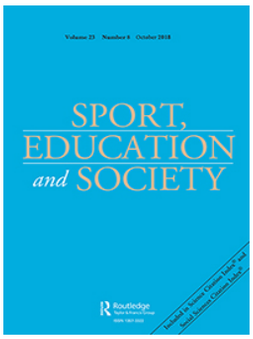

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'*Go for it Girl*' adolescent girls' responses to the implementation of an activist approach in a core physical education programme

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the responses from adolescent girls to the use of an activist approach (Oliver, K. L., & Kirk, D. (2015). *Girls, gender and physical education: An activist approach*. London: Routledge) by their teachers over the course of one school year during their core physical education lessons. The study took place in four secondary schools in different areas of Glasgow city. Approximately 110 girls aged 13–14 participated in this study as part of their regular physical education classes. The themes arising from the data were: (1) through variety and choice the girls were opened up to a wider range of possibilities in physical education; (2) relationships between peers (pupil-pupil) and teachers-pupils were central to the girls' engagement. We conclude that through the use of an activist approach, and in contrast to their experience of traditional, multi-activity physical education, girls responded positively to variety and choice as they co-constructed their physical education programme with their teachers, and the development of better relationships with their teacher and among themselves created a supportive learning environment.

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Activist approach; gender; adolescent girls; pedagogical model; physical education

Introduction

The factors affecting adolescent girls' engagement with physical activity, both in and out of school, are now well-established within the research literature. Over a 35 year period, the issues have been analysed in detail and have proven remarkably (though disappointingly) durable throughout this time. These issues are that girls become less active in adolescence than they formerly were in childhood, and less active than adolescent boys (e.g. Mitchell, Gray, & Inchley, 2015; Niven, Henretty, & Fawkner, 2014). Physical education activities are gender-stereotyped (e.g. Griffin, 1984). Girls dislike the clothing they are required to wear, the activities they are required to do, and are embarrassed and often humiliated in physical education classes (e.g. Flintoff & Scraton, 2006). This is particularly so in co-educational classes, which reproduce in amplified form the unjust and unequal features of patriarchal society (e.g. Hills, 2006; Scraton, 1992). Moreover, many girls appear to associate physical education activities with masculine characteristics of sweat and muscles, and dislike having to shower after lessons (Evans, 1984). We have known for some time that their physical education experience is often at odds with the performance of heterosexual femininity (being a 'girly girl', Oliver, Hamzeh, & McCaughtry, 2009) and that to move and 'throw like a girl' is a process of social learning (Young, 1980). We have understood that embodiment is gendered and racialized and carries markers of the socio-economic and cultural circumstances in which children grow up (Azzarito & Solmon, 2006; Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011).

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As Vertinsky (1992) noted and many feminist authors have since confirmed (e.g. Flintoff & Scraton, 2006; Stride & Flintoff, 2018), individualistic explanations for girls' disengagement from physical education has been an impediment to progress, and bear little scrutiny. There are many complex issues at work in shaping girls' engagements. Recognising this complexity while taking practical action, we propose, is the challenge that needs to be met. The situation of girls in physical education has been the topic of recent and timely research in Scotland, and confirms much of what is known about the situation of girls in other parts of the world, suggesting that these are global issues (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2010; Garrett, 2004; Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009; Oliver et al., 2009). As elsewhere, various initiatives have been trialled in Scotland, such as 'Girls on the Move' and 'Fit for Girls'. These initiatives have reported some successes. For example, in the latter case, Thorburn and Gray (2010) noted that providing some choice of activity including non-competitive, non-traditional activities was well-received by girls (Mitchell, Gray, et al., 2015). In the case of the former, Taylor, Hughes, and Koufaki (2013) reported some positive though mainly mixed results in terms of maintaining moderate to vigorous physical activity (MvPA) over and beyond the six months intervention. Consistent with international research (e.g. Kirk & Oliver, 2014 for a review), Niven et al. (2014) found a range of environmental factors identified by girls such as clothing, changing rooms, and the presence of boys as barriers to participation in physical education. Moreover, 'sporty' and 'non-sporty' identities among girls seem to remain current in Scottish schools, and act as a serious barrier to the inclusion and active engagement of all girls (Mitchell, Inchley, Fleming, & Currie, 2015).

