

Lewis- DL

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Lewis- DL

Understanding the influences on girls' participation and engagement within secondary school PE.

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Abstract

This paper reports the understanding of the influences on girls' participation and engagement within secondary school Physical education (PE). Girls' disengagement from physical education (PE) has been well documented in the literature. Trying to get girls engaged in their PE lessons has been seen as a challenge for some teachers and which obesity on the rise, it's important that teachers get their students as engaged as possible. The study took place with approx. 50 girls aged 18-21 participating in a qualitative questionnaire, with 9 then being selected for further research via interview. The themes arising from the data were repetitive sports-based PE, and self-perception issues which seem to have a link with PA levels further on in life. We conclude that through giving the girls more choice and to negotiate the curriculum creates better relationships within the class and a more productive learning environment a positive outcome on their experience.

Keywords: gender; adolescent girls; physical education; choice; physical activity

Introduction

"Historically girls have been constructed as 'the problem' for not engaging positively with the subject" (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001). However, after more research "Traditional sporting structures in the United Kingdom (UK), including Physical Education, have been criticized as inappropriate for the needs of many girls and young women" (Curry and Hargreaves, 1995). 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). Understanding adolescent girls opinions on PE are important to ensure they are fully engaged and not missing out on lifelong knowledge on how to look after their bodies. There are many consequences of disengagement

within PE. However, "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). This is important as it not only gives them a negative experience in school but also "continues to deprive women in terms of life-long learning and physically active post-school life-styles" (Deem and Gilroy, 1998) which is important factor to living a healthy lifestyle.

The purpose of this study is to get a greater understanding of the influences on girls' participation and engagement within secondary school PE. The study will be replicating Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, (2013) study of "This choice thing really works ..." without the intervention. This will be done through primary

Lewis- DL

research and also secondary research. The primary research will be conducted through questionnaires and then interviews, while the secondary research will be gathered through a previous research paper conducted by Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, (2013). The aim is to gather a better understanding of why the girls have different opinions of PE for example, the types of lessons they had, or the gender setting. The primary and secondary research will be compared to see whether there is a common theme between the two, to ensure that the results are reliable.

Methods*Study design*

The data collected was done so by qualitative research via questionnaires and interviews. The study had two phases. The first phase was a questionnaire about how engaged or disengaged the participants felt within school PE. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants had to decide whether or not they felt comfortable to be contacted for an interview if needed. The participants who had agreed to be contacted who were in the most engaged results, and the most disengaged results then got invited to phase two. Phase two was a one to one informal interview with one of the researchers. During the interview, the participants got asked open ended questions, which they'd answer to the best of their ability. Prompting was used when needed to gain a better understanding of how the participant felt, and to gain a further understanding of what the participant felt would have improved their PE experience.

Participants

For phase one, approx. 50 girls aged between 18-21 participated. The participants were aged over 18 meaning they could consent for themselves

but under 21 so their school experience was still fresh. The participants were given an information sheet as well as a consent form which needed to be filled out before participating. This ensured from the start of the research process the participants were completely aware of what the research entailed and they would be able to drop out at any point if they please do to so, with no questions asked. They were informed that the process is completely voluntarily and they wouldn't have to answer any questions they didn't feel comfortable answering. For phase two, 9 participants agreed to be interviewed. 6 of the 9 were engaged and 3 of the 9 were disengaged.

Procedure

The questionnaire was an adapted version of Johnmarshall Reeve's 'EDS: Engagement-Disengagement Scale' (no date) (Appendix 1.1). The questionnaire had to be adapted as the theme was classroom based. The wording was adapted to change it into a PE themed questionnaire. For example, one question which was changed was "When we work on something in class, I get involved" this was modified to say "When we worked on something in PE, I got involved" to ensure the questions asked were relevant to the study and past tense as the participants had left school.

The consent form which was given to every participant at the start of the research was created by York St John University (Appendix 1.2). The information sheet which was given to the participants included essential information the participants would have needed to know such as the duration of the research project, confidentiality, and the participants right to withdraw from the research at any point, before contributing to the research.

Lewis- DL

Once the consent forms had been signed, the questionnaires began. The participants were kindly asked to complete the questionnaire online without help from others and to the best of their ability, ensuring that the answers, were true, nonbiased and reliable. At the end of the questionnaire there was a section that explained phase two, which the participants would either agree or disagree to participate in. If they agreed, they'd leave their email address for the researchers to be able to contact them.

The participants who agreed to participate in the interviews were then sent via email another consent form and information leaflet. The interviews were one to one so the participants felt fully comfortable and to ensure that they got the chance to have their say to a full extent. The questions asked were open ended to allow the participants to come up with their own answers, meaning they could talk freely about their past experiences. An example of questions asked is "Do you take part in any physical activity now? If so, what? If not, why?" and "What activities did your PE lessons include, how did this affect your participation and engagement, and why?".

All the interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed word-for-word. Once the audio had been typed up, the data was destroyed by deleting the tape. This ensured the data couldn't get accessed to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants.

Measurements/ Instruments

To find out who needed to be interviewed for further research, the researcher worked out the 25 percentile of people who scored the highest and lowest on the questionnaire. The overall scoring of the questionnaire was worked out by adding up the scores of each category. There were 4 subjects for engaged with 19 individual questions and disengaged, with 20 individual

questions. This questionnaire is an 8-scale structure with 1 being fully engaged. The participants who scored 60 or below were the most engaged in their physical education lessons, as the participants who scored 140 or above were the most disengaged in their PE lessons. These were the participants contacted for an interview, if they agreed to participate.

