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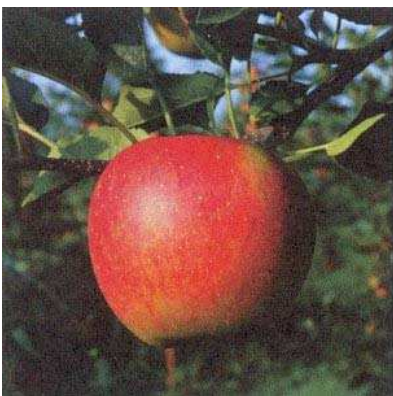
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Am I Bovered?

A participative action research study to develop, implement and evaluate physical activity interventions with girls.

Phase One Report



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December 2008



Centre for Health Services Studies (CHSS)

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The 'Am I Bovered?' project is a two-year study aiming to develop, implement and evaluate sustainable exercise-based interventions with girls aged 11-15 years in order to improve their engagement in regular physical activity. Overall, the study increases our understanding of the underlying attitudes and beliefs of girls about taking part in sport and exercise. The research will help to develop practical initiatives and guidelines to increase physical activity levels for this cohort. The insights gained into the lives and experiences of the girls can also be of benefit to services and professionals in order to identify key motivations and barriers to physical activity.

The project is in three phases:

Phase 1: This was an exploratory phase of the study, using focus groups with girls aged 11-12 and 14-15, recruited from two schools in Thanet, East Kent. These same schools will collaborate in the further phases of the project. The focus groups were designed to gain insights into the girls' understandings of the relationship between health and physical activity and their attitudes towards sport both in and out of school. Findings from the focus groups will be used to inform the next phase of the study, when interventions will be planned and implemented. This report summarises the findings from the first phase of this three-part project.

Phase 2: The second stage will recruit pupils from the same two schools who identify themselves as 'inactive' (meaning little or no participation in exercise) and involve them in a series of discussions aimed at developing activities which they anticipate will be popular and sustainable. The second phase will also see the implementation of these activities. The findings described in this initial report will aid the development of subsequent interventions that promote involvement and overcome barriers to participation.

Phase 3: The final stage will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the project from the perspectives of the young people participating and the multi-agency team.

It will also include pre- and post-activity measures of participation in and attitudes towards physical activity.

1.2 Aims

The aims of the first phase of the study were to:

- Explore factors that motivate and create barriers to 11-12 and 14-15 year old girls engaging in regular physical activity (Phase 1).

The remaining phases aim to:


- Develop and implement activities chosen by inactive 11-12 and 14-15 year old girls with the support of a multi-agency team (Phase 2).
- Evaluate the impact of the project, examining factors associated with young girls' engagement in physical exercise (Phase 3).
- Make recommendations for policy and practice.

1.3 Background

Obesity is described by the UK Public Health Association and the Faculty of Public Health as 'an excess of body fat frequently resulting in a significant impairment of health and longevity.' Obesity has serious consequences for health and life expectancy. People who are obese die on average nine years earlier than those of normal weight and there are several diseases such as Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease and some cancers associated with obesity. Obesity has serious economic consequences too. The cost of treating obesity-related disorders, and of indirect consequences such as sickness absence, was estimated at £3.3 – £3.7 billion for England in 2002 (Department of Health 2006).

In recent years there has been an 'epidemic' rise in obesity rates. In both England and the South East, obesity levels have increased significantly, although levels in this region remain below the national average. Rising levels of obesity in children are particularly worrying and the government has set a target to halt the year-on-year rise in obesity among children under 11 by 2010, in the context of a broader strategy to tackle obesity in the population as a whole (Department of Health 2004).

Many factors contribute to obesity but ultimately it is caused by individuals consuming more energy (calories) than they use. The excess calories are stored by the body as fat. At societal level the major causes are changes to dietary habits




(such as larger portions, higher fat convenience foods, snacking on junk foods) and a general reduction in levels of physical activity. Children and young people would appear to have become particularly susceptible to these societal changes, which will ultimately have a longer term impact upon health and wellbeing (Cavill & Biddle 2003; WHO 2004).

Over recent years some worrying trends have emerged regarding activity levels among young people. Studies show that opportunities for children in the UK to be active are declining:

- Car journeys to school have doubled in the last 20 years with almost 30% of children going to school by car, less than 50% walking and just 1% cycling (Department of Environment 2005)
- The total time devoted to PE lessons in schools has declined in recent years, and less time is allocated to PE in secondary schools in England and Wales than anywhere else in the European Union (European Youth Heart Study 2006)
- Only one-third of boys and girls aged 2-11 achieve the recommended level of activity to benefit their health through activity undertaken outside of school (Sproston & Primatesta 2003)

It is recommended that children and young people should achieve a total of at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity each day. At least twice a week this should include activities to improve bone health, muscle strength and flexibility. For a while now there have been concerns that this is not being achieved. Adolescence has been found to be a period of steep decline in physical activity and in some studies adolescents were consistently found not to be sufficiently active (Sallis 2000; Biddle et al 2004). There would also appear to be a gender difference as boys have been found to be more active than girls in a number of studies (Pate et al 2002; Biddle et al 2004; Currie et al 2004). The recent Health Survey for England showed that only about half of 13-15 year old girls were participating in 60 minutes or more activity on all 7 days a week (Sproston & Primatesta 2003). Hence the focus on girls in this study would seem to be justified.

Recent government targets have acknowledged study results and aim to increase the percentage of schoolchildren in England who spend a minimum of two hours per




week on PE and sport from 25% in 2002 to 85% by 2008 (Department of Health 2004). The overriding question however is how to do this effectively. While the solutions would appear straightforward in terms of increasing activity, a recent systematic review indicated that there are very few studies that have demonstrated sustainable changes in exercise behaviour among young people (Sluijs et al 2007). Most interventions that focus on increasing activity levels have successful short-term outcomes but limited long-term sustainability. Such programmes also tend to be prescribed by professionals with minimal involvement of participants in programme design.

In relation to young people therefore, further research is needed to look more closely at the root causes of unhealthy lifestyles in order to develop interventions that are more firmly rooted in the psychological, contextual and environmental orientation of young people. While government agencies and other research studies are strongly recommending an increase in activity among this age group, less emphatic are suggestions about how to create meaningful engagement in activity over a period of time and what sort of activity to promote. For example, there is less known about the psychological, social and environmental barriers that could disable young people from making healthier lifestyle choices. Perhaps most importantly, given the highly professionally driven programme development in this area, there is very little known about what constitutes an effective intervention from a young person's viewpoint. Children and young people must therefore be involved in the development and implementation of new opportunities for physical activity in order that they reflect enthusiasms and preferences and encourage a high level of participation.

Further to this, the role of parents must also be considered. Several studies found that adolescents' physical activity levels were influenced by parental support for physical activity (Trost et al 2003; Fren et al 2005). Parental support consisted of providing transport, observing and encouraging, particularly in a non-authoritative style (Schmitz et al 2002).

The most comprehensive review to date of the effectiveness of interventions to promote physical activity in children and adolescents recommended 'a multilevel approach to promoting physical activity' combining 'school based interventions with family or community involvement' and 'education interventions with policy and



environmental changes' (Sluijs et al 2007). Such interventions were found to be particularly effective with adolescents.

These findings have been incorporated into the design of the research and in particular, have informed the content of the interview schedules used for the focus groups.

1.4 Sites


This research is taking place in two contrasting secondary schools that are part of the School Sports Partnership. The schools are situated in Margate and Westgate and draw from a range of demographic profiles. These schools were chosen in order to reveal and better understand the contrasts in levels of engagement in physical activity.

School One

School One is a Roman Catholic Voluntary-Aided comprehensive for 772 pupils aged 11 to 19. Since 2004, it has been a Specialist Sports College and is the hub of the Thanet School Sport Partnership. In 2007, a new sports centre was opened with a large, well-equipped performance area, with classrooms and changing facilities on site. The school has also acquired additional playing fields and attained the Sportsmark Gold award in recognition of its extra-curricular sporting activities. Although situated in a relatively disadvantaged area, the school has below average rates for free school meals and ethnic minority students with English as a second language, and average rates of special needs.

All pupils in Years 7 to 9 have a compulsory two hour PE lesson once a week. In Years 10 and 11 they receive two hours practical PE and two hours theory. The school also offers Sports Leadership Levels 1 and 2, BTEC First Diploma in Dance and BTEC Higher Levels 1, 2 and 3.

The school employs two community sports coaches: One in Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) and the Duke of Edinburgh Award, and the other in basketball.



Sports available to female pupils include: Netball, basketball, badminton, rounders, gymnastics, football, tennis, swimming, dance, circuit training, cheer-leading, athletics and volley-ball. There is also an outdoor pursuits club where activities such as canoeing can be undertaken. Although there is no swimming pool on site, pupils can be driven by minibus to a local swimming-pool.

School Two

School Two is a larger, non-denominational secondary school for 1120 pupils aged 11 to 18. It is a Specialist Technology College. The sports facilities in School 2 are less up-to-date than those in School 1, but there are plans for modernisation of the entire school building. Situated in a relatively disadvantaged area, the school has above average rates for free school meals, special needs and ethnic minority pupils with English as a second language.

All pupils from Years 7 to 10 have a double lesson of PE a week which lasts for one hour and 50 minutes. PE is compulsory for the pupils in Years 10 and 11, but the amount of time available each week depends upon whether they have chosen PE as a subject for their GCSEs or a BTEC in Sports. Students who take a BTEC in Sport in Year 10 have three lessons per week, each lasting 55 minutes, as well as having their core PE lessons. The amount designated to theory or practical work per week depends upon the type of activities they are engaged with, however, at least one lesson each week is always practical

The school is situated near to a leisure centre with a swimming pool, but the school does not currently make use of the facilities. Sports available to female pupils in Year 7 include swimming, gymnastics, netball, hockey, rounders and athletics. For Year 10 girls, activities include netball, badminton, football, basketball, rounders and athletics. The Year 10 girls who take a BTEC in Sports do a range of activities which suit the learning objectives of their lesson.

1.5 Methods

The first phase of the research used a qualitative approach, considered most appropriate to eliciting information from younger people. Focus groups, which have

been used extensively in health and social research (Pope and Mays 2000), were used as a forum to discuss and debate issues, exploring not only what people thought, but also how and why. There are several advantages to using focus groups with children; they do not discriminate against those who have difficulty reading and writing; they encourage participation from those who are reluctant to be interviewed individually; and they facilitate contributions from young people who feel they have nothing to say (Kitzenger 1995). However there are potential disadvantages. This not only relates to the potential for more vocal participants to exclude the quieter people, but also that personal and sensitive issues may not be discussed, especially if some participants feel they are different from others (Cohen and Emmanuel 2000). Good facilitation skills are vital to ensure inclusiveness, but also in relation to this study, to be aware of the potential sensitivities around discussing physical activity

1.6 Access and Recruitment

During May and June 2008, four focus groups were run in each of the two participating schools, arranged with the help of the local School Sports Co-ordinator and PE staff. The groups were organised by age-group (Year 7 and Year 10) and took place during PE lessons, on school premises. Inclusion criteria were that the participants should be within study age range, able to communicate in English and be able-bodied (to ensure consistency of experience).

