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## **“You don’t want to stand out as the bigger one”: exploring how PE and school sport participation is influenced by pupils and their peers**

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# ‘You don’t want to stand out as the bigger one’: exploring how PE and school sport participation is influenced by pupils and their peers

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Population health concerns related to physical inactivity and obesity appear in policy documents, government campaigns and popular media across western societies. Children and young people have been targeted for physical activity promotion and schools have been positioned as sites for intervention. In particular, Physical Education and school sport (PESS) has been framed as a key part of the solution. While some interventionist programmes in schools have reported positive outcomes, they have also been criticised for stigmatising fatness, contributing to a culture of surveillance and fuelling body image anxieties. Despite ongoing work to ameliorate these critical issues by addressing physical activity promotion discourses, curricula and teaching practices many of the same challenges persist. In seeking alternative explanations (and solutions) this paper shifts attention to exploring the role of pupils and their peers. **Purpose:** While the critical literature on health and physical education has been illuminating, few studies explore the role of pupils and their peers. Further research is necessary to understand how school peers contribute to pupils' engagement with PESS. This paper, therefore, draws on Bourdieu's notion of physical capital and seeks to understand how pupils' physical activity is influenced by lived-body experiences in school spaces. **The study:** Data were produced from a 6-month bricolage-based study with pupils (N = 29, aged 13–14) across four diverse school settings in England. Multiple qualitative methods were deployed to enhance methodological rigour with what is often a challenging age group for research. Data were interpreted and theorised using the concept of physical capital. **Findings:** Pupils themselves play a significant part in establishing the physical body as a symbol of power and status in school settings. Participants understood the health risks of being both underweight and obese, but they regarded obesity as being more problematic because of the immediate social risks of 'standing out as the bigger one'. Following this rationale, participants sought to accumulate physical capital through engaging in exercise as a purposeful calorie-burning activity intended to avoid the pity, abnormality and derision which is expected to be directed towards overweight pupils. Furthermore, during PESS in clear view of peers, distinctions between pupils' physical capital could be made by recognising differences in sporting skill. In this context, physical capital mediated engagement in PESS in various ways. **Conclusion:** This study has revealed that peers play a significant part in constructing the lived-body experiences of young people. In order to address the criticisms raised about some school-based health promotion interventions, it is crucial to attend to pupils' relationships with peers as well as addressing policies, curricula and teaching practices. Being sensitive to peer relationships and their understanding of health may help teachers and health promoters decide how to manage the spaces where PESS takes place.

## **Introduction**

Population health concerns related to obesity and physical inactivity have led to national health campaigns around the world (such as Change4life in the UK, Get set 4 life in Australia and Eat Move Live in New Zealand) and various calls for changes in behaviour. In an attempt to prevent population-level non-communicable disease in future, there has been a significant focus on young people. Initiatives like the National Child Measurement Programme, Change4Life Clubs and the Healthy Schools programme utilise schools as key sites for education-based interventions. In the UK, and elsewhere, it is clear that schools have played a significant role in the implementation of these strategies, not least through Physical Education and school sport (PESS). Given this large-scale investment, it is vital to understand young people's experiences of physical activity in school contexts.

While educating young people about health is a well-intentioned endeavour, an international cohort of authors in Health and Physical Education (HPE) have raised critical concerns highlighting the paradox that health 'solutions' can, in some cases, help produce new problems by stigmatising fatness, contributing to a culture of surveillance and fuelling body image anxieties (e.g. Cale and Harris 2013; Evans et al. 2008; Gard and Wright 2005; Kirk 2006; Olofsson 2005; Powell and Fitzpatrick 2015; Tinning and Glasby 2002; Van Amsterdam et al. 2012). Sharing O'Dea's (2005) view that the first priority of preventative health is to 'do no harm', we consider the need to improve the way health manifests itself in the experiences of pupils to be of critical concern. In recent years, practitioners sharing similar concerns have taken practical action to avoid the inadvertent harms of health promotion. The Association for Physical Education have published the easily accessible advice laid out by Cale and Harris (2013) which, amongst other things, encourages PE teachers to deliver health related exercise in line with a 'health at every size' approach. Furthermore, positive action has been taken by proponents of a 'salutogenic' approach to health promotion (McCuaig and Hay 2013; Quennerstedt 2008) and the advocacy of 'critical pedagogies' related to health and the body (Fitzpatrick 2013). In a similar vein, the UK government launched a body confidence campaign, Be Real, in 2014 aiming to raise awareness of body image issues and work with partners to help educate teachers and pupils (GEO 2015). Furthermore, Sport England's 2015 promotional campaign, This Girl Can, attempts to provocatively challenge dominant sporting female representations by presenting imagery of females participating in a

