

Looking and 'feeling' the part

Anne Flintoff and Sheila Scraton

'But Mum, please! It's really awful this term – we're doing gymnastics and I've got my period. I really, really hate athletics! It's stupid. We have to wear shorts! And it's with the boys! I can't do it! Pleassssse – you've just got to say I'm not feeling well. It doesn't have to be long, but she'll make me do it if I don't have a note!'

Sonia covered her lower belly with both hands, pressing gently on the dull ache that had appeared overnight and was sure to worsen over the course of the day. Of all the days to 'come on'. Athletics – that was bad enough, without this as well! Minutes later, she was gratefully stuffing the note into her school bag and calling a hurried 'goodbye', as she ran to catch the bus. Her Mum hadn't liked PE, either. Well, what was the point? Who's going to do athletics or hockey when they leave school?, thought Sonia. Once she'd gone to aerobics down at the local leisure centre with her Mum. Now that'd been a right laugh. You could wear what you wanted, and it was 'all female'. You could make a fool of yourself and no one really minded, people were really nice. There were a lot of mirrors, though. Her Mum had started going with the hope of losing weight, but she hadn't been for weeks. She claimed she'd too much to do, what with her ironing and stuff, so Sonia hadn't gone since, either. The bus jerked to a halt and her thoughts were interrupted by Maria pushing up the gangway and plonking herself down on the neighbouring seat.

'Hiya, alright?' she asked Sonia.

'Yeah, suppose so. Feeling like shit, actually, 'cause I've just "come on", but at least I've got a note for PE.'

'Lucky you, I'll have to do it this week. I skived last week, so she's on my case. A nightmare!'

'And it's athletics 'n shorts as well!'

'Well, you're on the Council, aren't you? Aren't you doing stuff to change it?' responded Maria, glancing up from her iphone.

'Well, we are talking about the kit, yes. But you know Mrs Robinson, she says we have to listen to everyone, and not just suggest things that we want ourselves,' explained Sonia.

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‘And I bet Beccy and her lot think it’s OK as it is? Miss bloody Fitness Freak! She loves it, prancing about in her skirt or her little tight shorts! Have you noticed?’

‘Yeah,’ Sonia sighed, ‘I know. And Tina’s OK with it, too, *obviously*.’

‘Butch lessie! She’s always going to like it, isn’t she, what with her playing rugby an’ all! Anyway, I can’t see why we can’t just have a choice. My cousin at Brownlea’s can wear leggings or trackies, or whatever they want. Not hoodies, mind. Apart from that though, as long as it’s black, no big logos, you know, they can wear what they like. I mean, does the uniform have *any* affect on my performance in PE? No! I don’t see the point of it! It’s so childish!’

Sonia shuddered, remembering last week’s lesson. She did actually like some bits of PE. The swimming was good last term, for example. She was good at swimming. She’d gone to the local baths every Saturday with her brother when she’d been at primary school. As soon as she was in the water, she felt OK. She could swim quite well. But athletics! In front of the whole school. The windows all looked out onto the field, so it was like being in a goldfish bowl! You could just feel the boys staring at you, and imagine their comments. It just made her feel small somehow, not herself, and it was even worse when they did PE with the boys. That’d been one of the reasons she’d agreed to join the School Council – to try and change things. She’d been amazed how many people wanted to have their say on the kit for PE. It wasn’t just her. Loads of girls had come up to her, sent her texts; particularly the year 10s. All wanting different things, all wanting their views heard! Year 7s and 8s didn’t seem quite so bothered, though.

Following Maria off the bus, she felt a pull on her sweater from behind, followed by the sharp twang of her bra strap. She turned around and looked at the boy grinning in her face, his hands held up in front of her. ‘What? What’s the problem, Sonia? Don’t like a bit of attention?’ Before she could respond, Maria pulled her away.

‘Just ignore him, Sonia, it’s not worth it.’

Once off the bus and out of earshot, Sonia responded, ‘But that’s a good example. That’s exactly what we have to put up with from the boys here. I’m sick of it, and that’s what I want to change at this school! I just want us to be able to be ourselves, without the hassle all of the time.’

Jenny let her gaze come to rest on the untidy notice-board on the end wall of the cramped, over-hot, PE office and stopped herself from sighing out aloud. Out-of-date notices, the latest Head of Year missive, telephone numbers scribbled on bits of torn paper, and a lone black plastic whistle, hung by a frayed cord, jostled for position on its now faded, felt surface. A fly buzzed irritatingly around the room. Her colleagues looked at her and waited, silent. She noticed their folded arms across their chests and their posture, sitting back on their chairs, looking defensive. Danny tapped one foot, impatiently,

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grains of sand dropping from his shoe and collecting in a small pile on the floor. This wasn't going to be as easy as she'd thought and, for a moment, she hesitated. Did she have the energy, the determination? Getting everyone on board would take time, and a quick glance at the clock told her that, if she didn't hurry up, her time would be up, and her chance gone.