Consent was sought in advance from parents by distributing a 'pack' via the pupils, containing an information sheet (Appendix 7), parental explanatory letter and consent form (Appendix 9). On the day of the focus group, those girls whose parents had returned a signed consent form were allowed to participate in the research. At the start of each session, the project was re-explained to the girls (who had all read the information sheet with their parents) and they in turn signed a consent form in order to participate (Appendix 8) Confidentiality was emphasised and the girls' right to withdraw at any time was explained. In some cases, where girls were keen to participate but had not returned the parental consent form, the School Sports Co-ordinator telephoned parents to ensure verbal consent. It is usually not an ethical requirement to gain parental consent if potential recruits fully understand the nature of participation, but the school protocols were adopted in this instance.

The involvement of the School Sports Co-ordinator and PE staff was crucial to successful recruitment as they were able to encourage interest in the study with the school staff and pupils and actively recruit girls of varying levels of sporting enthusiasm into the groups. The schools' support in allowing and arranging the researchers' access to the pupils was also of central importance.

1.7 Sample

The target sample was 120, with the aim of recruiting 15 girls to each focus group. In total, 91 girls participated in 8 focus groups across the two schools. Numbers were lower than anticipated because of the difficulties of co-ordinating recruitment; primarily that researchers had only indirect access to pupils and their families and the demands of the school schedule meant that there was very little time to focus on recruitment without placing an unreasonable burden on school staff and the School Sports Co-ordinator. However, the number reached, while lower than the target overall, is sufficient to assess that the study has achieved a credible range of views and experiences across the two age-groups and both schools.

School	Year 7 (age 11-12)	Year 10 (age 14-15)
School One	28	20
School Two	22	21
Sub total	50	41

1.8 Instrumentation


In keeping with the participative action research method, six girls from School One were asked by the School Sports Co-ordinator to join a research advisory group during the developmental phase of the project. This provided an opportunity for researchers to elicit the views of young people on both the instrumentation (surveys and interview schedules) and the written communication material for the project (information sheets, letters and consent forms). The group's comments were invaluable in ensuring that the language and structure of the materials was appropriate to the target age-groups and their parents. The group also commented

on a Powerpoint slideshow of sporting images to be used in the focus groups (see below).

The focus group interview schedule (Appendix One) explored a range of issues related to general attitudes towards physical activity and aimed to draw out factors that help or hinder engagement. It was semi-structured to ensure consistency across the groups but was designed to be delivered in such a way that areas of discussion could also emerge spontaneously from the participants.

As the focus groups were fairly large (8-14 girls) and time was very limited, to elicit opinions from the most verbal and the most reticent it was essential to proactively control the group and to encourage all to offer their views. A particular problem was that there was no flexibility around time. Each group had a one-hour slot, during a regular PE lesson, but this was reduced to 45 minutes actual interview time by the demands of getting the girls to the room, explaining the study and gathering consent forms. As a consequence, it was very difficult to give all questions equal time, with the result that in the earliest groups, most time was given to discussing PE in school and questions about out-of-school activities and family support were rushed. After discussion with the project advisory group, it was decided that this potentially excluded important information, so in the later groups, the emphasis was shifted to enable more time to be allocated to this section of the schedule.

The research planned to make use of a Powerpoint slideshow of images of girls engaged in a wide range of sporting activities. The aim was to indicate to the pupil participants that the study was not interested only in school-based or 'typical' sports but in the widest possible range of activities and to stimulate discussion of the relationship between girls and sport. Images of netball, hockey and football were included alongside images of girls skateboarding, rock-climbing and doing martial arts. All the images were of teenage girls, reflecting the age of the sample and included competitive sports and elite athletes, as well as leisure pursuits and ordinary participants. There was also a slide referencing the 'skinny models' debate, reflecting the study's interest in body-image. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints discussed above and the limitations of the classrooms, in some cases it was not possible to show the slides in all the focus groups.



As the girls were generally willing to talk, the absence of a slideshow as an ice-breaker was not a serious affect. On the occasions when it was possible to run the slideshow, it was done on a laptop as projectors and screens were not available, this meant that the overall effect was not so dramatic that it totally altered the character of the focus groups. However, it is possible that the slideshow encouraged more girls to offer their views or helped them to understand the range of activities in which the researchers were interested.

1.9 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected with the use of audio equipment and subsequently transcribed word verbatim. Transcriptions were analysed using a content analysis approach (Flick 1998), whereby pre-determined themes extracted from the focus group schedule were loosely applied to enable the data to be sifted into categories. The analysis was undertaken in three stages. The first involved sifting the data under the broad themes identified from the focus group schedule and also exploring the data for any newly emerging themes. At this stage, the data was combined across Year 7 and Year 10 groups, but was not separated according to schools. The second stage involved combining the data from both schools and drawing out similarities and differences from the focus groups findings. The last stage involved a deeper level of analysis using research findings from previous studies and making comparisons with our data. At this stage, we extracted the key points from each section and used these as the basis for our recommendations.

1.10 Research Governance and Ethical Issues

Ethical approval and research sponsorship was gained within the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR) at the University of Kent and from Kent County Council. The latter were satisfied with the project proposal and agreed to provide research governance.

2.0 Findings

In the following section, the views which emerged from the focus groups will be discussed. The findings are arranged into themes which cross both schools and age-groups, however, significant differences will be drawn out. Quotations from the focus group transcripts will be used to illustrate themes; some have been abbreviated for clarity and length. Each quotation is coded by school, year group, focus group and transcript page number, but comments are not identifiable to individual participants as the transcripts were created anonymously.

The themes are structured to distinguish between beliefs, attitudes and perceptions, and more factual descriptions of activities. The main themes are as follows:

- ideas about the concepts of 'health' and 'fitness'
- descriptions of, and attitudes towards, PE in school
- school culture: this relates to the broader school context in which PE takes place
- attitudes towards and experiences of, sport and exercise outside of school
- gender: a prominent and cross-cutting theme that warrants separate consideration .

2.1 Ideas about health and fitness

When asked about the benefits of Physical Education (PE) in school and sport outside of school, the girls prioritised two aspects: the social – having fun with friends; and the physical – keeping fit, being healthy and controlling weight. Interestingly, other values sometimes associated with sport, such as competition, learning to lose, getting along with others, pushing oneself or the pleasure of winning, were not raised. Later in the report, the social aspects of physical activity will be discussed as they were perceived both positively and negatively by the girls, but first the way in which PE and sport were conceptualised as beneficial to the body will be explored. Delving into the way in which teenage girls conceive of their bodies and the physical concepts they associate with exercise can help to reveal the motivations for and the barriers against their participation in physical activity.

a) Being 'healthy'

Many of the girls spoke of sport being beneficial because it helped them to be 'healthy'. This was rather a vague term which seemed to refer to future benefits but which was also had connotations of feeling better during everyday life in the present.

"To keep yourself fit and healthy." (School 2 Year 10b 10)

"It's like good for your health and like helps you, you'd be like, you'd be able to do more things and everything" (School 1 Year 7 b21)

For some girls, exercise was described as making them feel physically better, for example, more energetic, but also as helping them feel better about themselves;

" when you can't do PE for a couple of weeks..I just feel very like tired, and very lazy kind of thing." (School 2, Year 10a, 7)

For others, 'health' was tied up with physical appearance:

"I think it's because like if you look good on the outside but you feel good on the inside, it's like you feel more healthier." (School 2, Year 7b, 10)

This integration of the 'inner' workings and the outward appearance of the body was well-expressed by one girl for whom the word 'fit' contained two important meanings: being physically healthy and being physically attractive, suggesting that for some girls, the motivation for exercise is improving their appearance as much as 'internal' notions of health.

"I think it's more good for girls because like they're more obsessed about the way they look and how fit they are." (School 1 Year 7 b10)

b) Weight control and body size

Weight-control was mentioned in all groups as having a strong association with being physically active and in this way, being healthy was equated with not being overweight.

"I think sports is important to like keep healthy so you don't turn fat"

(School 1 Year 7 a8)

Exercise and sport were described as helping to prevent fatness, but also as enabling people to eat what they like.

"I really like to eat a lot and if you, say like instead of cutting down on what you eat you can go and do exercise instead"

(School 1 Year 7 b13)

Although only some girls felt very strongly about controlling their weight through sport, it is significant that both of the above comments came from younger, Year 7, girls, who might be expected to enjoy sport for its own sake, rather than being concerned about weight-control and physical appearance.

While there was a widely held belief that exercise could contribute to weight control, this co-existed with a view that being 'big' and being healthy were not necessarily mutually exclusive –

"As long as you're happy with yourself anyway, as long as you're not like huge, sort of overweight and like, you're just like a healthy weight and like you're happy with yourself then you shouldn't really care ..."

(School 1 Year 10b, 17)

"If they're big and like whether they're good or not very good at sport they might be like a nice person, it doesn't really matter if they can't do it"

(School 1 Year 7 a20)

The 'size doesn't matter' way of thinking was particularly strong at School One, where PE has a large 'theoretical' component, which included tuition in healthy eating. There was a strong sense in this school that size should not inhibit people from participating in sport.

Body size was not just talked about in terms of being too big; being too small was also described as a problem. It was suggested that girls who were small were

perceived as being less good at certain sports (such as netball) and therefore may not be picked for teams.

“It it’s like umm, if someone’s like a captain they have to pick their team they will always go for the ones that look much stronger and bigger and everything and look like they can do it, because they might not pick the little people”
(School 1 Year 7 a20)

“Even though I’m really tall and I say I like netball, people always come up to me and like ‘oh you must be really good’ but I’m not, I’m actually really quite bad at netball, but then like dancing I mean I love dancing but like most, a lot of dancers are really small and petite and like really flexible but like I’m not”
(School 1 Year 10 a19)

This may be an expression of pubescent girls’ particular relationship to physical development or it may have been prompted by discussions about body size that had taken place in PE lessons, again, these comments emerged only from School One.

Commentary

Although the girls were familiar with the idea of sport and physical activity having physical benefits, these seemed to be most meaningful when they were tangible and immediate, such as feeling good, feeling attractive and feeling in control of their weight or body size. In this respect, sport was constructed as a means to an end rather than as something enjoyable or valuable for its own sake. The strong association between exercise, weight control and physical appearance found in the focus groups echoes the findings of other studies. Biddle et al’s (2005) study of Scottish school-girls reported that being fit and healthy was less important to girls than being thin. However, in contrast to Biddle et al’s sample, it could be argued that the girls in our study, particularly those in School One, seemed to have a higher awareness of the importance of physical activity, even though the motivation for doing it was most tangibly expressed in terms of weight-control and physical appearance.