variety of physical activities with a range of body shapes rarely presented in the mainstream media.

However, while these examples may suggest an intention to counter the concerns raised in the critical health literature, other recent developments highlight the pervasiveness and durability of contemporary health imperatives. In a new expression of familiar tendencies, the most recent mantra declares that ‘sitting is the new smoking’ (see Chau et al. 2015) directing our attention to an additional behavioural concern. Increasingly, it seems, the behavioural focus of disease prevention functions to individualise health responsibilities and produce citizens as consumers of health (Cohn 2014; Pirie 2016). Just as it was becoming difficult to keep track of the various behaviours that citizens need to perform in order to stay healthy, wearable technologies capable of quantifying, recording and prompting behaviour have stepped in and initiated a number of new debates (Lupton 2012; Miah and Rich 2008). These innovative technologies are potentially transformative and supportive but do of course come with their warnings (Gard 2014). Furthermore, the combination of crisis rhetoric and neo-liberal policies of austerity has opened up clear space for the involvement of corporate partners. Nike and Apple, for example, have been quick to capitalise on these emerging mobile health technologies and, in somewhat problematic and contradictory ways, the likes of McDonalds and Coca-Cola have been involved in health education and physical activity promotion with children (Piggin 2014; Powell and Gard 2015).

While these debates are evolving, PESS remains one of the ‘go-to’ solutions; often to its financial benefit. For example, following the recent widespread reporting of the exorbitant amount of sugar in popular soft drinks, the UK government announced the intention for a so-called ‘sugar-tax’ – income from which will be used to double the funding for school sport to £320 million (HM Treasury 2016). Yet the increasing expectation being placed on schools to deal with this ‘crisis’ is a cause for concern. This is especially concerning in light of evidence suggesting that PE teachers are ill-equipped and ill-trained to implement health-related educational goals (Alfrey, Webb, and Cale 2012). Indeed, little is known about the social contexts in which health promotion initiatives are eventually enacted. Given these recent developments, we consider young people’s physical activity and health promotion in PESS as an area in need of research. In particular, questions regarding how pupils experience their bodies in school contexts remain pertinent. We contend that the specific contexts in

which health promotion policies are realised provide important insights for teachers, health promoters and policy-makers.

Foucauldian-inspired analyses have dominated this area of research in recent years. ‘Discourse’ has been crucial in investigating the construction of knowledge in the media (Wright, Halse, and Levy 2016), in curricula (Webb, Quennerstedt, and Öhman 2008) and in teaching resources (Burrows and Wright 2007; McCuaig and Hay 2013). Furthermore, a number of authors have directed attention at the influence of ‘surveillance technologies’, and ‘bio-politics’ through HPE’s emphasis on body measurements and self-monitoring (Burrows, Wright, and Jungersen-Smith 2002; Öhman et al. 2014; Wright and Halse 2014). Furthermore, as ‘governmentality’ is often achieved through the ‘official’ knowledge channels, HPE teachers have also been central to research (Alfrey, Webb, and Cale 2012; Fitzpatrick and Russell 2015; Harris 2013). While we recognise the undeniable importance of Foucauldian-inspired contributions to knowledge in the field, there is growing support for the notion that regulation, monitoring and surveillance could be more ‘lateral’ (Andrejevic 2002) than previously theorised. Indeed, Rich (2010) articulates a dissatisfaction with reliance on the ‘panopticon’ in Foucauldian theorising and instead offers an Deleuzian account of ‘assemblages’ that ‘challenges the view that surveillance is a stable, unified or monolithic entity which acts upon schools’ and instead ‘focuses on connections formed with other groups, individuals, bodies and institutions’ (807). Throughout this study we consider the role of peers to be relatively under-played and seek to offer an alternative articulation.