The focus of the work in physical education over the past 20 years has shifted from analyses to interventions that might make a difference for the better to girls' experiences. A whole group of studies have been framed around what Vertinsky (2016) calls the 'exercise-is-medicine' school of thought, which sees girls' physical inactivity as a grave threat to health. These studies typically tend to repeat some of the well-established factors in influencing adolescent girls' engagement in physical education, often without reference to the copious literature just cited, as if these are being discovered for the first time (see Kirk & Oliver, 2014). This situation raises questions about the potential effectiveness and sustainability of the programmes they seek to put in place (see e.g. Barr-Anderson et al., 2008; Casey et al., 2013; Felton et al., 2005; McKenzie et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2000).

Another programme of interventive research that *does* build on the girls, gender and physical education literature is the activist work of Oliver and Lalik (2001, 2004) and Oliver et al. (2009), Enright and O'Sullivan (2010) and Fisette and Walton (2014), among others. This line of research shifts the focus from explaining girls' disengagement from physical education to how to re-engage them and keep them engaged. Based on what we know about adolescent girls and physical education, Oliver and Kirk (2015) developed a prototype activist pedagogical model for working with girls in physical education. The main theme of the model is 'adolescent girls learning to value the physically active life'. Four 'critical elements' provide it with its shape or 'practice architecture' (Goodyear, Casey, & Kirk, 2016), which are 'non-negotiable' in terms of the requirement that they are present within any approach to working with adolescent girls that is described as 'activist'. It is acknowledged at the same time that teachers will inevitably and valuably adapt these critical elements to make them work in their local contexts (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001). The critical elements are student centred pedagogy, pedagogies of embodiment, inquiry-based education centred *in* action and listening to respond over time. In the process of learning to value the physically active life, girls identify barriers to their physical activity enjoyment and participation and teachers work with them to negotiate the barriers within their control in order to increase their opportunities, interest and motivation for engaging in physical activity. Oliver and Kirk (2015) provide an overview of the emergence of an activist approach, which has been scaled up from Oliver's early work with small groups of girls to whole coeducational classes, to student teachers and experienced teachers.

Within this context, the purpose of this paper is to report girls' experiences of and insights into the implementation of an activist approach to their school physical education programmes. In the next section of the paper we briefly outline the key features of an activist approach, before explaining how

we designed the study and generated data. In the main section of the paper, we report and discuss our findings around two themes that emerged from what the girls said about their experiences of physical education within an activist approach. We conclude with a brief discussion of five key insights our data reveal about pupils' experiences of the process of engaging in physical education informed by an activist approach.

Research design

Activist methodology

The study took the form of a 10 month-long intervention that had two phases. The first phase ran from September to December 2015 and was concerned with Building the Foundation (BfF). Five teachers built the foundation in each of their respective schools over the course of eight to ten weeks using the activist methodology of student-centred inquiry *as* curriculum (see Figure 1) developed by Oliver and Oesterreich (2013). The foundation lessons allowed the teachers to co-create an environment that demonstrated mutual understanding, respect and learning amongst the pupils and their teacher. The first three lessons were essentially classroom-based lessons with each lesson having an overarching theme: student perceptions on physical education; co-creating a class environment; and curriculum learning outcomes. The findings section that follows has some data that illustrates the girls' reflections on how their teacher set out her foundation lessons.

Over the course of the next six to eight weeks, teachers utilised their pupils' responses to inform their subsequent activity lessons, their pedagogical practices, and how they related to their students. Teachers taught a number of taster lessons so that pupils could sample new and novel activities. Some of the activities that pupils chose or teachers suggested were boxercise, yoga, tae-kwon do, body conditioning, urban orienteering, touch rugby, football, HIIT workouts, Zumba, hip hop dancing and spinning. Although some team sports were played, these activities in the main were not part of the pupils' normal curriculum and so they had not experienced them before. It was important at this stage in the model for teachers to challenge the status quo of physical education, which in all four schools was organised around the multi-activity curriculum and physical education-as-sport-techniques (Kirk, 2010). Following each taster session, teachers debriefed with their classes and listened to their views about the session so that they could respond to this in subsequent lessons (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013).