Data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS. The mean and standard deviation were calculated to find the top and bottom 25 percentile of the data.

Braun and Clark's thematic analysis was used when analysing the interviews. Key themes were looked for during each interview. This allowed the interviews to be compared to one another and to be compared to secondary data.

ResultsCommon themes

One of the common themes that came up during the interviews was the activities available during PE lessons.

Researcher: What activities did your PE lessons include, how did this affect your participation and engagement, and why?

Pupil: Netball, dance, volleyball, dodgeball, exercise videos, circuits etc. Didn't enjoy circuits or any of the stricter activities but really enjoyed the fun activities such as netball, dance or volleyball etc.

It seems that PE is being taught through sports with the occasional athletic/fitness-based activity. This theme is apparent from both the engaged interviews and the disengaged interviews.

Lewis- DL

Self-presentational issues were a big factor within the interviews when it came to what the participants felt effected their peers to participate during the PE lessons.

Researcher: What do you believe were the factors that influenced other girls to not engage and participate in PE?

Student: Body image, self-esteem, embarrassment, friends, PE with boys, don't like the teacher.

The most common difference between the engaged and disengaged participants was the amount of physical activity they're involved in now.

Researcher: Do you take part in any physical activity now? If so, what? If not, why?

Student: No, I really struggle to find something I enjoy nowadays, and being in university and working in between and everything else just proves to make it so difficult to try and even find something I'd like, let alone actually commit to it.

This is compared to a participant who was very engaged in their PE lessons.

Researcher: Do you take part in any physical activity now? If so, what? If not, why?

Student: Yes, I take part in Outdoor Activities such as Climbing and Hill walking, and sometimes I would play football for fun

Discussion and conclusion.

The aim of this journal was to gain a better understanding of the influences on girls' participation and engagement within secondary school PE. There were 3 similar themes which were apparent within the research. These were, receptive sports-based PE, Self-presentational and life-long participation.

Repetitive sport-based PE

Multiple of the participants said that their PE lessons were mainly competitive sport based. One participant described their PE lessons as being:

“Netball, football, volleyball, rounders and fitness testing.”

When one participant got asked how they think their school PE experience could have been improved they replied

“I think that having some sort of choice or say in what activities we get taught would have encouraged me to participate. I also think that being able to try a wider range of activities would have engaged me more.”

Research done by Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, (2013) shows that their participants also felt the same quoting “the girls felt that not having enough choice in the PE environment was a major reason for their disengagement” and that this led to the participants “feeling they had no control or autonomy over their experiences”. Due to this the participants felt that pe wasn't valuable or relevant to them. However, after their physical activity (PA) intervention “it was clear from the data that girls valued being consulted and listened to”. A similar intervention done by Enright and O'Sullivan (2010) shows that the activities the girls suggested they do after being given a choice were “individual and non-

Lewis- DL

competitive activities, for example, gym, dance, boxercise, rock climbing, Pilates, and aerobics.”

Self-presentational

Self-presentational issues were a common theme through the interviews with both engaged and disengaged participants, however more of a barrier to the disengaged as to with the engaged. Self-presentation can be influential in decisions over whether or not to be physically active through social physique anxiety (Hart et al., 1989).

Researcher: What do you believe were the factors that influenced other girls to not engage and participate in PE?

Participant: Self-confidence, other girls being judgmental, feeling as though they aren't good enough, because their friends didn't want to take part.”

This was a similar theme with the research done by Mitchell, Gray and Inchley, (2013) as their participants felt “performing in front of more able peers, regardless of their gender, caused feelings of worry and embarrassment.”

Life-long participation

Reports have begun to “highlight the potential negative consequences for girls’ health and well-being, and to frame this problem within the context of an obesity epidemic” (BarrAnderson et al. 2008). “While lifelong physical activity has been a commonplace feature in the discourse of school physical education over the last 40-year period, the evidence from surveys of adult participation suggests that physical educators have failed to achieve this objective, an objective for the most part they have set themselves” (Kirk 2010). “It is estimated that obesity is responsible for more than 30,000 deaths each year. On average, obesity deprives an individual of an extra 9 years of life” (Health matters: obesity and the food environment, 2020). Obesity is increasing at an alarming rate, so it is important

that children are getting encouraged to be more active. From the primary research conducted, of the 3 girls disengaged, all 3 currently take part in little or no PA.

However, the participants who were engaged in PE still currently participate in PA. There is a clear link from the research that designment in PE has a life long effect on the participant, as PE is the primary source of education for health and wellbeing for children in school. This suggest that girls who are disengaged in PE are actually being deprived sound knowledge and of a life-long learning experience.

To conclude, there are many influences on girls’ participation and engagement within secondary school PE. However, the main barriers seem to be the repetitive sports-based PE as well as Self-presentational issues. This then seems to have a knock-on effect when it comes to participating in PA in future years after school. Giving the girls more choice seems to be a key element to making their PE experience more enjoyable, as they feel valued and responsible for their engagement within PE. If this project was to improve, it could be done over a longer time period with more participants so there would be more participants happy to participate in the interviews. This would ensure more reliable data, and a better understanding of a variety of barriers.

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Lewis- DL

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Lewis- DL