In seeking alternative explanations (and solutions) our theoretical point of departure is a shift towards a Bourdieusian understanding of young people’s embodied experience of school. While our interest still centres around the social meaning of the body within the health promotion discourse, we seek to contribute new understandings by exploring how these discourses are enacted and experienced by pupils and their peers. This intention is driven by the un-controversial notion that pupils are likely to care what their peers think about them and it would be remiss to ignore it. This, we feel, is in line with Larsson’s (2014) call to move away from researching what the body is and towards how the body matters. This is important not only because it centralises the perspectives of young people themselves, but also because it recognises that social contexts are co-constructed by/for pupils. In doing so, this paper contributes to the emerging interest in understanding the perspectives

and contributions of young people to the delivery and experience of PE (Fisette 2013; Oliver and Kirk 2016). This paper, therefore, draws on Bourdieu's notion of physical capital and seeks to understand how pupils' physical activity is influenced by their physical capital in the marketplace of the school.

### **Theoretical grounding**

A number of Bourdieu's concepts have been widely deployed by scholars in sociology and education. A key strength in his theoretical approach is the acknowledgement that social relations are often experienced through relations of power which serve to reproduce social structures and therefore inequalities. Bourdieu shows that these relations of power are enacted through cultural practices that serve to symbolically (and actually) distinguish groups of people from one another and eventually manifest in differences in dispositions and tastes. Here, we draw on one particular source of symbolic distinction – physical capital.

For Bourdieu (1999, 336), the concept of capital 'enables one to account for the relations of force that are actualized in and by relations of cognitions (or recognition) and of communication'. Physical capital refers to the forms of symbolic and material resources related to the body that individuals have at their disposal to enact relations of power. However, where Bourdieu conceptualised physical capital as being accommodated within 'cultural capital' (Hunter 2004), we prefer to advocate Shilling's (2010, 1991) notion that physical capital warrants central attention itself, particularly within debates about physical education and physical cultures.

Capital can only be understood in the context of the social space in which practices operate. Bourdieu referred to this context as the 'field' (Bourdieu 1985, 1977). Hunter (2004, 176) uses the term 'the field of physical education' to this effect.

The field of PE, then, is made up of a structured system of social relations between the educational authority, PE teacher educators, PE curriculum writers, health and sport professionals who have influence over curriculum and practices, individual school administrators, PE teachers, and PE students. Any analysis of discourses and the individual devoid of a social context is flawed and limited because it denies the relational positioning of the individual within social fields.

In following this conceptualisation of the field of PE we recognise that physical capital is somewhat relative, relational and context dependant. That is, there are particular rules and expectations within this social space that privilege some bodies over others. We can say, then, that the body is symbolic and that those in possession of valued bodies have high physical capital. As Shilling (2010, 155) explains:

Bodies that are trim, presentable and skilled in the arts of impression management gain status and value within and between these social fields, while the desirability and exchange value of those falling outside of these parameters are correspondingly lower.

Importantly for the focus of this study, the field is constituted significantly by pupils and their peers; a point that has thus far been largely unexplored in relevant research. Within this field, individuals must manage their own presentation of self in order to establish, maintain or acquire physical capital – with some being more equipped to manage presentations than others. What is emphasised through this perspective is the embodied nature of the self. This allows us to pay particular attention to how physical activity is used as a means to gain status, symbolic power and acceptance amongst peers and in reference to socially defined meanings. It follows, then, that within this context we might expect the body to become an ‘object of modification’ (Crossley 2001) in an attempt to achieve status. In other words, physical activity is a method to accumulate physical capital.