2.2 Views of PE in school

The focus groups were run within the school environment, during the PE lessons and in most cases, whilst the girls were wearing their PE kit. The section of the interview schedule exploring PE within school tended to elicit the most vocal and animated responses, and this may have been an influencing factor.

a) Practicalities and organisation

The girls had very strong opinions on many aspects of PE lessons, in particular, timetabling, the practicalities of changing and showering, and their school's regulations about kit. These issues were clearly the subject of a lot of talk amongst girls outside class and seemed to be part of a 'common culture' of complaint about PE in both schools, despite there being significant differences between the two in the way PE is organised and the facilities available.

(i) Timing and duration

The timing and duration of PE was a subject on which many girls had opinions. In School One, for practical reasons, the girls stated a preference for having PE at the end of the day rather than at the beginning;

"I think also you get really sweaty and 'cause it's at the beginning of the day, you're like sweaty and hot for the rest of the day really"

(School 1 Year 10 b3)

But the timing of PE sessions was also important in terms of the girls feeling motivated to do PE –

"I sort of like dread it but on a Wednesday morning but then when I'm doing it, it's quite fun"

(School 1 Year 10 a5)

Girls in School Two disliked having PE first thing on a Monday morning as they were tired after the weekend and felt that no sooner had they got dressed and ready for school, then they had to change out of uniform and into PE kit. It seemed the mid-week was the preferred time for PE;

"I don't think they should have it on Fridays because on Fridays you're like, 'Oh we have to have PE' and people like that can't be bothered because it's nearly the end of the week – they should have it kind of in the middle."

(School 2, Year 7 a7)

The general opinion was that the girls would feel more positive about PE if it was timetabled for the middle of the week and at the end of the day, as they would feel more alert and motivated and had the opportunity to shower after they had gone home.

Although there was little consensus, the girls also commented upon the amount of time they felt they should have for PE each week. This younger girl from School One thought that the frequency of lessons was about right.

"I really like PE because you only do it once a week and it's not too much to do in the week, so if people don't like it then like you only have to do it once a week not every day."

(School 1 Year 7 b2)

But another in the same group said that there should be more sessions during the week, especially given the school's status as a sports college.

"We're a sports college so I think we should do more sport, 'cause we only have it on a Thursday, but I think we should have it more often like maybe on a Tuesday and a Thursday, something like that." *(School 1 Year 7 b18)*

Some girls at School Two felt that they would like more PE for all pupils at their school, not just those taking additional PE-related qualifications.

"I still think that the people that even do normal PE should just get more PE lessons throughout the week"

(School 2 Year 10 a26)

Others commented that a single lesson of PE was inadequate, because they did not have enough time to change, then have a full PE lesson –

“if it’s a single lesson you don’t really get much time ‘cause the amount of time you’re spending in the changing rooms”

(School 2 Year 10 a27)

It is worth noting the consensus of approval for PE being time-tabled for the middle of the week and towards the end of the school-day, whilst recognising the difficulty of organising to suit individual tastes within a school environment.

“We should have the same time or change it so that the people who wanna do it have more time, and the people that wanna do it but don’t want as much time, have different times...”

(School 2 Year 10 a26)

(ii) PE kit

The regulatory school sports uniform was a cause for concern for the girls. In School One, the girls commented that the uniform was uncomfortable and impractical –

“I think with our PE kit it tends to get too hot. Like for the summer like you get hot, I think we should have like a vest top sort of thing because you do tend to get quite hot, it’s really thick material”

(School 1 Year 7 a15)

The girls commented that the school PE uniform was neither practical nor comfortable. They felt that some of the clothing was not fit for purpose – reporting it to be either too ‘baggy’ or too tight and was not suitable in different weather conditions. The Year 10 girls in School Two felt much happier with their PE clothing because they were allowed to wear their own choice of clothing.

“You feel more yourself” “Yeah, and you feel more comfortable in your own clothes...”

(School 2 Year 10 a9)

It would therefore seem that their sense of self-expression and individuality was important to them, which they displayed by being able to wear the PE clothes of their choice.

(iii) Changing

A theme which provoked particularly passionate comments across both schools and age-groups concerned the practicalities of changing before and after PE. Girls in both schools felt that the changing facilities were adequate if a little over-crowded at times;

“They’re better than the old ones, but the hooks are like that much apart”
(School 1 Year 10 b23)

“I think it’s alright, it’s quite spacious considering, because there’s not a lot of girls that have to get changed when we do PE” (School 2 Year 10 b19)

For those doing PE at the end of the school-day, there was a concern that getting changed back into uniform after the lesson could make them late for their transport home;

“Because sometimes our PE lesson ends quite late and some people have to get the train and bust” (School 1 Year 7 a11)

The girls also commented that they would like to see school lockers in the changing rooms, because they did not want to carry around their PE clothes throughout the day.

“If we had lockers that may help but this, it is a lot to carry especially we have to like, because we have it the whole day, you sort of have to drag it around with you” (School 1 Year 10 b24)

It became apparent during analysis that the changing rooms were also a site of significant anxiety about potentially being exposed and embarrassed. This will be dealt with in Section C, within the discrete theme of ‘embarrassment’.

(iv) Showering

We asked the girls whether they would consider taking showers at the end of their PE class. There were mixed views from all age groups and from both schools about whether or not the girls would be prepared to use them. In both schools, the Year 7s

were generally confused about whether or not they were allowed to use the showers.

“No, no, we don’t have showers. I think the year 10s and everything have showers..but we don’t have to...There are showers but we’re not allowed to use them”
(School 2 Year 7 a13)

“We don’t use them...We’re not allowed to use the showers... Which is a bit stupid why they put showers in...”
(School 1 Year 7 a26)

The girls held mixed views about having showers. Some girls said they would like to have the opportunity of taking a shower after PE but were not happy with the facilities at their school.

“I would love to have a door on the shower, at least a curtain or something, so when it’s a very hot day we’d actually have a shower.”
(School 2 Year 10a 31)

But others rejected completely the idea of showering in the school environment. Overall, the girls preferred to shower at home as they felt that this was a safer and cleaner environment to shower in.

“They are quite new so I think they’re all right...Yeah, they’re good but we don’t use them..No-one’s really going to have a shower in our own time..I think the boys do...The girls don’t have a shower..I don’t feel comfortable using them...Yeah, it’s a bit weird having to shower in school.”
(School 1 Year 10 a26)

““Even if there was some more up to date showers I wouldn’t use them”
(School 2 Year 10 b21)

“I would never use the showers, it’s horrible.”
(School 2 Year 7 a14)

The girls in most groups spoke at length about showering at school, regardless of the facilities available, suggesting that there was significance to it beyond the practicalities of getting changed for PE. The topic seemed to draw out many reasons for complaint, even in School One, where the facilities were very new and of a high standard. This could be interpreted in a number of ways. As focus groups have a tendency to draw out discontent rather than satisfaction, it could be that showering became a focus for the girls' complaint in the context of an otherwise relatively benign assessment of PE in school. It could also be that undressing in the school environment raised deeper issues of embarrassment, trust and vulnerability.

Commentary

The total time devoted to PE lessons in schools has declined in recent years – and less time is allocated to PE in secondary schools in England and Wales than anywhere else in the European Union (European Youth Heart Study, 2006). From the perspective of pupils themselves, views of the timing and duration of PE differed according to how enthusiastic the girls were at taking part in physical activity, highlighting the difficulty of catering for diverse tastes and inclinations within the school environment. Opinions on PE kit, particularly amongst older pupils, similarly reflected this desire to be treated as individuals rather than a mass.

There was a greater degree of consensus about time-tabling: sessions were preferred in the middle of the week, to avoid coinciding with 'Monday morning lethargy' and the 'schools out' atmosphere of Fridays, when pupils were keen to get home. Lessons at the end of the day were preferred to avoid pupils having to go through subsequent lessons feeling sweaty and dishevelled, they also preferred to have the option of travelling home in their PE kit, rather than having to change back into uniform. For some, changing after PE was described as delaying their departure from school and disrupting their homeward journey.

The practicalities of getting changed before and after PE were spoken about as not just inconvenient but potentially embarrassing. This latter problem will be discussed at greater length later in the report as it was a recurring theme of the focus group discussions. The inconvenience of taking part in physical activity has been identified by other studies of girls and sport such as a survey by the Women and Sport Foundation (24/11/2008). This widely reported poll found that girls were very

concerned with privacy and the quality of changing facilities, expressing preferences for cubicles and hair-dryers. Once again, the question emerges of how far it is possible to cater for the individual desires of pupils within the school environment.

b) Positive experiences of PE in school

The previous section has discussed some of the negative opinions about PE voiced during the focus groups. There were, however, also positive descriptions of PE, which although they did not animate the groups to the same extent as the negative, nevertheless offer insights into the motivations of school-aged teenagers.

(i) Sociable & fun

A striking and notable theme that emerged from the data was the 'sociable' aspect of PE. The Year 10 girls in School One explained that they were more likely to participate in sports if they were with their friends because it lessened the pressure to perform and made PE fun.

"It's alright with your friends if you come last 'cause you ... 'Cause you can joke about it... but if you're with your friends like oh no I lost and you just like joke around for a bit"
(School 1 Year 10 b15-16)

"I think it's a bit of a laugh 'cause you can have a bit of fun with your friends as well."
(School 1 Year 7 b11)

This comment from a younger girl at the same school demonstrates the strength of the impact of being with friends on how enjoyable PE lessons could be.

"I think it is sometimes, it can be fun 'cause like you can be put into different groups like with your friends, but then some other weeks like you're with other people you don't like and you don't get on with."
(School 1, Year 7 b11)

The two themes of friends providing a fun and a supportive context for sport is illustrated by another girl from the same school but in the older year-group;

"I think what people would like...just to be with their friends in the group, giving them support with the PE and then they would do PE, there's a lot of girls who don't do it" (School 1 Year 10 b20)

While the older girls spoke of the importance of mutual support to making PE relaxed and fun, the younger girls talked in more straightforward terms about 'fun' of being with friends and trying new things.

"I think it's also good for your health but it's also like it's really good fun, and you get to do different ones...so there's a variety" (School 1 Year 7 a8)

"I like it 'cause it obviously makes you fit...you get to go to different places like, and if you're in the team you get to make friends and everything then is fun" (School 1 Year 7 a8)

The girls from School Two expressed similar sentiments about PE having the potential to be fun;

"... you just like run around with all your mates and that, it's quite ...Yeah, it's fun that you don't have to sit at a desk and do work." (School 2 Year 7 b1)

"I look forward to rounders"

"If it's nice weather"

"I think it's just getting out of your uniform" (School 2 Year 10 a8)

However, there was a notable difference between the two schools in the extent to which the girls spoke about the sociable and fun aspects associated with PE. The girls in School One from both age groups were more positive in their depiction of PE but this attitude was far less prevalent amongst the School Two girls.

"I like PE but I think our PE lessons are like, they're not that good, they're not exciting...No. They're the same every week." (School 2 Year 10 a3)

According to the girls, the 'boring' character of their PE lessons had a significant impact on participation levels and this in turn affected their enthusiasm.

"But no one ever wants to do it because ... it's boring, just boring, like they get ... all the stuff out, no one actually does it, we sit on the mat."