Taking a deep breath, she reiterated her point: 'so to summarize, this is not about change for change's sake – it's important for girls' participation in PE as a whole, for who takes part, for how they feel, whether they view PE as something they feel comfortable doing – want to do. Surely we all want every pupil to feel like that, don't we? We all know we struggle with some of the girls, and I just think we ought to consider the whole package – not just what we offer – we've made some good changes to the kinds of activities we're doing ... but now I am proposing we go one step further. Research in the UK shows that one of the key things that puts girls off PE is the kit they're asked to wear, and the whole changing room/showering thing.'

'Research!' Danny snorted, 'great – so now we're going to change everything because you're doing your masters and have read some article! Our kids all go out for PE looking the part, looking smart, all the same. We've worked hard over the years for that. But now we're gonna relax our standards and let kids do what they like? Just because a few girls don't like it, and some academic or other – who I bet's never been anywhere near a school in the last 20 years – says so! Bloody marvellous!' Danny tightened his arms still further, frustrated at the way in which Jenny was pushing them to agree the change, and her power to impose it, regardless of their views. Although he'd not admit it, he was still smarting over the fact that she'd been appointed to the head of department's post two years ago. At the time he couldn't be bothered to apply. He thought he didn't need the hassle, what with his coaching and everything. Now it seemed his decision had come back to haunt him.

Peter, in his second year of teaching and still finding his feet in the politics of the department, did as he often did, and aligned himself with his senior male colleague's position. He chipped in, 'Danny's right, we shouldn't be changing the whole kit policy just because of one or two kids. The boys don't complain. In fact, in my experience, most of the girls don't, either. We already allow the Muslim girls to wear leggings, if they want to. So they're sorted. And if we do make a change, it's no guarantee that the others are going to get into PE anyway, so why bother upsetting things when most kids are OK? We know the kids who don't want to do PE and, whatever we do, they're always going to be like that!'

Danny, who wasn't going to give way easily, added, 'And anyway, OFSTED¹ didn't say anything about it! They clearly don't think we're doing anything wrong by having a kit for PE. And the head's always saying that part of the reason we've moved up the league tables is because of our uniform policy and the way we enforce it. Our kids look smart, and parents like that!'

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Jenny tried a different angle. 'It's not a question of us doing anything wrong as such. And I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't get kids to change for PE. But I do want us to consider how we can improve our practices, and that we avoid getting stuck in a rut. And our kit policy is one of those things I'd like us to consider. It's not just research that suggests kit is an issue, government policy guidelines do, too. Look at the handout. I think this statement here is really helpful. OK, it was written some time ago, but it's still useful.' Jenny pointed to a line on a page of the National Curriculum guidelines that she had printed off for everyone that morning. 'It says "considerations of safety, comfort and freedom of movement should override conventions associated with being female or male" and that's just it, I don't think our current kit does. We've all seen the way in which the girls don't like even walking down the corridor in their skirts or shorts if the boys are there, let alone when it's athletics or something on the field. And I think it's much more than making an exception for Muslim girls. *All* girls' bodies are maturing and changing, more so perhaps than the boys really. Regardless of their religion or culture – I think that's a red herring anyway – you can tell that a lot of girls are really embarrassed in front of the boys. You know as well as I do the kind of comments that are thrown about, particularly from some groups. It's a constant battle. We need to respect that all kids are different. Some are happy with their bodies, but others aren't, and that goes for some of the boys too, you know.'

Sarah interrupted, 'I can see what you're saying in some ways, Jenny, but I don't see how we can change the kit from skirts for games, even if we wanted to. If they want to play for a netball club outside school, or for the County, they'll have to wear them anyway. It's not just netball. I know they're allowed to wear shorts underneath for hockey but they still have to wear a skirt or they can't play. It's the Governing Bodies. You know as well as I do, Jenny – so we're going to disadvantage those girls playing County if we do this. And anyway, look at the women in high-level sport these days – they show off their bodies, and they're the role models for our kids! Look at the volleyballers, or the golfers! Even they're wearing really short shorts, and there are no complaints there, are there?'