Physical capital has been used in PE and sport pedagogy research. Hill (2015, 762) reports on the way that boys ‘invest’ in their bodies by doing particular types of physical activity that would ‘enable them to develop muscularity, fitness and/or motor competence, to attain or retain physical and social capital in school’. The metaphor of capital has also been helpful in other studies to highlight that some pupils are deemed to ‘posses’ more than others and hence be defined as higher ‘ability’ (Evans and Penney 2008). Furthermore, Hay and Macdonald (2010) show that these definitions of ‘ability’ can lead to differential access to spaces in which social, physical and cultural capital can be accessed leading to privileging some students’ achievement potential. While these studies have been illuminating, the ways in which pupils and their peers validate and contribute to physical capital in school spaces remains unclear.



## **The study**

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a wider research project aimed at understanding the sociology of physical activity and health for young people. While the methodology of the wider project is described here, it is important to note that this paper only reports on data relevant to the pre-sent discussion on the role of peers and physical capital on pupils' engagement with PESS.

Twenty-nine participants aged 13–14 (16 boys and 13 girls) were recruited from four schools near a medium-sized town in England. One school was a fee-paying grammar school and the three others were state-funded comprehensive schools. After gaining institutional ethical approval, permission was sought from Headteachers to carry out research in their school. All schools and participants are given pseudonyms here to protect anonymity. Data were produced in three main ways: focus groups, ethnography and photo-elicitation. The primary researcher drew from the concept of the 'Bricoleur' (Kincheloe 2005) to make sense of data captured in these three ways. Essentially, this bricolage approach allowed for the researcher to use whichever 'tools' from the methodological 'tool-box' that were most appropriate given the principle questions at hand. Indeed, this approach to data collection represents a rigorous attempt to avoid the pitfalls of 'methodoltry' (Chamberlain 2011) whereby singular methods are prioritised over the principles driving the research questions. This approach was appropriate in this context in particular due to varied preferences and experiences of young people across the different research settings.

A total of 60 focus group discussions were recorded over a 6-month period. Focus group discussions took place in groups of 2–6 and were carried out during school lunchtimes and free periods without teachers' direct presence. Focus groups were chosen in an attempt to reduce the adult/child power relationship anticipated to be a disruptive element in one-to-one interview settings. Discussions began in a semi-structured format but, as data collection lasted several months, soon developed into open discussions related to issues of central importance to participants. Most discussions were loosely structured around a topic which the lead researcher (first author) introduced (e.g. PE lessons and leisure time activities) and included questions like 'do you ever feel embarrassed during PE lessons?' and 'why do you think some pupils enjoy PE and others don't?' Further, we occasionally introduced small tasks

during the focus groups in order to generate discussion. These included a word-association task (e.g. asking participants to ‘write down the first 5 things that come to mind when you think about sport’) and an image response task (e.g. asking participants to comment on different images of sports people, muscular bodies, obese bodies and fashion models).

Ethnographic notes were helpful in gaining further insight into the school-level contexts encountered by the young people in this study. The lead researcher was able to actively participate in school life through fulfilling various different roles: school visitor, PE lesson observer, PE teaching assistant, health and personal and social development (PSD) lesson observer, lunchtime club organiser and inter-school sports competition volunteer. While maintaining a primary identification in the eyes of school staff and pupils as a ‘researcher’ or ‘student’ from the nearby university, these different roles and experiences helped position the lead researcher as someone having a greater involvement in the school settings. Through some of these ethnographic notes, this research attended to the naturally occurring behaviours in the ongoing everyday lives of young people outside of the peculiarity of the interview situations. Factors such as the environment in the school-yard, the ‘feel’ of the PE class or visual culture of the schools’ local surroundings were tangible through first-hand ethnographic observations. In this paper, we paraphrase some discussions with school teachers where relevant and note that, in contrast to discussions with pupils, these discussions did not take place in formal interview settings. Ethnographic notes were hand written or spoken into a voice recorder shortly after each school visit to effectively capture the researcher’s reflections.

