

Lewis- DL

Reviewing reasons for adolescent girls disengagement in physical education.

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Introduction

“There is an increasing body of literature investigating age-related declines in physical activity (PA) participation among young people” (Coleman, Cox, and Roker 2008). Research shows that children’s PA often declines over the period of transitioning from primary school to secondary school, getting lower every year until they leave. “The low PA participation rates are especially noted in girls, who reportedly engage in less PA than boys throughout the teenage years”. (Whitehead and Biddle, 2008). Teachers often struggle trying to get female adolescents involved with PE describing them as “‘low active’, ‘hard to reach’ or ‘disengaged’” (Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, 2013). We need to ensure that we understand adolescent girls’ opinions on PE. It’s important to ensure they are fully engaged and not missing out on lifelong knowledge on how to take care of their bodies and mind. Being disengaged within PE can have many consequences. “It is widely agreed that these girls and young women are not only missing out on a vital part of their education and experience, but that they also lose out in terms of their rights to access the beneficial aspects of participation in sport such as health, self-esteem, and enjoyment” (Health Education Authority, 1997). “PA has multiple benefits, such as “current and future physical and psychological well-being (e.g., prevention of obesity and enhancement of self-esteem)” (Department of Health, 2011). Not only does not being fully engaged lead to a negative experience at school, but also “continues to deprive women in terms of

lifelong learning and physically active post-school life-styles” (Deem and Gilroy, 1998) which is essential to living a healthy balanced lifestyle in future years.

Review of literature

“Historically girls have been constructed as ‘the problem’ for not engaging positively with the subject” (Flintoff and Scruton, 2001). This debate of blame is increasingly being challenged and deconstructed by PE researchers. “There has been a shift towards an appreciation that ‘the problem’ is more often located in the curriculum and pedagogical contexts within which girls are expected to participate and relates to the social construction of gender through PE and physical activity” (Ennis et al., 1997).

Self-confidence and competence.

Many teenage girls have an un-healthy relationship with their bodies. “PE is one site within school where ‘the body is explicitly used, displayed and talked about” (Paechter, 2003). It comes as no surprise that research done by Robbins, Pender, and Kazanis (2003) found that the most notable barriers were feelings of self-consciousness and a lack of motivation to be active. Girls often feel uncomfortable in mixed sex PE classes as “as boys are often perceived to be too strong or too aggressive”. (Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, 2013). However, it is not simply the case that boys are the sole cause of girls’ negative perceptions of PE as research done by Mitchell, Gray and Inchley (2013) shows that even in a single sex environment girls are still

Lewis- DL

nervous about their bodies and competence as “Other girls have also been shown to have both positive and negative effects on engagement in PE” Mitchell, Gray and Inchley (2013). “Female peers can be seen as both supporting and scrutinising in the PE class. Whilst some girls supported and encouraged participation in PE, other female peers scrutinised ability, bodies and looks which was detrimental to girls’ engagement in the subject.” (Mitchell 2012). While participating in PE can leave the girls feeling anxious, there are also external barriers that affect their participation. When interviewed, many adolescent girls discussed how they felt that “inappropriate PE kit, discomfort about sharing showers, changing rooms, facilities, compulsory activities even in bad weather and a lack of appropriate equipment” (Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, 2013) also had a negative affect on their motivation to participate in PE.

Activities on offer

In many schools, PE is primarily dominated by team games, with the odd fitness testing. The activities available are limited. The researcher experienced this during their work experience where the PE lessons were repetitive throughout all year groups. Researchers have described this way of teaching as “‘out of date’, and not interesting enough” Adolescent girls often mention how there is a “dislike for the competitiveness in traditionally organised team-based sports” (Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, 2013) which puts them off participating.

Methods

The primary data for this report was collected through work experience within Pentrehafod school, on a Friday 9am until 3pm over multiple weeks. During this time the researcher got to be apart of multiple lessons from year 7 to year 11. These lessons included, football,

dance/gymnastics, swimming/lifesaving, fitness, volleyball and GCSE theory classes. All lessons except GCSE with single sex lessons. Experiencing adolescent girls participation in PE first hand gave the researcher a better understanding of why some girls feel the way they do about PE and ways in which the lessons can be more inclusive for all, encouraging higher participation rates.