(School 2 Year 10 a10)

Although the girls enjoyed some activities, their level of enthusiasm was not sustained from week to week.

"We did like a really fun PE lesson and then the next week they do a really rubbish lesson, like last week we did like the high jump or something"

(School 2 Year 7 a3)

The girls in School Two expressed many more negative views which seemed to override the potential of PE to be sociable and fun. Although many said they did enjoy some PE lessons, there seemed to be a wider culture of negativity which impacted on their motivation to participate, this will be discussed later in the report.

(ii) Feeling 'good'

Across both ages and schools, the girls commented that participating in PE was generally a positive experience – as discussed earlier, they drew a strong correlation between taking part in physical activity and keeping fit and healthy.

"Oh I just think everyone does PE, everyone's gotta do it...to keep yourself fit and healthy"

(School 2 Year 10 b10)

They also suggested that the effects of sport and PE not only impacted upon their physical well-being, but also upon their mood, attitude and sense of self-confidence.

"I just like doing PE really... 'cause it builds you up for the day really and it makes you happy if you exercise, you're not always down"

(School 1 Year 10 b5)

"It changes your attitude"

(School 2 Year 10 a8)

"It's kind of energetic to, you don't get bored."

(School 1 Year 7 b11)

For some, the negative feelings associated with not exercising such as being 'tired' and feeling 'lazy' acted as a catalyst encouraging them to take the steps to become more active and engage with physical exercise.

(iii) A break from the 'learning environment'

The girls in one of the older year groups in School Two reported that participating in PE provided a break from the more sedentary experience of classroom-based lessons.

"It's more exciting than just sitting in lessons learning"

(School 2 Year 10 a7)

"It's better than sitting in the classroom..."

(School 2 Year 10 b4)

Another girl in the same group commented that PE was an opportunity for greater freedom in the school day, where she did not have to follow instruction from teachers and could assert her own sense of independence.

"Because you don't get told what to do, you can do it your way"

(School 2 Year 10 b5)

The opinions expressed of having a 'break' from the school classroom and having the chance to be independent were more pronounced in School Two. The need for self-expression and the desire to express their sense of individuality were evident among the older girls here, suggesting that they did not feel that the school environment provided many opportunities for such positive feelings.

c) Negative experiences of PE in school

As mentioned earlier, focus groups can have the tendency to draw out the negative more forcefully than the positive. This seemed to be particularly pronounced in the

school environment, where appearing too enthusiastic might be viewed as 'uncool' and there is something of an 'us and them' attitude of pupils towards staff. We should be cautious not to read the greater prominence given to criticism as an indication that pupils do not enjoy PE or appreciate its value. This qualification should be borne in mind when we go on to describe the further criticisms of PE articulated by the girls.

(i) Too much talking

One of the complaints made by the girls was that there was too much talking in PE lessons and not enough activity. Some of the girls wanted to spend more of their time taking part in a sport rather than listening to their teachers explain the game to them. They complained about having too much instruction and not having the opportunity to 'play'. This theme was evident with the Year 7 girls in School One.

"I think sometimes it can be fun but sometimes it's quite boring 'cause you have to listen for ages, like to do something you already know how to do"

(School 1 Year 7 a9)

"At the beginning of sport, PE, we always get like a long introduction about how to play it, they just keep going over it and over...so it takes longer and it takes half our lesson..."

(School 1 Year 7 a14)

They felt frustrated and stated that they would prefer to take part in sport and 'play' rather than listen to instruction at the beginning.

"..if you already know how to do something people don't want to sit there and listen they just wanna go and do something else"

(School 1 Year 7 a11)

The issue of listening to PE instruction as well as not having the opportunity to participate in sport during lesson time was also evident with the Year 10 girls in the same school (School One). They felt that the theoretical component of their GCSE PE was too serious and unnecessary, and detracted from the time when they could have been taking part in sports activities.

"It makes it too serious, like having to make circuits for yourself, all those things. I don't think it's really necessary to do because it takes away the like physical part of PE..but when you're sitting in a classroom in your PE kit it's ... it's just you should be out there" (School 1 Year 10 b19)

The girls in Year 10 talked about the same sorts of issues expressed by the Year 7 girls. Although they did not talk specifically about 'play' and 'fun', they still wanted the opportunity to have fun with their friends and socialise with them.

(ii) Lack of choice

Across all ages and schools, the girls felt that they did not have enough choice of activities in PE. The Year 7 girls at School Two spoke about wanting a wider range of options;

"I think we should get a little choice in it like they say whether we want to do games, would we like to do gymnastics or rounders orBeach ball or something" (School 2 Year 7 b25)

"It'll be more fun and we'd get to do different activities. Not learning just one, just learning loads of different ones in one day." (School 2 Year 7 b15)

This was also apparent among the opinions of the Year 10 girls at the same school –

"I like PE but I think our PE lessons are like, they're not that good, they're not exciting. No. They're the same every week" (School 2 Year 10 a3)

"Same thing really, I'm doing the same thing every week and stuff" (School 2 Year 10 b5)

There was an absence of such views about limited choice of sports and PE with the younger girls in School One, but the lack of choice and variety was raised by the girls in the same school in Year 10;

"Yeh, but it's the same stuff every year, netball, basketball, football, badminton, swimming or circuits" (School 1 Year 10 b9)

Taking part in the same activities, term after term and across the same academic year seemed to impede the girls' interest in PE. They felt that they did not learn any new skills.

"Yeah, they just make us do stuff that we've already done before, we're not actually learning anything"
(School 2 Year 7 b21)

Thus, the girls displayed a genuine interest in PE – wanting to learn new sports skills - but they felt they were not given sufficient opportunity to try a wide range of sports.

(iii) School sports teams

We asked about whether their school took part in inter-school matches with other neighbouring schools or organised inter-house matches within their own school. In both schools, pupils reported a house structure which allowed for competition between house teams. Many had taken part in such matches and described them as fun. Descriptions of inter-school competitions were less positive, with apparent difficulties in sustaining staff availability and pupil motivation.

"It's like, they have running events but they don't have practices or nothing, they just want you to turn up really, they just like, you get, basically you do your own training"
(School 1 Year 10 b25)

"Well, we used to have a netball club and there was loads of people at first but then it stopped for a while... 'cause it was after school, then it started up in a lunch and it let it down, the club down a bit, so there was only a few people going every week... so then we finished it and then we put another poster up and people started joining again. But all the best players they joined for a couple of weeks, they'd play a tournament and then they'd leave"
(School 1 Year 7 a16)

(iv) Expectations

The girls commented that sometimes they felt disheartened with their PE lessons, because their expectations had been raised about taking part in an activity, only to find out that the activity was no longer available for them. In the following dialogue,

we discussed whether the girls felt they had a choice of activities, and they stated that;

“If we had more of an option in what we could do, say like, because last year they were like saying ‘oh yeh, year 10 you’re allowed to do like trampolining and stuff like that’ and we haven’t even had, they haven’t even said any more”
(School 1 Year 10 b8)

Commentary

The girls discussed many positive aspects associated with PE. They talked about having a strong peer relationship with their friends, especially when discussing the fun and sociable side to sport. Smith (2003) has noted that an important motivating factor for young people when taking part in sport was the influence of friends and the need to gain acceptance from the group. He argues that, “peers are not only important to the acquisition of competence information in competitive sport settings, but also more generally to psychological adjustment as well as social and moral development” (Smith 2003: 27). Smith suggests that peers offer a way of interpreting the rules of sport, but also provide support in terms of the social and moral setting.

The girls reported that taking part in sport increased their confidence levels and made them feel positive about themselves. Although the girls drew a correlation between physical activity and feeling positive, this cannot easily be supported by research findings. Biddle and Wang (2003) have explored the relationship between motivations in participating in sport and self-perception. They argue that this correlation is not always evident – that high levels of physical activity do not always impact upon positive self-perception and vice versa (Biddle and Wang 2003: 699). Thus, the connection between levels of physical activity and self-confidence is not sustainable in all cases. Lastly, the girls in School Two reported that PE provided a break from the learning environment. This sentiment was evident in this school only and not applicable to the case of School One suggesting that perhaps the need for ‘a break’ was more pertinent in School Two.

The girls' overall attitude toward PE in school reflects a broad range of experiences relating to lack of opportunities to take part in sport, have fun and 'play'; disappointment with the lack of choices available in their schools; raised expectations of what could be available; and a genuine desire to try new activities and learn new skills.

From talking to staff at both schools about the range of activities on offer, it seems that the girls may have a different perspective to teachers. The girls are impatient to try many, varied activities and to have plenty of opportunities to play and have a break from 'lessons'. From the staff perspective, PE is part of the curriculum and it therefore cannot be treated as a merely informal opportunity to let off steam or spend time with friends: they are required to build skills and knowledge as in any other subject. This clash of expectations may explain some of the girls' disappointment.

d) Embarrassment and the fear of failure

The girls were greatly concerned about the possibility of embarrassing themselves during PE and many described their fears about looking foolish in front of their peers. PE seemed to be strongly associated with a fear of damaging their reputations, being exposed to ridicule and failing to achieve in competitive activities.

(i) Vulnerability while changing

The girls commented that some of their peers felt a sense of embarrassment when having to deal with the practicalities of changing for PE. They commented that they disliked having to undress in the presence of others, that this caused some of the girls great anxiety and as a consequence significantly diminished their enthusiasm for PE and this had a profound effect on motivations to do sport.

"..because they don't wanna get changed and they don't wanna do it and they don't wanna take part so they just like ruin the lesson in a way"

(School 1 Year 7 b14)

The sense of fear, anxiety and embarrassment concerning being seen unclothed by other girls is an issue that is explored further below. Some girls acknowledged that they did not want to change in front of other girls and wanted more privacy.

"I hate getting changed"

(School 2 Year 10 b5)

"I think they should put more like places for people to get changed privately"

(School 2 Year 10 b18)

The importance of privacy and security was especially evident with the girls when discussing showering at school. The girls felt deeply uncomfortable about having a shower; they were especially concerned about whether the shower cubicles had doors and could be locked. Furthermore, they were worried that other girls would look under or over the cubicle doors.

"Even if we had ours, I still wouldn't use them, because you feel vulnerable having a shower and there's all those girls out there getting changed..."

(School 1 Year 10 b3)

There was a strong sense that the changing rooms were a 'risky' place where girls could feel vulnerable to being exposed to ridicule or where things could happen that might threaten their reputation. The girls were incredulous at the suggestion of taking a shower at school (see above discussion) preferring to shower at home in their own time. This perhaps reveals a particular insecurity felt by adolescent girls about their bodies, where even amongst friends, the risk of being physically exposed is acutely felt.

(ii) Embarrassment while doing sport

It was not just while changing the girls expressed anxiety about being embarrassed; some girls commented that they felt very self-conscious when taking part in PE, especially if boys were present. Across both schools, within the Year 7 groups, girls spoke about how they felt about being watched and on display in front of the boys.

"I'm not trying to sound disgusting, but sometimes when you do mixed PE and you're like jumping up and down, you get disgusting boys staring at you"

(School 1 Year 7 b20)

This embarrassment was not just about the physical development of their bodies but also about things like getting flushed or running in a 'funny' way. It was not just boys who the girls were self-conscious around, but other girls too.