Although she'd anticipated some resistance to her suggestions, nevertheless Jenny's heart sank at her colleague's lack of support. If she couldn't convince Sarah, she knew she'd struggle to convince the rest. It *was* difficult with the Governing Bodies, and Sarah did have a point there. But, on the other hand, this was PE, not sport, and the reading she'd done for her masters had really got her thinking. It helped her make sense of some of the things she'd been struggling with, and given her a different perspective. A gendered perspective. She could see how some of the things they did could be partly why some of the girls were switching off PE. Of course, she could hardly talk about a gendered perspective and 'discourses of heterosexual femininity' here, could she? Jenny acknowledged to herself. Pity they weren't all reading the same stuff as her! Even so, she was determined to get them to reflect a bit more. We're

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professionals after all and it mattered for the girls' sake – but also for the boys', she thought. It wasn't as if there wasn't an issue with the boys too, at least for some of them anyway. It's easy for us to sit here thinking everything is OK. We're sporty, we enjoy physical activity. We're OK about our body image. But that's the point, we're not like most of the kids we teach!, Jenny reflected, before continuing.

'I am not saying that we should just be changing the girls' kit either. I think we need to review the choices we offer to everyone. Not all of the boys are happy with wearing shorts and a T-shirt on a freezing cold day either. We could simply have a list of different clothing in school colours and give kids the choice about what they wear. That way, we acknowledge everyone's different. And everyone's comfortable because they get to choose what to wear. Surely that's worth thinking about?'

At that moment, the bell for the next lesson drowned out her voice, and before she could bring the meeting to any kind of conclusion, Peter stood up, pushing his chair backwards, legs screeching on the floor, and strode to the door. 'Sorry, we gotta go!'

Turned inwards towards the bench, Louise hunched her shoulders forwards, trying to cover her way-too-small breasts as she swapped her white school blouse for her PE shirt. An Asda supermarket special, which her Mum had got her at the weekend! Two for one. A good deal, she'd claimed; although Louisa couldn't help thinking she'd never use either of them if she could have her way! She hated PE. Pulling on her school sweatshirt quickly, she shivered as a stream of cold air filled the changing rooms from an open window. To get rid of the smell, Miss Cooper said. True, it did smell, but it would take more than fresh air to make this place bearable, she thought. Cold, dirty, crowded. Who in their right minds would choose to change in here, let alone have a shower afterwards? At least showers were optional now they were in Year 10! Glancing up, she saw Sonia, and remembered the School Council meeting later that day. She must talk to her about it at break.

'Right girls, are we all ready? Let's have some hush for the register, please.' Miss Cooper interrupted the noise and, once she'd gained order, quickly read through the names. 'OK, it's lovely and warm today, so there's no need for sweatshirts, girls. Out to the field please, quick as you can!' Thinking that here was a real live situation where she could practise her arguments for the Council meeting later in the day, Sonia responded politely, but firmly, 'But Miss, why can't we just choose whether we want sweatshirts or not? I think one or two of us are actually quite cold and would prefer to keep them on today.'

Research context

This ethnographic fiction draws on data collected as part of a qualitative study exploring young people's active lifestyles, and specifically the

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relationship between their out-of-school physical activity involvement and school PE. We were interested in how young people's experiences of school PE related to, if at all, their out-of-school physical activity engagement. The research took place in four case-study schools, all co-educational, comprehensive schools with multi-ethnic intakes, located in the inner city area of a large north-eastern city, and consisted of group and individual interviews with 60 young people in total. The young women's stories revealed rich insights into their active negotiations of gender and class relations in their quest to be physically active, in and out of school. Discomfort around their PE clothing and their experiences in mixed-sex lessons were significant parts of many of the young women's interviews.

Note

- 1 The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) is the government body in England responsible for standards in services that care for children and young people, including schools.

Recommended reading

- Flintoff, A. and Scraton, S. (2001) 'Stepping into active leisure? Young women's perceptions of active lifestyles and their experiences of school physical education', *Sport Education and Society*, 6(1): 5–22.
- (2006) 'Girls and PE', in D. Kirk, D. Macdonald and M. O'Sullivan (eds) *The Handbook of Physical Education*, London: Sage, pp. 767–83.
- Garrett, R. (2004) 'Negotiating a physical identity: Girls, bodies and physical education', *Sport, Education and Society*, 9(2): 223–37.
- Hills, L. (2007) 'Friendship, physicality and physical education: An exploration of the social and embodied dynamics of girls' physical education experiences', *Sport Education and Society*, 12(3): 317–36.
- Scraton, S. (1992) *Shaping up to Womanhood: Gender and Girls' Physical Education*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