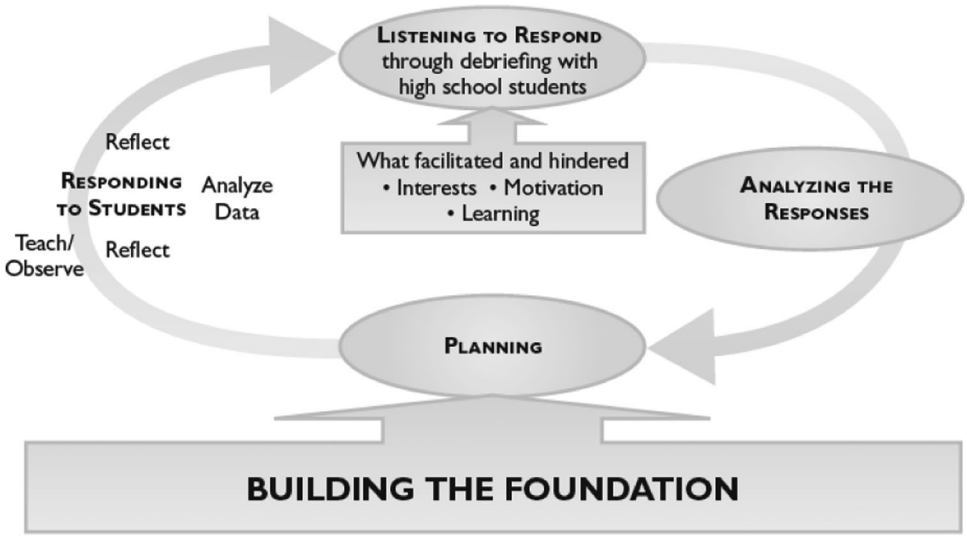

Figure 1. Student centred inquiry *as* curriculum (Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013).

The second phase ran from January to June 2015 and involved the co-construction of a thematic unit of work in physical education. A thematic unit, unlike traditional multi-activity units organised by content (e.g. soccer, volleyball, or aerobics), focuses learning around a central theme (e.g. learning the differences between moderate and vigorous physical activity; learning how to increase physical activity outside of schools; teamwork and cooperation). A variety of physical activities and other subject matter are then used as media for teaching and learning of this theme across a longer period of time such as a whole semester.

The five teacher-participants attended three one-day workshops led by Kim, in October 2015 prior to BtF, January 2016 reflecting on BtF and in preparation for the thematic unit and May 2016, reflecting on the year. The workshops were both training sessions for the teachers in using an activist approach and also, in the January and May workshops, opportunities for data collection. In January and May 2016, Cara and Kim also conducted focus group interviews with girls, two groups from each school, involving approximately six girls in each group, chosen by the teachers to represent a range of interests and ability in physical education. The focus group interviews were carried out in the schools, which allowed the researchers to become familiar with the school sites for the activist intervention. The teachers were offered an opportunity to contribute examples of what they were doing with their classes with each other through a closed social networking site. Some, though not all, teachers took this opportunity. Finally, Cara visited the schools around the half-way point of BtF and twice during the second phase between February and May, carrying out short interviews with each teacher in December 2015 and made notes of lessons she observed.

Context

The research took place in four secondary schools for pupils ages 11–18 within Glasgow City. Each teacher worked with one of their timetabled classes which meant that one of the schools had two different classes using the activist intervention. School 1 is a six-year non-denominational state-funded comprehensive school with a mixed ethnic background population having reported 18 different languages being spoken at home. The school enrolment in 2015–16 was approximately 1200 pupils. The school serves areas of multiple deprivation, with 47% of its pupils living in the 20% most deprived postcodes according to the 2016 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).[1] School 2 is a six-year non-denominational, co-educational, state-funded comprehensive school. The school enrolment in 2015–16 was approximately 1000 pupils of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but predominantly white. The school serves areas of multiple deprivation, with 86% of its pupils living in the 20% most deprived postcodes according to the 2016 SIMD. School 3 is a six-year all-girls state-funded Roman Catholic school. The school enrolment in 2015–16 was approximately 700 pupils. The school serves areas of multiple deprivation, with 48% of its pupils living in the 20% most deprived postcodes according to the 2016 SIMD. Although the school is denominational it serves a large Muslim population. School 4 is a six-year Roman Catholic state-funded comprehensive school. The school enrolment in 2015–16 was approximately 2000 pupils. The school serves areas of multiple deprivation, with 36% of its pupils living in the 20% most deprived postcodes according to the 2016 SIMD. A number of pupils in the school (around 40%) have English as an additional language, with over 40 different languages being listed as first languages at home.