"...when I do PE and then everyone comes up to me and says I look like a cherry"

(School 1 Year 7 b 20);

(iii) The influence of boys

The girls in Year 7 at both schools commented that they sometimes felt inhibited about taking part in PE in case of being judged by the boys in their school. Not only did they feel embarrassed about being watched (see above), but they were also very wary of the general presence of boys and feared receiving adverse comments from them. This seemed to impact upon the girls' confidence and led them to question their own physical abilities.

"If there's anything that does put the girls off it's when the boys do watch you and see you running and everything, they do judge you"

(School 1 Year 7a18)

The girls in School Two commented that they felt under pressure from the boys. Any minor mistakes in a game such as failing to kick a ball would be publically ridiculed –

"If you're trying to like kick a ball and stuff and like you miss or something, they'll start laughing and then joke around every like...It upsets you. And so like they can put pressure on you as well"

(School 2 Year 7 b29)

The girls in School One from the same year reported being excluded in mixed gender activities. They commented that the boys would not include them in football games –

“..so they think if like they pass it to you...umm they umm sort of say like ‘Oh I’m not passing you the ball ‘cause you’ll end up dropping it or something”

(School 1 Year 7a 19)

The girls felt that they were not seen by the boys as a competent member of a football team when playing a game. To them the boys were more concerned with being competitive and winning, rather than including team players who they believed were less competent. The opinions of the boys impacted greatly on the activities the girls were willing to participate in. Some of the Year 7 girls in both schools stated an interest in playing sports with the boys, but feared repercussions from them. Drawing from their experiences of playing with the boys, the girls felt excluded and judged by the boys, which fundamentally damaged their confidence to the extent that they questioned whether they wanted to play sports with them in the future.

(iv) Competition and failure

Another source of embarrassment which detracted from the pleasure of PE was the fear of failure. They felt pressurised when taking part in competitive sport as they did not want to let their team mates down –

“Well I hate competitions, I think they put too much pressure on people...”

(School 1 Year 10 b15)

But also from getting individual activities wrong and making a fool of themselves.

“..I was left and everything to do it on my own and everyone was like sitting out and everything, and I was just standing there, I was really embarrassed, I was like ‘oh my gosh, all these eyes on me, I won’t be able to do it. I didn’t do it, so I sat out”

(School 2 Year 7 a22)

The girls who were less able were particularly afraid of humiliating themselves.

“Yeah because, and then it’s like what are we supposed to do when they’re jumping and we’re just sitting there, we’re not getting any fitter”

(School 2 Year 7 b22)

The issue of humiliation was important and underpinned their worries about competition and feeling embarrassed. They worried about being ridiculed and being seen as incompetent, especially those who were less able could feel isolated which is a further de-motivating factor when taking part in PE. Furthermore, the girls were perceived as either 'sporty' and 'non sporty', which could affect their experience of PE in school in the subsequent years.

(v) Rewarding performance

The girls commented about the rewarding of pupils for PE performance. They stated that they felt disheartened about the issuing of grades, because they believed that the same pupils were rewarded for doing well each week –

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s like the same people, and they’ll like ‘well done you, well done you’ and then it’s like us, they just ‘oh try better next time”

(School 2 Year 7 b19)

The sense of unfairness and injustice concerning the rewarding of certificates was more pronounced in School Two. This issue seemed to delineate between the girls who were labelled as 'good' at PE, while the rest felt disheartened as if their efforts were not recognised or acknowledged. Some of the girls in School One also objected to the grading of effort –

“Umm, I think that at school when we do sports I don’t think we should be judged about it”

“Because we get these..grade things”


“And we have to get judged by either plus’, minus or Cs and Ds”

(School 1 Year 7 a9)

Grading and rewarding performance was a factor that particularly affected the girls who were less able at PE. Thus, this was a very strong de-motivational factor for some of the girls.

Commentary

These quotes make very clear the de-motivating effect of the fear of embarrassment.



The girls' embarrassment was related to their anxiety about taking part in competitive sports. This data is supported by previous research; it was found in a Scottish based study (SportsScotland, 2006) that girls saw sport as being too competitive. The findings showed that, "a competitive environment is considered to be a major factor in drop-out amongst girls who do not consider themselves to be good at sport" (SportsScotland, 2006: 8). In the study, the girls who were most likely to report finding sport in school too competitive were the girls who had low levels of sport and physical activity participation. Conversely, girls who were involved in and enjoyed competitive sport showed high activity levels. Therefore, competition is a barrier for some girls taking part in sport, but not a problem for all girls (SportsScotland, 2006: 8).

The theme of embarrassment was much stronger in School Two. Perhaps the general school culture, the sense of dissatisfaction with PE and the nature of the overall teacher-pupil relationship may have impacted upon their sense of fear and humiliation the girls felt in this school (for a further discussion see section 2.3). This finding indicates the importance of adults creating a supportive and encouraging environment for young people to be prepared to try and perhaps to fail without fear of embarrassment or social ridicule. The importance of adults creating a safe environment is also emphasised by the descriptions of vulnerability that emerged in some of the descriptions of changing rooms.

Overall, the girls in both schools felt 'sitting out' was counterproductive, as they believed their time would have been spent better participating in physical activity. They also objected to continuing with a sport if they thought it was beyond what they felt they could do. It does seem a perplexing issue for PE staff to confront – on the one hand they are compelled to introduce new activities and teach sports, however, perhaps some of the sports they teach are beyond the ability of some of their student intake. This suggests that there is a case for separating the girls in relation to choice, enthusiasm and ability.

Perhaps the rewarding of certificates is an issue that requires further scrutiny. Public displays of rewarding the girls who did well appeared to build up a sense of grievance and animosity towards the teachers from the girls who were not rewarded. The girls in School One objected to grading too; they felt this discouraged them from

taking part or trying harder as they would be awarded much lower grades in relation to the effort they made. Possibly rewards should be given strategically to girls for effort rather than on good performance and also teachers could be more careful to ensure that the same girls are not rewarded in consecutive weeks.

2.3. Issues related to school culture

The school environment and social setting impacted significantly on the experiences and attitudes of the girls towards PE. The general condition of the sports facilities shaped their expectations in both schools. There was a visible contrast between the sports facilities in Schools One and Two (discussed further below), which seem to influence the girls' motivation and enthusiasm.

The social environment within school was an important motivating factor for taking part in PE. The girls spoke about the importance of having good teacher-pupil relations and they talked about feeling more willing to participate if their teachers were enthusiastic about taking them for a lesson. Interestingly, the younger girls discussed feeling less secure about their new school environment and confused about taking part in sports; since leaving primary school, they had to learn new games and rules for sport they thought they knew how to play. They also reported a sense of loss since going to secondary school, as they felt they could no longer 'play' games, thus their enthusiasm for PE had diminished.

a) Views on school facilities

The girls in Year 7 at School One took pride in their sports facilities. This is unsurprising as School One is a specialist sports college and is equipped with a new sports centre and gym and newly acquired additional playing fields. The girls in this school commented that they thought the facilities were good, which was evident as other schools came over to use their sports hall –

“The sports hall's just been done up I think and it's actually really good, 'cause people from primary schools are coming to like play in our hall because they've heard that it's really good and we have really good like facilities and that”
(School 1 Year 7 a25)

The girls vocalised their satisfaction and contentment with the facilities, to the extent that they felt annoyed when others schools used the facilities, but did not show the same amount of care and respect for the sports hall. They commented that when other schools came and used the facilities *“they made the changing rooms a mess”* (School 1 Year 7 a 25). Apart from the showering and changing facilities, the girls in this school seemed to have fewer complaints about their actual sports facilities.

These opinions stand in stark contrast to the opinions and attitudes of the girls in School Two. At this school, the girls in general had more notable grievances with their sports facilities at their school. They commented that due to the lack of facilities, they had to participate in some activities in a classroom or the school canteen –

“The sports hall, that one over there, so we haven’t been in it yet since September”

“So we’ve been in that little one”

“Or just doing it in classrooms” (School 2 Year 10 a13)

“Like the other week we had to do aerobics in the canteen”

(School 2 Year 10 a13)

They also stated that they had used the school hall, but they found this was unclean and disliked using it –

“Yeah the hall’s all dirty, it don’t get cleaned does it, when you sit down you have like all white stuff on you” (School 2 Year 7 b17)

The general level of disgruntlement with the sports facilities was clearly evident in the comments from the girls in Years 7 and 10. The girls seemed to have a much greater sense of dissatisfaction in the sports facilities. They spoke about being unable to use them and the toilets being unusable in the sports hall. In order to address the facilities problem during PE, the girls felt that it would be reasonable if they could use other facilities in their local area. However, they commented that they were not permitted to use these,

*“Because we used to have a go at ***** gym....But we’re not allowed to do that no more I don’t think”*
(School 2 Year 10 a28)

*“It’s like one day when we did PE, we could take our swimming costumes and they could just take us over to ***** and we could go swimming”*
(School 2 Year 7 b26)

The shortage of sports equipment as well as not being allowed to use their local gym meant that the girls felt aggrieved and unenthusiastic about taking part their PE lessons.

b) Teacher – pupil dynamics

The data revealed evidence of factors the girls felt aggrieved about, which created tensions between themselves and their teachers. They stated that their motivation for taking part in PE was sometimes dependent upon the attitude and mood of their teachers. The girls discussed that they enjoyed their lessons *“when she’s [teacher] in a really happy mood that puts me in a good mood”* (School 2 Year 10 a16). They also acknowledged that their teachers were sometimes confronted with indifferent and nonchalant pupils who did not want to participate in PE regardless of their efforts.

“I do feel sorry for them though, like they always plan a lesson for us and we never actually do it, we split like, it seems like a silly little thing to do ‘cause no one else does it”
(School 2 Year 10 a17)

Here the two schools also differed in terms of teacher-pupil relationships and the sense of motivation to participate in PE. The girls in School One rarely reported ‘opting out’ of their PE class. However, it was claimed that about half of the girls in School Two used various excuses to resist taking part. In School Two there was much stronger evidence of such tensions especially with the Year 10 girls. The girls commented that the teachers were unwilling to challenge the pupils who did not want to take part in their lesson and commented that girls who forgot their PE kit, feigned illness or produced a forged ‘sick note’ supposedly from their parents, were not willing to confront them about such excuses for ‘opting out’ of their PE lesson –

“Yeah, it’s as if the teacher’s scared of you or something”

“Yeah, they just don’t wanna argue back”

(School 2 Year 10 a19)

The desire to seemingly forge sick notes underpins the lack of enthusiasm for PE and is of concern. The girls stated that if they saw a significant proportion of their class unwilling to participate, they felt they did not want to take part in PE either. This reflects back to the need for peer support expressed by this age group.