The secondary data were collected through multiple journals. The journals were found using the University Of Wales Trinity Saint David online library. These journals had done their own primary research which included interventions, as well as drew upon secondary data. The researcher started off looking at a journal called “Can I do it in my pyjamas?” Negotiating a physical education curriculum with teenage girls” written by Eimear Enright. Whenever they came across information that was relevant or interesting, they then went to the reference list and read the original journal where that was from. They also used other journals that had been used in previous research they had done, which they knew would be relevant to this study.

Discussion

From the researchers experience within work placement, they could see that there was a love hate relationship with PE.

The researcher was a part of a volleyball tournament for St.Davids day. The set up was a tournament, with the winning house team getting points which would be added up with other activities throughout the day which then got presented in assembly. At the start of the week the girls got to decide which sport they would like to participate in. The options were volleyball, dance and swimming. The majority of the girls who picked volleyball felt comfortable

Lewis- DL

to participate, even the students who wouldn't regularly. The reason why this may be is that the girls got a choice. Brooks and Magnusson (2007) highlighted the important role autonomy plays in PA participation. Giving the girls choice gives them "control or autonomy over their experiences" (Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, 2013). This makes the pupils feel like they had a responsibility to participate as they didn't have to pick volleyball. Research completed by Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, (2013) found that when they give their participants choice, the "activities in which individuals felt that they had control and a choice over were seen as the most enjoyable" as to compared to the teacher deciding. Another reason on why the girls were more engaged during the volleyball tournament could be because they were contributing to a wider cause. The winning team got points awarded to their house among other points throughout the day which later got added together for an overall award. By there being an overall reward, it made the girls feel accountable for their actions as they had a bigger goal to reach which was the end of school trip for their house winning. A way in which teachers can implement rewards in their sessions could be using the sport education model. During this model the pupils are in the same team throughout the whole year. Each week they win points for participating, as well as being friendly, or having good sportsmanship. This way everyone gets the chance to be win points, making them feel a part of a team. They also have a end goal to try reach.

The researcher was participating in work experience over 2 terms. During one term, one class had football. The girls weren't particularly engaged in these sessions and seemed to take part because they had too. Before the change over of terms, the teacher asked the class what kind of fitness they'd like to participate in next term. They responded with activities such

funkypump, boxercise and fitness DVDs. It's important that the students and teacher have a good relationship. Research shows that if children "recognise that teachers are attempting to make a more supportive, enjoyable environment, this may increase their motivation in PE" (Cale and Harris, 2009). A research project done by Cale and Harris (2009) had a similar outcome as they found that "many felt invisible in the PE class and so being given the chance to express their activity preference and to talk to teachers about their PE experiences resulted in them feeling acknowledged.". Throughout the next term there were more girls participating and less notes being handed in as they now felt the lessons were valuable and relevant. This is because Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) was used as theoretical framework. Letting the girls decide how they wanted their fitness lessons to go gave them competence, relatedness and autonomy. This improved the girl's intrinsic motivation which is known to improve motivation to participate. According to SDT, autonomy supporting conditions are created when learners are provided with opportunities for meaningful choice which is what the girls got during that term. "Research suggests that, when PE teachers focus on improving students' competence and perception of competence by providing appropriately challenging and relevant activities with some degree of choice, then intrinsic motivation and learning is enhanced". (Standage and Gillison 2007). This was done as the fitness sessions were tough to a degree, meaning the girls felt like they were working hard and gaining something from it. There was a better mood within the fitness lessons as the girls were happy to be there, which made the teacher happier as she felt the girls were enjoying while gaining fitness too. The researcher also noticed that the girls took criticism and praise better when there was a happy environment. The relatedness

Lewis- DL

component of SDT suggests that social-contextual factors will influence an individuals' motivation towards a particular activity. This was clear when the girls got to partner up with their friends in pairs, rather than have to work with girls they're not particularly friendly with like in team sports.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that there is a need for change within PE for adolescent girls. There seems to be a link with letting the girls have more choice when it comes to what activities they do as it makes them feel listened too, and lets them decided on activities that they find enjoyable and valuable of their time. There should more activities on offer other than team sports such as yoga, swimming and athletics. Giving the girls the responsibility to adapt their own curriculum holds them accountable for the sessions that happen. There definitely needs to be more communication with the teacher and students to create a better relationship with will then result in a happier environment. Using extrinsic rewards too instead of solely relying on intrinsic motivation may help the girls who don't enjoy exercise in general.

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Lewis- DL

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Lewis- DL