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## **This Girl... Can? Exploring the potential impact of This Girl Can in secondary schools**

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# THIS GIRL... CAN?

## Exploring the potential impact of This Girl Can in secondary schools

Lucy Harris, Rachel Sandford and Oliver Hooper [afPE member]

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, girls' participation in physical education (PE) has not been considered as comparable to that of boys', with girls' attitudes to the subject and divergent interests often cited as key reasons for this (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001). However, the danger of such a view is that girls themselves are identified as the 'problem', rather than recognising that the subject may not be responsive to their (potentially) differing needs (Azzarito *et al.*, 2006). This 'blaming' discourse is increasingly being challenged within contemporary PE research, with a shift towards an appreciation that the 'problem' rests more with the curriculum and pedagogical contexts within which girls are expected to participate, as well as the social construction of gender through PE and physical activity (Flintoff and Scraton, 2005; Sandford and Rich, 2006). Research is now also beginning to recognise more positive aspects of girls' participation, such as enjoyment of being active (Barr-Anderson *et al.*, 2013).

In considering the issue of gender, it is important to acknowledge the mechanisms of exclusion girls can face within PE. Azzarito (2011) found that a hidden gendered curriculum continues to operate within PE, shaping and constraining young girls' physicalities. The concept of gender distinction within PE is longstanding, with boys historically undertaking physical training whilst girls, required instead to demonstrate feminine comportment and behaviour, were prohibited from participating in such activities (Scraton, 1992). Although such extremes are not evident today, the concept of 'gender-appropriate' sports, based on stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, persists. Whilst much has been done to challenge gender issues within PE, masculine and feminine ideals continue to

be embedded within the curriculum and notions of what it means to 'be a boy' or to 'be a girl' are perpetuated by current practice (Azzarito *et al.*, 2006; Penney, 2007).

### WHAT IS THIS GIRL CAN?

This Girl Can is a campaign by Sport England which seeks to encourage women and girls over 14 to be more active, regardless of shape, size or ability. The campaign was launched in January 2015, following research that identified a significant difference in participation rates amongst males and females, with two million more men than women exercising or playing sport regularly (Sport England, 2016a). This research also found that although women are significantly less active, three quarters of those consulted expressed a desire to be more so. The majority of these women identified that a key reason for their inactivity was the fear of judgement with regard to shape, size and/or ability; most notably exposing their bodies and not appearing 'feminine' (This Girl Can, 2016b).

A central feature of the This Girl Can campaign were the adverts containing 'real women', utilising hard-hitting slogans such as 'sweating like a pig; feeling like a fox'. Statistically, when shown the iconic adverts, 70 per cent of women reported being motivated to participate in sport (This Girl Can, 2016b). Subsequently, Sport England (2016a) found that more than 7.2 million women were regularly taking part in physical activity and sport – 250,000 more than before the launch of This Girl Can. Whilst it is acknowledged that the campaign itself cannot be considered entirely responsible for this increase, it is perceived to have played a key role in enhancing girls' and women's participation (Sport England, 2016c). Sport England (2016a) also found that young people aged 16-25 are slightly more active

with a small increase of 3,700 compared to 2015. However, when comparing this number to the overall figure, there is neither a substantial nor significant increase for this age group, highlighting more work needs to be done to target this younger age group – with schools being an obvious site.

Despite the launch of This Girl Can and various other campaigns consistently striving to engage more women and girls in physical activity, a challenge still exists within the PE environment with regards to gender. There is much academic debate regarding the issues females may face within the PE context and the effects of previous initiatives (such as the Girls Active project by the Youth Sport Trust) that have attempted to challenge particular barriers. However, there is yet to be significant discussion on the effects of This Girl Can, at least within the context of schools. The research outlined here is from a recent study that sought to explore what female pupils (and their PE teachers) perceived to be barriers to girls' participation in PE and to explore the potential role that the This Girl Can campaign could play in addressing these, specifically within the secondary school context.

### METHODS

The study was iterative in nature and comprised two phases. Phase 1 involved an online survey, hosted on the Bristol Online Surveys platform and distributed via Twitter. The purpose of the survey was two-fold: firstly, to explore teachers' views on girls' perceptions of and participation in PE; and secondly, to explore their views on This Girl Can. A total of 50 secondary PE teachers (from across England) responded. Phase 2 involved focus groups with Year 7, 9 and 11 pupils (n=16) from a case study secondary school in the East Midlands.