“Every Thursday I ask like all of my friends, I always ask them ‘are you doing PE today’, they say ‘no’, ‘oh I won’t do it them” *(School 2 Year 10 a12)*

They did feel that if PE was made more varied this could make a difference. Overall – the general attitude of a number of the Year 10 pupils was to resist taking part in PE lessons. There was a noticeable sense from the pupils that they could not be bothered to participate. In fact this opinion was vocalised in the Year 10 groups at both Schools One and Two.

“I think some people like find it like cool not to do it, I don’t know why but like some people around our age just feel like kinda drop out of sport and in clubs and everything, it’s a time when people mostly drop out..”

(School 1 Year 10 a14)

“Yeah most of ones that don’t do PE are the ones that like smoke as well, they just like, it’s like they can’t be bothered” *(School 2 Year 10 a11)*

It seems that many of the pupils at School Two did not want to appear too keen or enthusiastic about physical education. The opinion expressed above was especially evident with the Year 10 girls. This suggests that by Year 10 age, some girls have moved from feeling relatively positive towards PE to a sense of rejecting any attempts at engaging in physical activity.

c) Year 7 girls – transition to secondary school

A further issue to emerge related to changing schools. The Year 7 girls at School Two described that they felt confused and perplexed about sports and games since

they moved to secondary school. They commented that since changing schools, they were less certain and felt less confident about sports they thought they knew they *could* participate in. This following quote illustrates some discomfort at having to learn and adapt to new rules:

"I find that if you've got like say if you went to your primary school and they were teaching you like say netball and you learnt how to pivot and they tell you to land on one leg and that you can move twice or something, I don't like it that if you move school they teach you to move once and I think ..."

(School 2 Year 7 b20)

It would seem that they feared not knowing these rules in case they made mistakes, let their team down or perhaps looked foolish in front of their peers.

The girls in Year 7 at both Schools One and Two also described a sense of loss in the move to secondary school and this related to the theme of 'play' expressed earlier in the discussion (see 2.2.). On arrival at secondary school, they were no longer able to participate in PE across both genders, but had to take part in PE in single sex groups. This impacted upon the sports they were allowed to play with the boys.

"Yeah 'cause I liked it at my primary school better the sports because they were mixed. 'Cause you had like netball, that was mixed, and rugby and football that was mixed, and now we're just separated"

(School 1 Year 7 a19)

"Yeah, in our primary school we used to do everything, we had all the sports like rounders and everything, but we don't do anything now"

(School 2 Year 7 b3)

This view stands in contrast to the embarrassment felt by the older girls about taking part in sport with or around boys. The Year 7 girls also described that it was no longer acceptable for them to 'just play' during break-times. They commented that playing was reserved mainly for PE lessons at secondary school unlike their former experiences at primary school.

“In our old school we had like this big bag of toys, like there was stilts, cats cradle and everything and if we had that now people would take the mickey out of us and ‘go oh, look at the babies playing with toys”

(School 2 Year 7 a19)

The girls reported a sense of loss about no longer being able to play outside and perhaps this reflects an expectation made upon them to mature as soon as they reach secondary school. They looked back at the activities they undertook at their primary schools with a sense of nostalgia. They commented that as girls, it was no longer acceptable behaviour to ‘run around’, whereas boys their age still did. They also stated that they would ‘just chat’ and would feel embarrassed about playing. Thus at secondary school, they felt aggrieved at the strict gender rules in physical activity for both girls and boys.

Commentary

In many ways the two schools contrasted in terms of school facilities, which impacted upon the levels of satisfaction with PE. The girls in School One reported a much greater level of pride and care in their facilities, whereas the girls in School Two felt less enthusiastic about PE in part because they felt the facilities at their school were poor.

The importance of good teacher-pupil relations is a strong motivational factor for taking part in PE. The social dynamics between the teachers and pupils is pivotal for encouraging greater participation. The tensions described in School Two suggest that participation in PE was a point of conflict between teachers and pupils.

The views of the girls from Year 7 across both schools indicate the significance of the transition from primary to secondary school. Their comments reveal that girls of this age have to come to terms with a new social setting and negotiate a different adolescent/young person’s terrain, which in many ways is still unknown to them. The move to secondary school has meant that the Year 7 girls have had to leave their childhoods behind, including activities associated with this such as playing games. This could act as an initial discouragement when taking part in sports and PE. Smith (2003) has suggested that an important factor that may impact upon physical activity is changing schools. He alludes to the idea that having continuity in physical activity

settings (for instance taking part in PE at primary school) may continue to impact positively on physical activity involvement, because pupils have developed a constant and stable peer group. However, the transition to secondary school may impact negatively on physical activity involvement, as social settings change (for instance attending a new secondary school) and peer groups are in the process of being created (Smith 2003: 34). Therefore, the transition to secondary school is a significant factor that impacts upon motivations for taking part in PE.

2.4 Activities Outside School

Up until this point, we have concentrated on the girls' descriptions of physical activity within the school environment. However, the study also focused on how girls participate in sport outside of school. This section explores their experiences of physical activity through local clubs, family and public facilities.

a) Range of activities

The majority of the girls described taking part in some kind of sporting activity outside school; this was noticeably more common in the younger age-group. The most common activities were swimming and dancing. Some belonged to swimming clubs, while others went to the pool with friends or family. Dancing was particularly popular amongst Year 7s at School One, with large numbers attending a couple of local dance clubs at weekends. Out of school activities the girls had tried included:

School One

Dancing, swimming, indoor climbing-wall, army cadets, jogging, football, trampolining, canoeing, ten-pin bowling, cycling, horse-riding, taekwondo, touch rugby, gymnastics, judo, archery, bowls, water aerobics, ice-skating and roller-skating.

School Two

Swimming, trampolining, football, dance, horse-riding, bike-riding, dog-walking, going to the gym, wind-surfing, life-guard club, baton-twirling, self-defence and golf.

The range of activities mentioned across all the focus groups was impressively wide. Swimming and dancing seemed to be the most popular and the most regular

activities across all age-groups and both schools. It was difficult to judge how regularly the other activities were pursued by the girls who mentioned them. The spread of participation in such activities was uneven between individual girls, with some naming numerous sports and others struggling to name one that they had tried.

b) Barriers

(i) Cost

Barriers to participation outside school were primarily discussed in terms of cost, time and transport. The cost of attending a local swimming pool, of horse-riding sessions and gym membership were mentioned as specifically excluding the girls from as much activity as they might like.

“£3 or £4, I think that’s quite expensive...Quite expensive when you do running for an hour”
(School 2 Year 10 a34)

I started to do karate, but it was £6 for half an hour and it was really expensive, so I had to stop because it was too expensive. And I did horse riding too but that was like £13 for an hour and that’s really expensive too.”
(School 1 Year 7 b38)

“Mine’s pretty expensive, but it’s horse riding, ‘cause you have to buy all the right riding stuff but like I’ve been doing it since I was 9, so I’m pretty committed, so ... because I want to work with horses and I just told my parents that it’s for my future career”
(School 2 Year 10 b26)

“If you wanna like a range of sports like lots of different, then it can get quite expensive but I think if you’re specific to one sport then it’s like ok”
(School 1 Year 10 b28)

In both schools, pupils said they thought that the expense of sporting activities acted as a barrier to their greater participation.

(ii) Time

Time was an issue for both girls and parents. The pressure of nightly homework was felt to make participating in sporting hobbies more difficult. This was an issue for the older girls more than the younger.

"I know our GCSEs are really important but I do think our physical education is very important as well and I do think we should have more time to go and do outside activities, I mean we get three pieces of homework a night at least and then we have our coursework on top of that." (School 1 Year 10 a31)

"I've always got too much to do." (School 2 Year 10 a38)

Time was also described as an issue for parents, both because those who worked were less able to transport children to and from activities but also because siblings were competing for parental time.

"My mum just kind of rants and moans about the cost and having to drive out at half six every evening" (School 1 Year 10 a30)

(iii) Freedom and perceived safety

Although some did go out and about by themselves and take public transport to participate in sporting activities, this depended on the location of their home and the activity itself, indicating that girls of this age are still dependent on adults to a considerable extent. Their freedom to travel was sometimes described as being curtailed by distance and the time it took to get to clubs and activities.

"I can never do after school."

"If there's something outside of school it might be too far away, like you don't know where it is and it's too far away." (School 1 Year 7 b32)

However, a number of girls spoke about their own or their parents' fears about being out and about on their own.

“My mum doesn’t kind of allow my brother to go on his own because he’s a bit too young, and if I wanna go out on my own, she does have to come with me just in case anything happens.”

“I don’t like going anywhere on my own because I’m scared someone will come and nick, kidnap me or mug me or something.”

“I hate walking places, so if I go anywhere I have to bring like one of my sisters with me.”

(School 1 Year 7 b40)

The sense of threat from other people was not always about adults, but also about other young people.

“I like going on my bike but then sometimes it’s a bit umm weird, because where I live round outside of it there’s loads of teenagers and I’m scared like you that they’ll probably nick my bike ...”

(School 1 Year 7 b40)

Although the girl above talks about the risk of a crime being committed against her by teenagers, others expressed a vaguer sense of threat which was more akin to social embarrassment. This was expressed as teasing about being too keen, wanting to get fit or at just looking foolish.

“I wouldn’t be seen on a bike...Cramp my style”

(School 2 10 a40)

“I’d feel a bit embarrassed, as I’m meant to be doing like running every night but I feel embarrassed running like through Whitstable ‘cause I don’t like people watching me”

(School 1 Year 10 a33)

“And they just like laugh at you going ‘hey you’re trying to get fit”

(School 1 Year 10 a33)

“I go jogging and if you go past someone you know you’re always like head down, keep on ...”

(School 1 Year 10 a33)

Only a few of the Year 7s described playing out informally in the park with their friends; accompanying younger siblings seemed to give them the license to play more physical games rather than just hanging out.

"...we play black magic with our little sisters you've got to stand on something black and...if you don't stand on something black then they come up to you and go 'black magic' and you're on and you've got to run around and catch people"
(School 2 Year 7 a13)

A number of girls preferred to exercise within school because they felt exercising outside school was difficult to sustain.

"I used to go running...but then it became boring, I didn't want to do it 'cause no one would go with me in the end"
(School 2 Year 10 a40)

"It'll be nice like if the school did do more out of school activities instead of having to go to other places to go and find them, it'll be nice if your school held those activities."
(School 1 Year 10 a29)

There has been increasing concern in recent years about the lack of freedom children experience and in particular, the impact of fears for their safety on their freedom to play informally with their peers. The views expressed in the focus groups suggest that many of the girls had internalised these fears and did not feel that going out and about, being active was a normal, supported thing to do.

c) Family motivation and support

Despite their restricted freedom, many of the girls described their parents as encouraging them to be more active, whether this meant supporting them in organised sports, paying for activities or just trying to get them to turn off the television and spend time outside.

"...my mum usually says to me if I'm watching TV, she says, 'why don't you go and do something with your friends'"
(School 2 Year 7 a17)

“...if I wanted to do any sports then my parents would help me and like take me there if it was quite far away and things like that” (School 2 Year 10 a36)

Varying levels of interest in sport amongst families were described. Some girls described sports-mad fathers who watched sport on television, brothers practising sport to a high level, mothers who had been good at sport and encouraged their children to take part. Others watched big sporting events at home such as football internationals.

