) might call ‘true believers’ (understandably), determined to justify the existence of PE in the face of persistent threats.

Questions for reflection

- 1 The conventional way to define PE goes something along the lines: ‘Physical Education educates young people *in* and *through* the *use* and *knowledge* of the body and its movement’. Where is the ‘wider social role’ for PE in this definition?
- 2 If PE might have a role to play in developing predispositions towards sports participation (likely to ‘track’ into adult life) among young people, what would that role be?
- 3 What might be the implications for the content and delivery of school PE?

Further reading and resources

Coalter, F. (2007) *A Wider Social Role for Sport. Who’s Keeping the Score?* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

At the heart of school PE is sport. As this text illustrates, sport is believed to have the potential to play a ‘wider social role’ in developing a range of personal and social attributes while alleviating a variety of social problems. The author explores the particular social problems that governments seek to address through sport, and critically examines the nature and extent of the evidence for sport’s positive role. It is simply the definitive text of its kind.

Kirk, D. (1992) *Defining Physical Education: The Social Construction of a School Subject in Post-War Britain*, London: The Falmer Press.

This seminal text situates PE in a historical context. In exploring how the subject has been socially constructed amidst the to-ing and fro-ing of various interest groups in the PE subject community and beyond, the book explains how some ‘definitions’ of PE have been prioritised over others and particular purposes foregrounded.

Roberts, K. and Brodie, D.A. (1992) *Inner-City Sport: Who Plays, And What Are The Benefits?* Culemborg: Giordano Bruno.

This study and the book that emanated from it have remained largely undiscovered. This is a great shame given its focus on, among other things, what might be termed the ‘recipe’ for becoming ‘locked-in’ to sport. The evidence from *Inner-City Sport* remains valid and relevant and the size and scope of the project itself mean that it is unlikely to be repeated. I have long since ceased to be surprised by how much evidence from subsequent research fits with the study’s key findings.

The following PE journals should support further reading. There are also many education journals which contain articles related to relevant topics across education more generally, which are useful to extend debate further. They may also contain PE specific articles.

- *European Physical Education Review*
- *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*
- *Physical Education Matters*

- *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*
- *Quest*
- *Sport, Education and Society*

Notes

- 1 In broad terms, PE involves the socialisation of young people into those physical activities and sports organised (and usually overseen) by PE teachers or their representatives during the school day and week. This definition of PE distinguishes curricular from extra-curricular PE or, as it is often referred to, school sport. In this chapter PE will be taken to incorporate school sport.
- 2 The term ‘socialisation’ refers to the processes through which people are ‘taught’ (either directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or unintentionally) and internalise the values, beliefs, expectations, knowledge, skills, habits, and practices prevalent in their groups and societies. It amounts, in other words, to learning the culture or ways of life of the networks into which people are born and live. Among other things, socialisation becomes manifest in what young people take for granted or think of as ‘natural’. Values – defined as beliefs that certain goals or behaviours are more or less preferable to their alternatives – tend to be a particularly significant aspect of socialisation. Secondary socialisation refers to socialisation beyond the family in institutions such as schools.
- 3 And, more recently, PSHE: Personal, Social and Health Education.
- 4 Defined as the rights and responsibilities of being a member of a society. For some, such as Laker (2003), such responsibilities involve the social and moral, the political and the communal.

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