Visual methods were introduced to the participants roughly 8 weeks into the research study. For some time, visual representations of the body have been investigated in research which attempts to deal with today’s ‘image-saturated world’ and the ‘physical culture’ of the health industry (Hill and Azzarito 2012; Pink 2007; Rich 2010). Participants in this study were provided with digital cameras to take home for one week each and were essentially asked to ‘show me’ (as opposed to ‘tell me’) about aspects of physical activity in their lives. A total of 95 still photos and 11 video clips of varying lengths were taken (7 minutes 20 seconds in total). On many occasions, photos were brought back to the focus group context and participants were asked to explain and elaborate on their photos. This kind of photo elicitation has been used during research with children by others (Clarke 1999; Hill and Azzarito 2012).

During interviews, participants were asked simple questions like, ‘why did you take this photo?’ and ‘what is important about this photo?’ On other occasions, the visual data were self-explanatory and required no verbal explanation.

Data were compiled and organised in the software programme, NVivo, before being subject to analysis. The analysis involved a thorough process drawing on Alvesson and Skoldberg’s (2009) account of reflexive methodology which outlines a tripartite relationship between the (1) corpus of data, (2) the interpreting researcher and (3) the research community. This involved the initially reductive process of coding data at nodes related to the research question and developed into establishing coherent themes. Hence, physical capital emerged as an important theme because it was evident in the data, the lead researcher was aware of the concept and it was deemed relevant to the research community within which this study operated. We acknowledge that this was an iterative process that was at times inductive and at times deductive and that the concept of physical capital is epistemologically significant in the production of the findings. It is also important to note that data analysis alluded to the influence of peers in ways that were not related to physical capital, such as through the formation of friendship groups. These data are not included in this present paper in order to give physical capital adequate focus and attention.

### **Visual appearance: ‘you don’t want to stand out as the bigger one’**

The social stigma attached to obesity was clear in the data. Pupils who participated in this study were well aware of what has been referred to as ‘the social risks of being fat’ (Evans et al. 2011, 335) and in some cases perpetuated the stigma themselves. For many participants, regardless of the school setting, obesity was a sensitive subject and difficult to talk about. Following a PSD lesson at St Andrews High School as part of the ethnographic fieldwork, a teacher told the lead researcher about how hard it was to openly talk about obesity in the classroom discussions for fear of offending anyone. When asked about his opinions of obesity, one student participant (Richard, St Andrews High School) said, ‘I don’t really want to talk about that’ which promptly ended the discussion on the topic on that occasion. Indeed, in focus group interviews, some participants felt the need to say ‘no offence’ after using words such as obese or fat. Fatness for some girls could be summarised concisely with the statement ‘you don’t want to stand out as the bigger one’ (Naomi, Woodley Grange High School). For one girl, however, the social risks of being fat were of such

magnitude that she reported; 'I'd rather be anorexic than obese' (Angie, Woodley Grange High School). In reporting this statement out of its immediate context it is important to point out that Angie used the statement in a way that could have also been put as 'I'd rather be anorexic looking than obese looking'. The omission of the word looking is perhaps telling in itself in that the social risks of having an abnormal body is more meaningful and concerning than the (potential) health risks of being anorexic/obese.

Further, when used between friends, the word obese was sometimes used to deliberately offend for humour. In a discussion with a pair of pupils at Grove Hill High School, one joked; 'he's not fat. He's obese! [laughter]'. While the interviewer only captured this interaction during data collection, it is not unreasonable to assume the same gesture is used elsewhere without humour with the intention of enacting power and inflicting some damage. Not only were fat bodies the object of derision, they were also the object of pity and disgust. During a word-association task at St Andrews High School, one male participant wrote 'feel sorry for them' when referring to the word 'obese'. When presented with images of obese bodies, pupils often laughed or showed distaste. Bourdieu is helpful here in making sense of this process; he states, '[T]he logic of the symbolic is fundamentally diacritical, distinction is the specific form of profit that symbolic capital procures' (Bourdieu 1999, 337). Constructing fat bodies as objects of ridicule, pity and disgust is, therefore, part of a process which distances those with 'normal' bodies from those with 'deviant bodies'. In this way, profit is distributed amongst pupils with 'normal' bodies and gains in capital are made for use in the marketplace of the school.