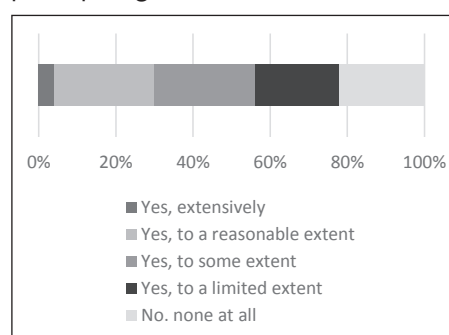
Within these focus groups, pupils were presented with images from This Girl Can and were also shown the main campaign video. These were used as stimuli to generate discussion and explore the pupils' perceptions of participation in PE (their own and others') as well as the This Girl Can campaign. The data generated from both phases were subsequently analysed using a thematic approach where initial codes were generated, grouped and refined. The analysis generated three key themes, namely: Barriers to participation; Encouragement, Engagement and Empowerment; and the 'fit' of This Girl Can in the school context.

## FINDINGS

### THEME 1: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The data indicated that a significant proportion of participants believed that girls faced challenges within the context of PE. With consideration of teachers' responses, 78 per cent felt that girls faced at least some challenges when participating in PE at school (Figure 1). This finding was also consistent for pupils, with most identifying many reasons as to why girls might not, or might be reluctant to, participate in PE. Several recurring challenges were identified by both teachers and pupils, three of which are discussed in further detail.

**Figure 1:** Do you think that female pupils at your school face challenges in participating in PE?



#### (i) Appearance

One of the main challenges, identified by both teachers and pupils, was the concept of appearance. This aligns with the work of Oliver and Lalik (2009) who state that the idea of having a 'desired body' gradually becomes a key part of girls' lives during adolescence. On outlining potential barriers to girls' engagement, one female PE teacher suggested that:

*"The problem is with (girls) not having enough time to get showered and look beautiful again after lessons."*

A key factor relating to appearance, referenced by many pupils across the various focus groups, was PE kit. For example, a Year 7 pupil suggested, *"The shirts have a 'V' that shows too much... they make you feel uncomfortable and embarrassed"*. This resonates with the work of Flintoff and Scraton (2005) who proposed that the revealing nature of PE kit exposes girls' bodies and can make them feel uncomfortable around their peers (particularly those of the opposite gender). However, in contrast to this, a Year 11 pupil stated, *"If girls could wear a crop top and leggings they'd do it... rather than wearing this horrible stuff"*. This notion of girls being more willing to participate if they had more choice around kit was supported by teachers, with one suggesting, *"PE kit is not keeping up with modern trends"*.

#### (ii) Boys

A large proportion of schools (~70 per cent) whose teachers participated in the survey taught PE in mixed-gender classes, with only a small number having gender-segregated PE. Despite this, it was evident that mixed-gender PE was regarded by many as a potential reason for girls' disengagement. One female teacher commented, for example, that, *"The girls don't always feel comfortable playing with the boys"*, while another argued, *"Some girls don't wish to participate in front of the boys"*, and yet another commented that, *"Some girls are intimidated by the sportier boys"*.

Similarly, the 'issue' of boys was discussed in all three of the pupil focus groups, with all the comments relating to negative experiences. For example, one Year 7 pupil noted, *"No-one passes to the girls in games, the boys just keep the ball to themselves, so you just end up standing there doing nothing"*. The year 7 girls often discussed having boys in their class, commenting that the way they 'take over' or say girls are 'doing things wrong' is a key reason for girls not enjoying such lessons. This idea was also replicated amongst the two older age groups, with a Year 11 pupil stating, *"I hate being in PE with boys"*. This resonates with the work of Hills (2007) who suggests that girl-only lessons can sometimes provide a safer space for participation, as they remove the potential for boys to 'tease' the girls.

#### (iii) Activity type

A final recurring barrier was the type of activity offered to pupils. Over the course of the focus groups, the notion of sports 'for boys' and 'for girls' became apparent. For example, one year 11 pupil noted, *"If a girl does football they can get judged for it, girls aren't meant to do football, girls are supposed to dance"*.

This suggests that young people still often have deeply ingrained notions of gender-appropriate sports, perhaps reinforced by the PE curriculum and longstanding school practices. The issue of activity choice was alluded to numerous times throughout the focus groups, with one Year 7 pupil stating, *"I wish the teachers would put a box of something like what we all want to do, and mix it up, because we always do what the teachers want every week"*.

Teachers also identified activity choice as a potential barrier to girls' participation, although some respondents also highlighted steps that they and/or their departments had already put in place to address this. For example:

*"The pupils are offered a range of different activities to choose from... we are also trying to ensure our curriculum is varied, giving them the choice to be active in not just games, but also different fitness activities, trampolining, free running, etc."*  
(Male, NQT)

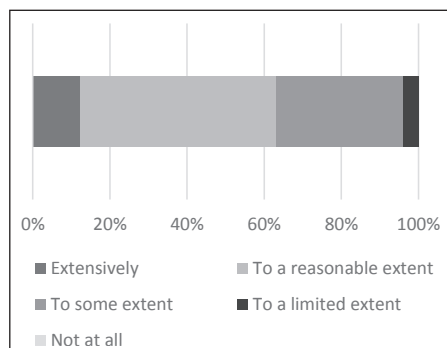
These findings surrounding barriers to girls' participation in PE, supported by wider literature, suggest there is more work to be done to ensure more girls feel better enabled to participate in PE. Arguably, as it stands, the hidden gendered curriculum proposed by Azzarito (2011) is still very much in operation.