Participants

The girls were aged 13–14 and classes for the study were selected by the teachers. In the case of four of the five classes, girls were in intact physical education groupings, which was a single sex class context. The fifth class, which was the smallest with 12 girls, was especially composed for Cara, who was learning to use the activist approach herself, but as she was based at the university she returned to her former school for the purpose of the study.

Data generation

A range of data generation methods were used (see details in the *Activist methodology* section). All interviews and workshops (apart from the October workshop) were voice recorded and transcribed. Detailed hand written notes were also made by David for the second and third workshops. Cara also made written records of her lesson observations.

Data analysis

All data for this paper were analysed by Cara, Kim and David individually, and then further analysis was shared among the three researchers as themes and subthemes were developed. They undertook initial coding of the data, searching for confirmatory and dis-confirmatory evidence in relation to the girls' experiences of an activist approach. Themes and sub-themes were identified for opening up a wider range of possibilities in physical education; building relationships; and girls feel more comfortable and less judged. Only the first two themes are reported here. In the case of each theme, the researchers searched for detail in the data, for example how girls experience variety and novelty -*'We're doing like different stuff'*. While girls sometimes expressed disagreements with their peers, we found few data in sufficient amount to constitute dis-confirmatory evidence of the main themes and sub-themes, though we also note that pupils in the focus groups (our main source of data on the girls' voices) were selected by their teachers. The schools themselves presented different environments in which the girls experienced an activist approach, but nevertheless the data that emerged about girls' experiences was by and large consistent, regardless of its source.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured in a number of ways. For example, all interviews were transcribed and the data analysed by all three researchers independently and then together. All three researchers were present at the workshops, and all were present for the first visits to schools in October. Cara visited the teachers once each in phase one and twice each in phase two. The social networking site did not work quite as anticipated. Four of the five teachers posted on the site but only two used the site regularly throughout the 10 months and one teacher never accessed the site. Nevertheless, the various data generation methods allowed triangulation of sources and respondents.

Researcher reflexivity

Each of the researchers was committed to the activist approach outlined by Oliver and Kirk (2015) and developed by Oliver over a 20 year period. The teachers were interested in working differently with adolescent girls to become involved in the project and became increasingly committed to the approach as the project progressed. They also knew each other in their professional capacities and so were comfortable in sharing their work within the project.

Findings

We report here two themes that emerged from the focus group interviews. These were: opening up a wider range of possibilities in physical education and building relationships.

Opening up a wider range of possibilities in physical education

Throughout both phases of the activist approach, we found evidence from the girls to suggest that this approach opened up a wider range of what is possible in physical education and that this, in turn, contributed to an increase in motivation and engagement in physical education lessons. Embedding

choice into programmes echoes other research with girls in Scotland (see Mitchell, Gray, et al., 2015). However, other possibilities such as novelty, variety, and the co-creation of their curriculum with their teacher were all equally valued by the girls. Furthermore, as embedding student voice is a key feature of an activist approach, girls articulated that this approach allowed them to challenge the conventional norm of physical education programmes and experience something 'different'.

'We're doing like different stuff': variety and novelty

For the girls, variety and novel activities became 'exciting' aspects of their core physical education lessons and they became 'more interested' because of this. For some pupils, variety meant they were getting a 'different thing every week (and therefore) it's more exciting' (Focus Group [FG], School 4, January 2016). These 'different thing(s)' were dispersed throughout both phases of the activist programme. In the BtF phase, girls sampled non-traditional activities in order for their teacher to gauge their levels of interest and motivation. A girl from School 4 explains, 'you know in first year like we did sport, like basketball and badminton and stuff, but now like we're doing like different stuff'. Some of the 'different stuff' the girls experienced included yoga, dance, boxercise, fitness games, tae kwon do, exercise to music and spinning. These activities were selected in part because the girls had not experienced them regularly in their physical education curricula, which was primarily team based sports rather than a focus on lifetime physical activity. Given that the intent of BtF was to broaden their perspective of possible content, the girls and their teachers selected activities that were new to them. Similarly, during the thematic unit phase, programmes were tailored to meet specific learning objectives and subsequent lessons used a variety of activities to focus on the overall theme. One girl from School 1 comments that what they normally saw as a 'block' of a single activity was changing:

> We're like changing, even though you still need to do a block or something for a length of time, we're doing like different things within it, so you don't get bored of it (FG, School 1, May 16).