So it is clear that fat bodies are stigmatised and valued less than others for the young people in this study. Pupils considered fat by their peers had low physical capital and were likely to behave differently in social contexts as result. For the female pupils at Woodley Grange High School, this meant doing physical activity to burn calories. The girls' general agreement with Angie's statement 'you don't want to stand out as the bigger one' during one discussion, highlighted a pertinent motivation for them. Burning calories was an important motivation for several participants and a secondary intention for others. In this group of girls, both Angie and Naomi said that their physical activity was mostly done at home. Their photographs (Figure 1) highlighted this too. While most pictures were self-explanatory, the interviewer had to

ask Angie why there were photos of the stairs, to which she answered, 'I run up the stairs 'cos it's a really good way of burning calories, quickly'.

Indeed, on occasion, it seemed that any physical activity which did not involve the intensity required to burn calories 'quickly' was seen as inefficient or even a waste of time. When Hali (Wood- ley Grange High School) mentioned that going to the gym 'gets it done quicker' the interviewer asked what she meant:

Researcher: Hali, you said 'it gets it done quicker' what do you mean by that?

Hali: Say if you do football, the amount of energy or calories that you would burn in your match is probably less than, after all that work and being outside and fighting for the ball and whatever, it's like probably much less than going to the gym and working out. And it's, like, more professional.... If you go to the gym for an hour or something, like three times a week, it would probably be, I'm just guessing but, I think you'll probably burn more than if you were playing sport.

The idea of engaging in physical activities for body shape goals was mostly talked about by girls. However, one male pupil said, 'I like to keep in shape and so I like doing sports 'cos that helps to keep in shape' (George). Another pupil (Michael) – who we should mention was significantly larger in body shape than his peers – was keen to turn his 'fat into muscle':

Researcher: Does it bother you, about body weight or anything?

Michael: [No] does it fuck (spoken quietly). Three years. I'm gonna go to the gym in 3 years.

Researcher: So what do you think of those people who are really conscious of it then?

Keith: It's good that you're in there exercising but you shouldn't be in there every day. It should be like 3 times a week or something.

Michael: When I'm 16 I'm going to the gym, fuck it.

Researcher: Yeah? Why will you start going to the gym?

Michael: So I can lose all my fat and turn it into muscle. Simple reason.

(Grove Hill high School)

Noting that '3 years' is the soonest that this pupil would be allowed access to weight lifting facilities in the local gym (16 years old), it is significant that he stresses the desire to gain muscle as soon as possible. His quick response of 'does it fuck' does the work of managing himself as being unconcerned about his physical appearance; a strategy, perhaps, to 'show face' and maintain a level of pride while hiding his concern. The addition of 'fuck it' does similar work to manage his presentation of self. This interview extract indicates that physical activity is considered a way to gain physical capital.

Another pupil's actions observed at the same school highlighted the way in which pupils can alter their engagement with PESS depending on the context. Lewis was also visibly much larger in body size than his peers. The lead researcher described one particular event in his ethnographic notes:

There was an interesting incident with Lewis during the Grove Hill High School activity day. Pupils had the opportunity to take part in various activities around the school. One such activity involved four volunteer pupils competing in an arcade-type dancing video game in front of an audience of about 20 other pupils. After watching in the audience for one round, Lewis volunteered to take part himself. While I stood at the back of the room, I noticed some laughing at Lewis' expense as he prepared to start the game and I was concerned that the event could end in embarrassment for him. However, it seemed that Lewis took the lead in bringing humour to the situation by overtly laughing at himself and raising his arms to salute when he was doing well. By leading the humour, it seemed as if others were then ill-equipped and unable to laugh at him and his attempt to dance. He made the situation funny by participating in an ironic way.