### THEME 2: ENCOURAGEMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT – THIS GIRL... CAN?

As discussed, the This Girl Can campaign aims to get more women and girls active by challenging some of the (mis)conceptions around women's participation in sport and physical activity. With the campaign aimed at challenging similar barriers to those identified within this research, teachers were asked about the potential role the campaign could play in addressing some of the challenges that girls may face within PE. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the majority responded positively, with all considering that the campaign had the potential to impact on these barriers.

When teachers and pupils were asked their perceptions of the campaign, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Nearly three quarters of teachers believed it was a 'really positive' campaign, with a small proportion having no opinion or feeling 'indifferent' towards it. Pupils' responses were also largely positive. For example, on being shown some of the campaign images during a focus group, one Year 11 pupil stated,

**Figure 2:** To what extent do you think that the This Girl Can campaign can/could help to address some of the challenges some female pupils might face in engaging with PE?



*"The [posters] challenge being embarrassed because it's basically saying you shouldn't be embarrassed about what you look like, what gender you are or what religion you are".*

Within the survey, teachers were also asked whether they were aware of the purpose of the campaign. Interestingly, three terms were repeatedly used or referred to when describing the purpose of the campaign, namely: engagement, encouragement and empowerment. For example:

*It is a fantastic campaign aiming to engage and ensure the participation of girls in sport.*  
(Female, 11+ years' experience)

*The purpose of the campaign is to encourage both young girls and women to be physically active. It aims to break down the negative stereotypes around women being involved in sport/physical activity in the hope that this will increase participation and enjoyment.*  
(Male, NQT)

*It is to empower girls to be involved in whatever activity suits their interests and for physical exertion to be normalised.*  
(Male, 11+ years' experience)

Pupils were also asked about the purpose of the campaign. The same ideas were reproduced in the focus groups with one Year 9 pupil suggesting the campaign, "Empowers women... showing girls don't have to be this stereotypical 'don't like sports, all about the makeup' type of person, there's a different side to them". Further to this, a Year 11 pupil stated, "It's to empower women, to let them go and do what they want and not not do sports

*just because of gender stereotypes".* Interestingly, the views expressed by the participants in this research, about the campaign being empowering, encouraging and engaging, very much reflect the original aims set by Sport England. This could indicate that, to some extent at least, the key messages of the campaign are being recognised, acknowledged and reproduced within the school context.

## THEME 3: THIS GIRL CAN IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT – A GOOD FIT?

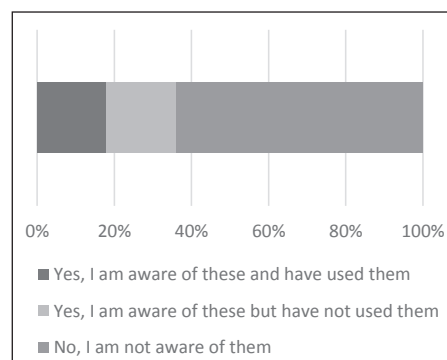
Although This Girl Can was not originally intended for schools, its potential for impact in this context has been driven by the development of school-specific resources by the Association for Physical Education (afPE). The final theme to be discussed speaks to this issue and examines teachers' and pupils' perceptions regarding if and how This Girl Can could (and does) 'fit' within the school context.

Over half of the teachers who responded (64 per cent) stated that This Girl Can had been utilised/promoted within their school. In those schools where the campaign had not been utilised/promoted, the main reasons for this were concerns over the suitability of resources for use within the school context and the target audience of the campaign.

### (i) Resources

The campaign resources promoting 'real women' are perhaps the most familiar aspect of This Girl Can and were readily acknowledged by teachers. However, teachers were not so aware of the school resources developed by afPE (see Figure 3). Indeed, it is significant to note that although 64 per cent of teachers indicated that This Girl Can had been promoted within their school, a considerable proportion of these were not aware of the school-specific resources and as such may not be engaging with the campaign as fully as they might.

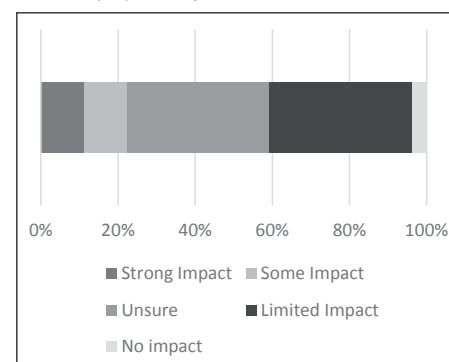
**Figure 3:** Are you aware of the This Girl Can resources developed by the Association for Physical Education (afPE)?