Girls from School 2 also mentioned this notion of blocks of activity the girls normally experienced in their multi-activity physical education programmes:

> Kim: Why didn't you like it (physical education) in the past?
> Pupil 1: I think it's because we did the same thing for months and (it was) not really that fun.

Another girl from this school added that taking part in a new activity had them 'still talking about it' after the lesson:

> Pupil: I know when I come out of class now for PE … we kind of talk about what we were doing and we're excited even after we've done it.
> Kim: Can you give me an example of that like tell me something about that
> Pupil: When we come out, I'm going to say tae-kwon-do, like when we came out and when we go into the changing rooms, everyone was still talking about it (FG, School 3, Jan 16)

This level of excitement for girls was key to opening up a wider range of possibilities that were available to them in their core physical education programmes. A girl from School 4, whilst reflecting on her past programmes, further comments on how she looked forward to trying new activities:

> Kim: You said you're more excited because you're doing different things, tell me about that, why are you more excited?
> Pupil: More excited because usually if you have a seven week block of netball you just know what's going to happen, it's dead boring, but you look forward to it if you know you're going to do something different and something you want to do. (FG, School 4, Jan 16)

Referring back to the notion of blocks of activities (i.e. netball), this particular girl found that it was 'dead boring' if you always 'know what's going to happen' and through her experience of an activist programme, she was able to appreciate the excitement that 'something different' had to offer her.

'She likes to include our feelings … ': choice and co-creating a curriculum

During the BtF phase, it was important for teachers to consider with their pupils a wide-variety of non-traditional activities to demonstrate the possibilities that *could* be available as physical education. Furthermore, during the thematic unit, it was essential for teachers to structure this unit around the responses from the girls in the BtF phase, but also how girls responded in their day-to-day lessons. This allowed the teachers to not only 're-tune their ears' so they could hear what the girls were saying, but to also re-direct their actions in response to the girls (Cook-Sather, 2002). Other research (see, e.g. Enright and O'Sullivan (2013), Fisette (2013), Oliver et al. (2009)) has found that when pupils are part of the process of making their curriculum, they are not only more actively engaged, but they are able to take more responsibility and ownership for their learning.

Throughout the study, we found strong evidence that the girls recognised how this responsibility of co-creating their programme impacted their engagement in physical education lessons. Girls from school 3 further recognised that asking for pupils' views became a difficult process, at times, because of the 'strong opinions' in their class. They commented on how the 'quieter' girls 'don't get like (to be) heard a lot than the people that are really passionate' (FG School 3, Jan 16). They describe to Kim how all opinions were sought by their teacher:

> Pupil 1: (…) we sat down in a classroom and she (the teacher) gave us a piece of paper of what we would like to do in PE for this.
> Pupil 2: She asked questions even what we wrote on the paper and then she asked some people.
> Kim: Ok, so everybody got to write things down so that she had everyone's opinion, even if people wouldn't talk?
> Pupil 3: We were given a flashcard, a bit of paper, and..
> Pupil 1: She collected them up, I don't know if she still has them, probably does. (FG, School 3, Jan 16)

This free writing exercise is part of the BtF phase and allowed the teacher to solicit girls' opinions about how they felt about physical education, as well as highlighting which girls were more outspoken than others in the class. The teacher was then able to keep these responses to make further decisions about how she worked with the class.

One girl from School 4 highlighted how her teacher 'include(s) [their] feelings a lot more':

> She likes to include our feelings a lot more. At first it was just like, it wasn't as if it was bad in a way, it was more like, if she said 'oh we're doing football' almost everyone would be like 'we don't want to do it' … (and) she said 'well we're doing it anyway'. But now we wouldn't even usually do football or anything like that and now sometimes she even asks our opinion what do you want to do (…). She includes your opinions a lot more now. (FG, School 4, May 16)

Embedding student voice and offering choice in the programme was common across all four schools. The girls responded to this process positively, with a common sentiment that: 'we get to choose as well (…) even the times we don't get to choose they know they're always going to eventually (…) so they listen more and they get on with the activities a lot' (FG, School 2, May 16). Because they felt more involved in the process, the girls were 'more interested in (PE)' and '(tried) more'. Girls from School 4 valued being asked their opinion about their curriculum:

> Pupil 1: I like the fact she is now asking us what we want to do, instead of just forcing us (…) And most of us are like we don't really want to do that (…), but now she's started asking us what do you want to do? do a game first? what game do you want to do? so it's a lot better than last time.
> Cara: Perfect, yeah go ahead.
> Pupil 2: We've got more a variety of sports (…). Like it used to be just a choice like, it just wasn't a choice it was just the teacher's choice, but now we've got more sports to do and we can pick ours. (FG, School 4, Jan 16)

Importantly, the girls held the view that although they had been offered choice in the past, it was always the 'teacher's choice' and that their voices were lost in making decisions about the programme. Providing choice in the activities offered to girls in physical education in order to increase their engagement is present in the research literature (see e.g. Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006;

Mitchell, Gray, et al., 2015). However, some girls in this study began to understand that taking responsibility in making decisions about their programme gave them skills in other areas:

Pupil 1: Obviously it's like a two-way kind of (process), like you (the teacher) can't just be like ok so (…) you're going to do this for 45 minutes and I'll pick your teams, I'll do this (…) you're giving us no responsibility if you're doing that (…) our whole time in PE we're just being told what to do (…)
Kim: And do you think it's valuable for students to be given responsibility for their learning?
Pupil 1: Yeah so they can try something new.
Pupil 2: And it's also a life skill.
Pupil 1: Independence.
Pupil 3: So they do it outside school. (FG, School 3, May 16)

The girls in this school recognised that making choices came with responsibilities saying, for example, 'if you want to play it, you all know how to set it up so … ' (FG, School 3, May 2016).

Building relationships

Over the course of the study, girls were able to articulate how the environment itself and the relationships within the class (i.e. pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher) were integral to their motivation, engagement and learning. As we already noted, the classes in this study were single-sex. Although boys were not present in their classes, girls still spoke about how they would feel if boys were present. The absence of boys was common in the girls' conversations about relationships, even in the girls-only school. The development of relationships was central to creating the right learning environment and also the process of learning to work with others.

'The overall atmosphere has changed completely': co-creating the environment

As part of the BtF phase, teachers and pupils were able to co-create the environment by spending some time speaking about relationships, and these conversations resulted in the creation of a class code in each of the study schools. The girls in all four schools were able to recognise that the environment was 'better' because of this. For example, in School 1:

Pupil 1: It's a lot nicer, better environment to be in.
Kim: What do you think has allowed this environment to be different?
Pupil 2: We spoke about being better towards other people, the teacher spoke to the class and explained we've this kind of, just because we've been getting the classroom, she's been telling us we should be treating others like this and it should be fair. (FG, School 1, May 16)

In school 4, the girls had not worked together previously as they were only brought together in this arrangement for their physical education classes. When this was recognised, the girls engaged in a number of team building activities to help them get to know each other:

Pupil 1: I also feel like we've been doing lots more team work, like when we were, she (the teacher) was giving us a powerpoint and all that, and we were saying we don't really know each other that well, so I feel like lately we've been dealing with the things together, like you're getting to know people more.
Pupil 2: Mixing you about more, cos half the class normally don't talk to the other half of the class. (FG, School 4, Jan 16)

Girls from this school added that grouping girls who knew each other with others who didn't helped them 'work better in a team':

Kim: Tell me how you've been working together (…)
Pupil 1: Well, instead of just going into our own groups of friends, we go with one friend and then go into another group
Kim: Ok, so what's happened from doing that?
Pupil 1: Well you've talked to people you've never talked to before in class
Kim: You're working with different people?
Pupil 2: Yeah, so we work better in a team, like before there used to be like a divide almost. (FG, School 4, Jan 16)

In this school, it was necessary for the teacher to recognise this 'divide' amongst the girls and find ways to help them work with together. The girls recognised the teachers' intentions for helping them to get to know each other in class helped create an environment more conducive for learning. In their views, it led to a better atmosphere, as girls from School 1 add:

Pupil 1: I think it's better
Kim: Why?
Pupil 1: Everyone is more confident
Pupil 2: The overall atmosphere has changed completely
Kim: (…) Paint me a picture (…)
Pupil 2: You can go into one of the gyms and like sit next to someone who you don't really have a close friendship with but they'll still be a conversation there, they won't give you horrible comments or something it won't be awkward, it will just be like.
Pupil 3: It's more like not laidback as in people don't do things but as in strictness and stuff, you can have a joke around now but no one takes it too far really.