This kind of tentative engagement further highlights the embodied nature of subjectivity and the importance of the social context in determining behaviour. What young people say and do is dependent on what peers expect of them in their social roles and social positions. For Lewis, standing out as 'the bigger one' in the polite words of Angie or as 'a fucking fat bellend' in the less polite words of Michael, provided the context for the ironic participation that he decided to enact. As Hunter (2004) points out, pupils often attribute lack of competence to visual markers of

fatness. These pupils therefore ‘continued to be seen, or see themselves, as fat, and concurrently, they had no expectation of being competent’ (Hunter 2004, 187). Returning to the ethnographic note presented above, assumptions made about the competence of overweight pupils may have added another layer of complexity to Lewis’ management of taking part in the dance-mat competition. Not only did he have to deal with the perceived paradox of being overweight and active in front of peers, but also the assumption that he would be incompetent. These findings, we suggest, illustrate that pupils who lack physical capital in the field of physical education as a result of their visual appearance have to carefully negotiate spaces where physical activity takes place. Some pupils sought to avoid ‘standing out as the bigger one’ in comparison to peers while others sought to turn ‘fat into muscle’ in light of possible derision from other pupils. Indeed, while exercising in clear view of peers, one overweight pupil participated with humour and irony.

### **Physical ability: ‘I don’t actually try because in case we go wrong’**

Physical movement is also a socially meaningful activity in that it differentiates by skill, competence and ability. Pupils who are good at sport can benefit from their ‘officially endorsed’ physical capital, whereas those who are not are often left powerless on the field of play and beyond. Examples from the data in our study demonstrate the various ways in which movement can be used to accumulate physical capital in present contexts and how avoiding movement can be seen as protecting physical capital from being lost.

Pupils were very aware that being skilled and successful in sport and PE was considered valuable to their peers. The public displays of trophies and international jerseys in one school corridor in particular (King Edwards Grammar, Figure 2) served on one hand to celebrate achievements of certain praiseworthy pupils, and on the other, to highlight that sporting achievement is legitimately worthy of celebration. These symbolic artefacts of the successes of other pupils were made visible, often in foyers and public areas of the school and always in glass cabinets protected from dust and theft.

In the knowledge that good performances are worthy of praise, there is the simultaneous knowledge that poor performances are worthy of shame. Several pupils reported the embarrassment felt when standing out as a low ability pupil.

Aaron: I just swim really slow, like. It's kind of embarrassing at the end when I was, like, on the side and I was the last one. And everyone was looking at me like [gestures pointing].

In recognising this shame, the same group of pupils suggested splitting PE lessons into ability groups:

Researcher: Is there anything that you would change about PE?

Aja: I think it would be better if we could split up into two groups.

Researcher: And why would you like that? Freddy: 'Cos then it would be easier. And you wouldn't get embarrassed as much, when you, like, drop the ball.

What is clear from the data above is that the ability to perform well in spaces where sport and physical activity take place has some social value and is in reference to peers. What follows logically is that young people may practise sport to improve in order to experience being valued. Alternatively, pupils may avoid exposing themselves through sport to prevent embarrassment. Several participants in this study – particularly those who considered themselves to have 'sporty' bodies – lauded the benefits of practising sport. One high-achieving sportsman, James from King Edwards Grammar School, described one of the reasons why he fully engages with Hockey during PE:

I play it for school and for Tigers [the local team] which is sort of involved with the school anyway. So I try hard in that, one for fitness and two just to practice...and I think I'll learn faster if I try harder rather than just mess around. But I think everybody tries hard because we want to win the games on Saturday.



The social credibility that being good at sport brings was not reason enough to engage for all pupils. The alternative strategy in light of physical capital was evident in the actions of pupils who wanted to avoid embarrassment in sporting situations. Richard nicely articulated his concern about engaging in PE in year 7;

I think the only time I've ever been embarrassed or anything is when, I think, in year 7 when you just walk in and you don't know anybody and it's in this open field or whatever, and there's just one or two people you might know, and you're just thinking 'how am I going to do this without looking a fool?' It's just the fear of just going into a place and not knowing what you're doing.