“...my mum used to do like do a lot of swimming; she used to get trophies and stuff like that, so my mum, when she takes me swimming quite a lot, she goes ‘why don’t you go and do like swimming lessons’ and stuff like that. She’s really good” (School 2 Year 7 a16)

“We watch like rugby ‘cause I kind of enjoy that sport and my family are in that sport as well, and whenever I get the chance I like to watch netball ‘cause that’s like my sport that I do” (School 1 Year 10 a6)

“It can bring us all together like the afternoon just sit down and like watch games ...” (School 1 Year 10 a7)

However, a general interest in watching sport was more associated with male relatives. Some of the girls picked their way through the sports they were most interested in, while others hated watching sport altogether.

Commentary

The girls in both schools described a wide range of activities which they participated in with varying rates of frequency. Judging from the girls’ responses in the focus groups, there was an uneven spread of activities across families, with some girls listing many and others none at all. The cost and time involved in taking part in out of school sporting activities were described as posing significant barriers to participation. Children and parents were described as having limited time to take part in clubs beyond the school day and the girls were very aware of the costs of activities to their parents.

Not all activities were formally organised, a few of the younger girls described simply playing out with friends, but this did not seem to be a universal experience and was something which was not evident at all amongst the older girls. A significant number of girls described feeling 'at-risk' when out and about by themselves, which discouraged them from being more active (Gill 2007). Because of their own, or their parent's fears about safety, the girls were therefore additionally dependent on parents to fund and transport them to organised activities.

Geographically, school was felt by a number of girls to be the easiest place to do sport, with the additional benefit of having people around who they already knew. The issue of embarrassment and feeling self-conscious was also evident in the girls' descriptions of out of school activities. Although being active amongst friends was seen as fun, when children they did not know were around, there was a sense of unease about being teased or feeling foolish.

There was an age-related pattern, with the Year 7s generally seeming more inclined to join clubs or attend out of school sessions. Some mentioned that they had only just stopped going to clubs such as the Brownies or Guides. Some of the older girls were still seriously involved in sporting activities, playing for local teams, for example, but a larger number seemed to have stopped seeing sport as a hobby. This is a pattern found in other studies.

The girls spoke about their motivation for out of school sport as being fun, being energetic, spending time with friends, and trying new things. They also described their families as being keen for them to be more active. For some, this meant that their parents facilitated their participation in formal activities, while for others, their parents encouraged them just to get out and play with friends.

2.5 Gender

The lack of opportunities to take part in sport greatly influenced the girls' enthusiasm for physical activity. The Year 7 girls felt that at school, there were fewer and fewer occasions to participate in sports with the boys. Many of the choices of PE activities were aimed at boys such as rugby or football, which the Year 10 girls objected to

participating in. Furthermore, the girls were conscious of being labelled as unfeminine and 'boyish' if they were interested or keen on sport.

a) Fewer opportunities for girls?

The comments from the girls suggest that there were increasing restrictions on them. The girls across both schools in Year 7 noted that since their arrival at secondary school, they felt there were fewer and fewer opportunities to take part in sport. They commented that they seemed now to be too weak to participate in sports with the boys –

“Boys get to do all the fun stuff and we have to do all the boring ones ‘cause they all think girls are weak”
(School 2 Year 7 b24)

The girls commented that at primary school they would participate in sport together thus showing that the girls could keep up with the boys. The girls suggested that if the boys learnt to do the sports the girls did, this would show them that the girls were not as weak as they thought.

This was not however the opinion of everyone. Some girls wanted to prove that they could play 'masculine' sports with the boys while others did not and it was clear it was a matter of choice.

“..I love rugby and we were saying about..how we wanted like to do rugby, the girls included, and we like went round asking girls if they wanted to do it and they all said no because it was with boys and they was like didn't want to do it”
(School 1 Year 7a18)

As previous sections have highlighted, there are many issues at play such as a growing sense of self-image and fearing damaging their reputation in front of their peers that are factors brought to bear.

The girls at both schools were conscious of the gender restrictions placed upon them, which limited the choices of sports activities available. As noted above, the Year 7 girls wanted to play rugby, but this did not seem to be possible (School 1

Year 7 a 21). This links with a theme, mentioned earlier, that girls were seemingly weak and therefore unable to play such sports. They stated that –

“..it’s the PE teachers who do the rugby, but they said no we couldn’t because we would..have like the male teachers teaching us and they’d be teaching us like the boys..so that they didn’t have... like we’re a bit soft”
(School 1 Year 7a23)

The girls in School Two raised other issues concerning the gender biases in PE at their school. They commented that –

“Those of us who don’t do GCSE PE, we have to do football with the boys. Yeah, we have to do things that the boys wanna do” (School 2 Year 10 a3)

The girls stated that they were interested in doing activities such as trampolining, but doubted whether such facilities would be made available to them, because their PE teacher organised activities according to the boys’ preferences (School 2 Year 10 a24). They also commented that due to practical problems (that there were so few of them in the PE class) they had to participate in sports that the boys had chosen. They noted that the female PE teachers were confounded with what activities to organise for them.

“...our PE teacher, our other GCSE teacher, is a woman, like she gets like stuck with us in the week, she’s often sorry for us ‘cause she knows that we don’t have anything to do”
(School 2 Year 10 a29)

Thus, the predicament of the girls at School 2 was an issue that the female teachers were very conscious of. This female teacher realised that the choice of physical activities for the girls was often poor and they did not know how else to engage them in PE when the facilities were inadequate. Therefore the lack of opportunity in PE was more pronounced in School Two, which is of notable concern.

b) Gender and age

The older girls were conscious that by the time they had reached Year 10 (aged 14 and 15) they were afraid of taking part in sports which had a risk of being injured and hurt.

“Yeah because like there’s a girls football team, there’s a girls rugby team, so all the girls can do but it’s just like we’ve got the fear that we will hurt ourselves and all sort of stuff when we actually play it”

(School 2 Year 10 a25)

Some of the Year 10s associated football and rugby as sports that are played by boys. Their views show that by Year 10, some girls perceive certain sports as being played traditionally by ‘females’ or ‘males’, thus think about physical activity in terms of gender specific sports. Interestingly, the girls in Year 10 reported with a sense of loss that the gender distinction was less prevalent when they were at primary school

–

“No one minded in primary school, I didn’t mind it in primary school”

(School 2 Year 10 a25)

Comparing the views of the Year 7 and 10 girls, it is evident that the Year 7 girls felt the gender distinction more acutely at secondary school, which was based upon the belief that girls were physically weaker. They felt that such views were unfounded, drawing upon their experiences of primary school. The girls in Year 10 similarly disliked such gender stereotypes that women were weak, but were more cautious about wanting to participate in PE with the boys.

c) Doing ‘unfeminine’ sports activities

Some of the younger sporty girls in Year 7 commented that they wanted to play traditionally ‘male’ sports such as football or rugby, but feared being seen as unfeminine.

"Yeah, 'cause people didn't care what they said ... or some people might say 'oh yeah 'cause you're more like a tomboy instead' and boys wouldn't pass [to] you and everything and I sort of miss it"

(School 1 Year 7 a19)

Another girl stated that she wanted to play a 'male dominated' sport, but was afraid of being seen as unfeminine –

"I feel quite embarrassed to do football"

"Yeah because there's people who'll start saying I'm a bit of a boy"


(School 1 Year 7 a23)

The Year 7 girls' views show they have a growing concern about playing sports with the boys for fear of being seen as unfeminine. It is interesting to note here that the Year 7 girls (at ages 11 and 12) were still prepared to play sports with their male counterparts; perhaps the recent experiences of participating in such sports with boys at their former primary schools had not yet dampened their wishes to play sports with them. However, the quotation above demonstrates that their desire to continue playing rugby or football with them was being gradually eroded.

By Year 10, it seems that the girls have been conditioned to believe that rugby is a sport more suitable for boys, because of the contact nature of the sport. Perhaps the Year 10 girls are more susceptible to the idea of gender specific sports, because this has been reinforced to them throughout their PE experience whilst at secondary school. Also, the Year 10 girls are defining their own notions of femininity, thus perhaps rejecting participating in a sport that would in any way suggest that they are 'unfeminine'.

Commentary

Drawing from the comments of the girls from both age groups, it appears that there is a growing polarisation in attitudes towards physical activity from Years 7 and 10. On arrival to secondary school in Year 7, the difference in physical activity between girls and boys is less pronounced. However, by the time girls have reached their



teenage years, girls seem to be far less keen and interested in sport and PE (Pate et al 2002; Biddle et al 2004; Currie et al 2004).

In our study, the Year 10 girls' (aged 14 and 15) diminished enthusiasm and sense of embarrassment stood in stark contrast to the enthusiasm for PE vocalised by the Year 7 girls (aged 11 to 12). The findings from our project indicate some notable differences in attitudes towards PE between the two age groups – this theme is supported by data from previous studies. The recent Health Survey for England showed that only about half of 13 to 15 year old girls were participating in 60 minutes or more activity on all 7 days a week (Sproston & Primatesta 2003). It seems that by the time girls have progressed through their secondary schools, the enthusiasm for PE they once felt in Year 7 soon recedes. This suggests that there are some complex psychological, contextual and environmental factors which impact upon their lifestyle choices.

Stereotypes and perceptions relating to strict gender roles affected the girls' participation in physical activity in two ways. First, external factors such as the lack of appropriate available activities acted as a barrier to motivation. The SportScotland study (2006) found that, "girls often feel there is a lack of activities that they find interesting or that are targeted specifically for them" (SportsScotland 2006: 15). This view was also found in our study, that the girls were not interested in participating in the activities that was available at their school, because they perceived these as unsuitable or inappropriate for girls of their age.


A second barrier to motivation is that the girls had also internalised certain gender stereotypes about being unfeminine and boyish, therefore they did not want to take part in PE. The SportsScotland study (2006) noted that, "many girls...felt that certain sports would be inappropriate for girls. Sport, and in particular team games, was highlighted as a male-dominated field" (SportsScotland 2006: 11). This was also borne out in our findings that the girls felt that games such as rugby were unsuitable for them as they feared being hurt. The Scottish study found that some girls described 'sporty' girls as being, "practically like a boy" (SportScotland 2006: 11). Similarly, one girl in our study complained that because she played football, she was seen as unfeminine and boyish.

3.0 Conclusion

This study offers an insight into the key motivations and barriers that adolescent girls describe concerning sport and physical activity. Our focus has been to use the views and opinions of the girls themselves to explore why and how girls have lower rates of physical activity than boys. The findings from this study contribute to a growing body of literature highlighting the challenges in encouraging young girls to participate in physical activity. This research forms the bedrock of the study for developing measures and devising practical initiatives in the next phases of the project in order to introduce the girls at each of the two schools to new ideas and opportunities to engage in physical activity.