For these particular girls, the environment that was co-created with their teacher was central to them feeling confident and comfortable around others and therefore able to enjoy their lessons more.

'You don't really mind who you get put with because everyone tries': working with others (peers and teacher)

Inevitably, much of what girls in the study discuss in relation to working with others in their class (including their peers and their teacher) stems from the co-creating a positive environment with their teacher. The girls in all four schools were able to explain that their relationships with their peers in the class had improved during the course of the activist programme. One girl spoke about how this class had improved her relationships with others outside of her physical education class, commenting, 'There was certain people that I'd never spoken to in the class (…) but now like I'm talking to them and I see them in the hall and everything' (School 4, Jan 16). Other pupils from School 3 recognised that in their class there were 'quiet' and 'loud' people and by mixing the groups up, new relationships could be made:

Kim: Have you noticed any changes in how your class engages and works together?
Pupil 1: People have put their difference aside and like sort of realised they need to get on with it.
Pupil 2: There's not any moaning now when we get put into groups, everyone just does it.
Kim: So you're just more willing to do that, why do you think that is?
Pupil 1: Cos you feel more comfortable, cos everyone like tries more now as well, you don't really mind who you get put with because everyone tries. (FG, School 2, May 16)

For these girls, feeling more comfortable and everyone trying impacted how much effort they put into their physical education lessons. The development of good working relationships between girls contributed, then, to the creation of a positive learning environment. Pupils in School 4 discuss how others in the class often encouraged them:

Pupil 1: Last year I wasn't that much involved as I am this year, cos this year is much more motivation and stuff and people are trying to force you to do it (PE), I mean not forced, but in a good way.
Pupil 2: Encouraging, come on, come on just do it and most people would be like no it's fine because they're not even enjoying it.
Pupil 1: But now I'm enjoying it and joining now. (FG, School 4, Jan 16)

The class ethos developed for this group to the point where they came up with a class mantra, *'Go for it Girl'*:

Pupil 1: To be more motivated cos we made this class mantra thing GFG which stands of Go For it Girl.
Kim: Oh cool, I love that.
Pupil 2: So like when we were running we would shout it to make our team work harder.
Pupil 3: To make the team motivated.
Kim: And do you think it worked? [Group Yes]. Kim: How come?

Pupil 1: Cos like see when you are at the back and because we are all supporting you can run really fast, so the other class would feel quite … .
Kim: Oh right, so you're yelling, you're chanting the motto.
Pupil 1: I was going to say other classes came up to us what are you shouting and we're like that's our class mantra. (FG, School 4, May 16)

This mantra even began to attract the interest of pupils in other classes who were curious to find out what the girls were chanting.

Girls were all able to identify changes they saw in their relationship with their teacher, and particularly commented how their relationship with their teacher improved, impacting their overall engagement during lessons. Girls from School 1 reflected on their bond with their teacher:

Pupil 1: I think most of the girls in the class have a strong bond with Miss S____
Pupil 2: If you took us away from Miss S____ and we got a different teacher I think we would all go back into the way we were into different groups and everything because with Miss S _____ we all feel comfortable. (FG, School 1, Jan 16)

Five months later when we talked with these girls again, they had changed to a different teacher who was not using an activist approach. The girls were able to recognise that the relationship with Miss S was important to them and their enjoyment of physical education:

Pupil 1: When we were in Miss S's class, I enjoyed it a lot more and then we moved to Miss P's class and stopped enjoying it. But I don't think I don't like PE because of the sport we're doing, I think it just depends on like the teacher and the people that I am with and all that and how they act towards everything really that you do.
Pupil 2: That's what affects us more, we don't mind PE but how the environment is and how the people are. (FG, School 1, May 16)

In just a matter of months, these girls began to notice how a change of teacher[2] had a direct impact on the class environment, despite the class consisting of the same pupils.

Girls from School 2 further comment how they have seen changes in the way their teacher has interacted with them from when she started using this approach, highlighting that she gives them options during lessons:

Kim: Have you noticed any changes in the way she (your teacher) interacts with you?
Pupil 1: She doesn't make you do stuff you don't want to
Pupil 2: She tells us to try
Pupil 1: Other teachers force you to run, do gymnastics an' all that and if you don't want to do it, if you don't like doing it in front of people, like boys, but Miss ____ doesn't (… .)
Pupil 3: She'll say to try it. (FG, School 2, Jan 16)

Girls across all schools commented on their relationship with their teachers saying that they 'feel more comfortable telling (their teacher) and she won't get annoyed (…)' (School 1); that 'she knows us better' (School 4); that 'like it's as if she knows us or something' (School 2); and that 'she's just sort of become our friend now' (School 3). This illustrates to us that the development of this relationship between teachers and pupils may be for girls as or more important than the curricular content of physical education lessons.