In this instance 'not knowing what you're doing' poses an important problem for pupils who might feel it necessary to protect whatever vestiges of physical capital that they possess. This was a common strategy for less-able pupils and was recognised and accepted by the able pupils;

I think for some of the people who aren't so good – because obviously they're watching better people play – then they're not really getting involved and don't want to 'cos they don't want to make a mistake. (James, King Edwards Grammar School)

Making a mistake is socially damaging for 'less-able' pupils taking part in physical activity. Embarrassment is essentially a social experience and, for the girls in Woodley Grange, being watched by other pupils was explicitly the reason why competitive lunchtime sport was so poorly attended at school:

Hali: They probably would [take part] but not with everybody watching [agreement].

Angie: It's embarrassing. Researcher: Is it the boys? Or just anyone watching or...?

Gemma: It's just everyone, like.

Naomi: It's on the Ball-court at lunch so everybody that's outside and everybody that's just having their lunch.

Angie: And they're just sat there watching.

Hali: And I don't think that anyone takes it seriously because of that. People are just talking on the side and everything.

Researcher: So could you be too keen?

Angie: Well it's like I don't actually try because in case we go wrong. And everyone would be like 'haha Angie'.

Naomi: And you'd feel stupid.

This point resonates with claims made by Hill (2015) who suggests that 'popularity, respect, athleticism or merely avoiding being called a "muppet", can impact who is heard, who is silenced and who can play or make decisions about who can play' (774). The discussion above with Naomi, Angie and Hali adds the subtle point that making a mistake when trying to play well is more damaging than simply lacking ability. In addition to pupils' concerns about lacking skill and competence in the school, a connection could also be made with misrecognition and presumption that certain bodies are more/less 'able' than other bodies; a discussion that has been raised elsewhere (Evans and Penney 2008; Hay and Lisahunter 2006).

## **Conclusion**

PESS have been heavily implicated by recent attempts to ameliorate health concerns regarding childhood physical inactivity and obesity. Building on from a body of critical research illuminating and problematising health policies, curricula and teaching practices, this study sought to use the concept of physical capital to explore the ways in which peers influence pupils' engagement in PESS. We have argued that peers have a significant role to play in the field and hence contribute to physical capital distinctions in schools.

The findings from this study suggest that pupils engage with PESS in ways that comply with hierarchies constructed by the physical cultures of health and physical activity promotion. In the highly social context of schooling, the diacritical effects of physical capital impact individuals' experience of and engagement with physical activity. The participants seemed astutely aware of their positions in various settings where physical activity took place and acted accordingly. Our interpretation suggests that by making distinctions between peers, pupils understand PESS to be a practice that has important implications for physical capital, largely understood by

visual appearance and sporting ability. As such, for the pupils who understand, reproduce and enact physical capital, physical activities inside and outside of school are often made meaningful by the fact that they are calorie-burning activities. While health promoters striving to increase physical activity levels may cite this as a success, this study highlights that this success is premised on the questionable exploitation of social risks associated with deficits in physical capital. Additionally, physical capital has important manifestations in the way that pupils understand ability and competence. Pupils distinguished by having low physical capital appear to avoid physical activity, especially in the school context. When they do take part, data highlight how pupils can feel embarrassed during PESS and therefore deploy strategies to take part in ways that appear as if little effort is being applied.

Findings are relevant for physical educationalists throughout the UK and further because of the underlying theoretical mechanisms outlined and the broadly comparable health promotion contexts internationally. If nothing more, the above data may be food for thought amongst teachers, health promoters and exercise practitioners aiming to involve, include and engage young people in pursuit of a healthier lifestyle. By highlighting that peers play a significant part in shaping the field we demonstrate that policies, initiatives and teaching practices may be realised and experienced in different ways depending on the actions of pupils in their particular contexts. As such, any one teacher carrying out the same lesson in the same facilities may encounter a different set of rules and expectations and pupils may participate accordingly. We therefore suggest that teachers need to be sensitive to this and carefully consider how activities are organised and managed. Particular activities organised in a particular way that emphasise distinctions in physical capital ought to be avoided. Practitioners are also encouraged to further develop and implement the inclusive practices that are commonplace – but not universal – and, crucially, seek measures to develop inclusivity amongst pupils.

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#### PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT PEDAGOGY 13

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