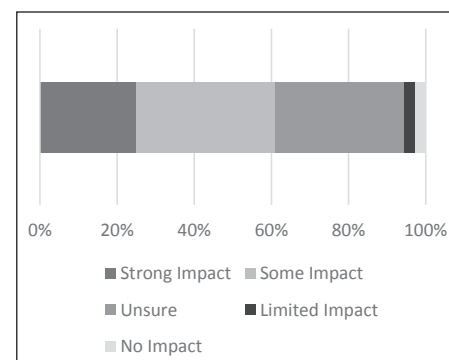
Despite the disparity surrounding the selection and use of the This Girl Can campaign resources, more than half of teachers (62 per cent) said that they are or could be useful within their practice. Of those teachers who were unsure, a key reason was doubt over the suitability of the campaign resources for use within the PE curriculum, for example: "Many resources developed by external agencies are not well suited to teaching within the curriculum and so do not fit in well with lessons" (Male, NQT). It should be remembered, however, that many teachers were unaware of the school-specific resources and referred only to those developed for the main campaign.

Teachers who had utilised the This Girl Can resources were asked what impact they felt there had been on pupils at their school. Teachers who hadn't used the resources were asked what impact they felt there might be, if the resources were used. The response was varied and, although it was positive overall, the results were not entirely convincing (see Figures 4 and 5). The data suggest that teachers who had not yet implemented the campaign resources saw more potential in them than those who had, with 22 teachers seeing 'some' or a 'strong' potential impact in comparison to only 13 teachers who had used the resources and seen 'some' or a 'strong' impact.

**Figure 4:** If you have used the This Girl Can resources, what impact have they had on pupils at your school?



**Figure 5:** If you have not used the This Girl Can resources, what impact do you think they could have on pupils at your school?



THIS  
GIRL  
CAN

# This is how I get my teenage kicks.

This Girl Can

Pupils were also asked how effective they thought the resources might be within the school context. Interestingly, the younger age groups found them the least relatable with the Year 11 group responding most approvingly. In addition, despite the Year 7 pupils choosing several posters that inspired them during the focus group, one pupil commented, *"Even though you see these...you've still got boys teasing you and these t-shirts that show a bit too much, you still feel really self-conscious"*.

This notion was replicated within the Year 9 focus group, showing that although some barriers can be challenged through the resources, there remains something of a disconnect between the premise of the campaign and the practice of PE within the school context.

## (ii) Target audience

Throughout the focus groups it became clear that some of the 'hard-hitting slogans' in the adverts were not fully understood, especially amongst the younger age groups. For example, within the Year 7 session most of the participants made comments such as "I don't understand that" or "I don't get this message" and "I don't get what that one means". This suggests that some of the slogans may be too abstract for younger pupils and may not perhaps be a good 'fit' for all within the school context.

Another potential issue was made apparent during the older pupil discussions, this time in relation to broader subcultures within the school environment. For example, when discussing whether the campaign would affect engagement rates within PE, a pupil responded with:

*"Do I think it'll work? No, because you've always got the popular people in the school. I don't think they'd risk their reputation... I think maybe in Year 7 this would've made a difference, but by Year 9 they (the popular people) won't change their social status now."*  
(Year 9 pupil)

This echoes research that suggests social standing and being part of a 'popular' group is important to young people and represents a significant source of self-esteem (Ellis and Zarbatany, 2007).

The disjunction between the campaign and school context was also apparent within some of the teacher responses, for example:

*"I think it is a great campaign for adults who have lost confidence in themselves... However, I don't think the focus has particularly been on under-16 girls."*  
(Female, 11+ years' experience)

However, many teachers also felt that the campaign could have potential within the school context, if more work could be done to specifically target that age group and adapt key messages accordingly.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, in relation to the potential barriers of girls' engagement in PE, the findings of this study replicate those highlighted in wider PE literature and broadly include key issues such as appearance, activity type and gendered behaviours/practices. Moreover, they suggest that to continue to get girls more physically active within PE there is a need to consider, among other things, the composition of PE classes, the choice of activities and the options for appropriate clothing across all age groups.

The research outlined here suggests that This Girl Can has potential to improve participation and engagement in PE, but that more needs to be done to ensure the resources are appropriate for the school context and that key messages are tailored to be meaningful for different ages of pupils. In addition, there is a need for greater promotion of the school-specific resources developed by afPE. These may need to be promoted further, or via different channels, to make teachers aware of these and to promote their potential use within PE and the school more broadly. ■

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Lucy Harris is a PGCE PE student, Rachel Sandford is a Lecturer in Young People and Sport, and Oliver Hooper is a Doctoral Researcher in Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy at Loughborough University.