Discussion and conclusion

Our purpose in this paper has been to report adolescent girls' responses to the implementation of an activist approach to their core physical education programmes in four Scottish secondary schools. Two of the themes we identified from this year-long study were the offer of a variety of activities and choice opening up possibilities for what physical education could be, and the importance of building relationships to developing a positive learning environment for teachers and pupils to work together in the co-creation of the curriculum

We suggest these data provide five insights into girls' experiences of this approach to physical education in contrast to their experience of traditional teacher-led and content focused multi-activity programmes. First, the data show that the girls enjoyed a wider variety of novel activities that they could sample. While this change in content and how it was organised, first as 'taster' sessions and then as part of a thematic unit, was well received by the girls, we think content by itself is mainly a vehicle for other features of physical education that the girls value. Girls' relationships with their teachers were important to the quality of their experience of lessons, as was their comfort in working with other girls who may not be part of their friendship group. A second insight follows, which is that the development of relationships between the teacher and pupils and between pupils cannot be left to chance. The BtF phase is explicitly concerned with creating the right environment for girls to feel comfortable, engaged and motivated. Both teachers and pupils had to adjust their perceptions of physical education in order for the process of building relationships to become an explicit pedagogical concern rather than a taken-for-granted asumption. Third, while the girls talked a lot about feeling more comfortable in the physical education environment, they also wanted to feel challenged. Engaging in new and at times challenging activities was only possible when they knew it was safe to fail, because they could trust their fellow pupils and teacher not to judge them. Fourth, a result of explicit work on relationships meant teachers and pupils got to know each other better, but also to know each other differently. Provided with opportunities to express their points of view had the effect for some of the girls of feeling a sense of ownership of their physical education experience. Some also talked about learning that with choice came responsibilities, both to oneself and to others in the class. The pupils talked about enjoying physical education more when everyone was trying, and when there was no moaning or dissent. Fifth and finally, we can see in these data that pupils having a say on their physical education programme does not result in anarchy. The girls show their awareness that an activist approach comes with a shift in the power dynamics in lessons, and that being listened to seriously by their teacher requires a different form of engagement from them.

These five points provide insights into the pupils' experiences of an activist approach to physical education, and these experiences appear to be in contrast to a traditional approach. At the same time, we are aware that our data provides only limited evidence that the learning aspirations for this pedagogical model had been achieved. We think there is some evidence of girls identifying and naming barriers to their participation in regular physical activity since these were the focus of several of the thematic units. We cannot say, however, whether the pupils generally were able to critique these barriers and find ways to overcome or transform them. We think evidence of these learning outcomes requires more time and explicit measures of interest, engagement and motivation.

Nevertheless, we think the activist programme was well-received by the majority of the girls we spoke with over the course of the year. At one level, we can claim that many girls preferred an activist approach in contrast to their experiences of traditional forms of physical education. We note, however, that girls' experiences were strongly influenced by their local school context, and that the actual programmes in each school took different forms according to the teachers' and pupils' perceptions of what kinds of physical education activities best met their needs and interests. Notwithstanding these differences, our findings demonstrate that there are shared features across the schools. Given the variations between the local contexts, even in a small and relatively homogenous national education system such as Scotland, we cannot claim that an activist approach provides a solution to solve 'the problem' of girls in physical education. There is no-one-size-fits-all activist programme. We conclude, nonetheless, that there is sufficient evidence in this and other previously published studies to make a strong claim that an activist approach represents, following Stenhouse (see Kirk et al., 2018), not a prescription for the curriculum, but instead a provisional specification that is 'worth putting to the test of practice'.

Notes

1. See http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/SIMD
2. In this case, the school changed timetable in May which resulted in a new teacher for this class. At the time of the study Miss S was the only teacher in her school that had learnt to use this approach. Miss P was keen to continue the work that Miss S had done, but timing of the timetable change meant she was unable to commit the time to learning this approach herself.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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