Our analysis correlates with the findings from previous work (Biddle et al 2003 & 2005; SportsScotland 2006) and builds upon such research in the light of new government initiatives to promote healthy eating and living in the “Five a Day” campaign, as well as local authority initiatives promoting ‘Healthy Schools’. Our research focuses on the Eastern and Coastal Kent area of Thanet. The relevance of the research in terms of its local focus is especially important, as we have been able to identify issues and suggest motivations that are in keeping within a specific social and situational context. This is discussed further below.

Overall, the girls held positive ideas about health and fitness. They associated sport and PE at school with having fun with friends, having a break from lessons, being healthy, controlling weight and improving their general sense of well-being. However, the practicalities and organisation required to undertake PE sometimes dampened their enthusiasm. What was apparent was that despite the differences in terms of changing and showering rooms at both schools, most of the girls still objected to taking a shower at school and disliked changing in front of others even in changing rooms that were new and more spacious. The perceived lack of interesting or suitable activities was also a de-motivating factor. Other negative influences were the fear of being embarrassed, making a fool of themselves, being exposed to ridicule and failing at tasks. The level of embarrassment articulated by the girls was especially evident in our study in comparison to previous research. We were conscious that any activities that could damage their reputation or cause embarrassment were features that were negatively associated with sport and PE.




The significance of embarrassment is a theme that arose concurrently throughout the findings and is a strong feature of our analysis. The psychological and behavioural issues underpinning this argument have been discussed above and constitute an area that would benefit from a further in-depth study.

The social setting at school impacted upon the girls' involvement in PE; having modern facilities and having a strong teacher-pupil relationship were both factors cited as having a positive influence on them. There were perceptions that PE unfairly favoured boys, but at the same time, there was ambivalence towards sport, with 'sporty' girls being regarded as unfeminine and 'boyish'. We found the views on gender differences between boys and girls especially acute in our research in contrast to previous studies (Biddle et al 2005; SportsScotland 2006). The school culture was especially important to the girls' experience of sport and PE. It seems that physical activity was perceived as a realm that was primarily a male domain and 'boys' were preoccupied with playing sport, where the presence of girls within these school spaces was certainly less evident. A longstanding and underlying theme is that girls perceive boys as having an aptitude for sport, whereas they would rather dissociate themselves from the 'sporty' label. Although some initiatives have been undertaken to challenge such gender roles, there is still much work to be carried out in order to confront such views.

Our research also found a stark contrast in attitudes between the girls from Year 7 and Year 10. The Year 7 girls felt enthusiastic and willing to participate in PE whereas some of the girls from Year 10 were less motivated and felt unenthusiastic about physical activity at school. It is, however, unclear why these changes in attitudes take place between the two age groups and warrants further research.

Outside of school, having fun and socialising were also associated with physical activities. Here, parents seemed to play a crucial role as facilitators enabling participation in sport. Access to facilities, money, time and transport were all described as impacting on participation. Some girls felt confident going 'out and about' in their local area but others had safety fears about being in public and anxieties about being teased by other children. This seemed to increase their dependence on parental time and money, as being active had to be done within formal organised activities.



Our study reveals that adolescent girls recognise the importance of physical activity and perceive it as fun and sociable. However, the findings also indicate some significant barriers and de-motivating factors that are worthy of consideration by professionals seeking to increase the participation of girls in sport. Our study has shown that a continued input is needed to change the attitudes and beliefs of young girls in order to facilitate much greater participation in physical activity.


Strengths, weaknesses and limitations

The findings indicate that considerable insights have been gained, capable of informing the subsequent phases of the project. There are, of course, areas and issues that were not fully explored in the study, in particular, time restrictions meant that school-based PE was more heavily discussed than out-of-school experiences. There was little time to explore in greater depth the more complex issues such as gender and wider school-pupil relationships. The dynamic of the focus groups also tended to gravitate towards a consensus on the 'centre ground', with those girls who were particularly keen on sport less likely to express the full extent of their enthusiasm and those who particularly struggled with PE unwilling to express the more personal reasons for their reluctance to participate. However, it is felt that this initial phase of the study has laid some solid ground for developing the interventions and activities proposed for Phases 2 and 3.

4.0 Recommendations

Clear indicators were revealed from the study findings in relation to key motivations and barriers –

- The fun and sociable aspect of physical activity should be emphasised and built upon as it is the most important motivator for girls of this age.
- Although the variety of views and preferences expressed suggest that it will be difficult to please all girls with regard to the timing, frequency and duration of PE lessons, there were some areas of agreement such as dislike of lessons first thing in the morning and a preference for lessons at the end of the day.
- Other practical barriers to be considered are privacy when changing, the option of private showering, and unpopular aspects of regulation kit.
- Because of the variations in levels of perceived competence, desire for competition and for physical exertion, the range of activities on offer should be as wide as possible.
- Embarrassment and failure was a strong de-motivational factor, heightened by mixed-gender activities. The project's female-only focus is therefore reinforced by the findings.
- Rewards for achievement need to be carefully considered as they are potential disincentives for those who perceive themselves as less competent.
- Resources spent on facilities seemed to influence levels of motivation, it is therefore recommended that the environment in which activities take place is given careful consideration.
- Motivations for out-of-school activities included having fun, socialising, trying new things and having the opportunity for physical play, but it should be recognised that teenage girls are heavily dependent on their parents/carers



to facilitate their involvement. Activities will have to compensate for inequalities in the distribution of money, time, transport and enthusiasm.

- Work needs to be done on girls' perceptions of sport, which can be contradictory. On the one hand girls want fairness of opportunity, but on the other are already influenced by gendered notions of appropriate behaviour.

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Appendices

Instrumentation appended:

1. Phase 1 Focus group schedule
2. Phase 1 information letter for focus group - girls
3. Phase 1 consent form - girls
4. Phase 1 consent form - parents

APPENDIX 1



PROJECT TITLE: 'AM I BOVVERED?'

PHASE ONE - Focus Group Schedule - Girls

AIM: To elicit attitudes and perceptions of the relationship between health and activity.

Ground rules

1. Attitudes

- a. What do you think of sport?
 - o Taking part
 - o Sport in school
 - o Watching
- b. What do you think of exercise and getting fit?
- c. What is P.E. like in your school?
- d. What do people your age like about doing it?
- e. What do people your age not like about it?

[PowerPoint images of girls doing wide variety of activities as a back-drop]

[Perhaps get them to come up with words to describe sports, exercise, physical activity e.g. sweaty, fun, sociable, hard, embarrassing etc]

2. Motivation

- a. Why do you think people your age take part in sport or exercise?
- b. What puts people your age off?

3. Body Image

[this may come out of motivation – e.g. losing weight motivation]

- a. Do you think people's size and shape is important? How does this relate to sport and exercise?
- b. Are there any sports or physical activities that girls would like to do but feel they can't?

4. Support

- a. What makes it difficult for people your age to take part in sport and physical activity?
 - o Is there enough time give to it at school?
 - o Do you enjoy P.E.?
 - o What do you think of the facilities?
 - o Is there a range of activities to cater for different interests?
 - o What about changing rooms, showers etc?
 - o Does your school take part in inter-school matches and fixtures?
 - o Are there sports competitions/matches within your school?
- b. What would help people get involved in sport and exercise?
 - (i) In school
 - (ii) Outside school
 - o Cost?
 - o Transport?
 - o Parents?
 - o Time?
 - o What is available locally?
 - o Personal safety/freedom (e.g. going out running, out on bikes)
 - o Choice

Your ideas on physical activity, health and fitness in Kent

Our names are Ferhana Hashem and Jan Macvarish and as part of a team at the University of Kent, we have been asked to carry out a project by the Big Lottery Fund on physical activity, health and fitness in Kent.

We would like to invite you to take part in the project.

Before you decide if you want to take part or not, it is important that you understand what the project is about.

What is the project about?

This project will find out what girls think about being active and getting fit. It is also interested in the kind of exercise girls would like to see in Thanet. Your answers will be used to provide better opportunities in the future, to meet the needs of girls. Your views and experiences are therefore very important.



What do I have to do?

We would like you to take part in a group discussion with other girls.

We will be talking about things such as, what you think about exercise and being active and what you would like to do to get fitter and healthier. We will also discuss body image and the support available for girls who want to exercise and get fit.

The discussion will last between 40 and 60 minutes and, with your permission, it will be recorded. With your permission, we will also ask your parents whether they are happy for you to take part in the study.

University of
Kent

What happens to the information?

We would like you to know that anything you tell us will stay with us, and your information will be completely confidential.

The recording of the session will not include names, so any comments you make cannot be traced back to you.

Any information that has been recorded in the project, such as sound recordings or documents, will be destroyed when the project is finished.

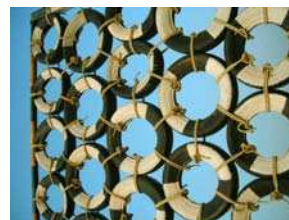


Do I have to take part?

It is up to you if you take part. If you don't want to take part, this is completely fine in any way. If you do decide to take part you can also change your mind at any time during the group.

How can I find out more?

If you would like to know more about the project or if there is anything that is not clear, you can contact us (Ferhana Hashem or Jan Macvarish) on 01227 824887 / 823666 during office hours, or leave a message and we will call you back.



You can also contact us via email on F.Hashem@kent.ac.uk or J.Macvarish@kent.ac.uk or by writing to the following address:

Centre for Health Services Studies
University of Kent
George Allen Wing
Canterbury
Kent CT2 7NF



APPENDIX 3

The Big Lottery Project
'Am I Bovered?'

Jenny Billings
Senior Research Fellow
Ferhana Hashem & Jan Macvarish
Research Fellow & Research Associate
Tel: 01227 824887 / 823666

Centre for Health Services Studies
George Allen Wing
University of Kent
Canterbury CT2 7NF

The Big Lottery Fund Project: 'Am I Bovered?' – Consent Form

Please read through the questions and tick the boxes if you consent.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the 'Am I Bovered?' study and have had the chance to ask questions.

2. I understand that taking part in the project is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I agree to the discussion being recorded.

4. I agree to take part in the 'Am I Bovered?' project.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of Person Taking Consent: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

University of
Kent





**Centre for Health Services Studies
George Allen Wing
University of Kent
Canterbury CT2 7NF
Email: F.Hashem@kent.ac.uk
J.Macvarish@kent.ac.uk
Tel: 01227 824887 / 823666**

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

Your daughter is being invited to take part in a research study about physical activity, health and fitness at her school. The school is fully supportive of and committed to this project. The title of this research is:

The Big Lottery Fund Project: ‘Am I Bovered?’

Before you decide whether you want your daughter to take part, it is important that you understand what the research will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.


What is the research study about?

Physical activity, health and fitness are important for all young people, but particularly for girls, who in general are less active than boys. Our project aims to raise awareness about well-being and promote physical activity in girls from Years 7 to 10. We are particularly interested in finding out what girls of this age-group think about exercise and being active and what they would like to do to get fitter and healthier. The views of the girls are important to us and we want to find out a bit more about the ways in which we can get them more interested in regular physical activity.

A number of focus group meetings will be organised to take place at your daughter’s school, during school-time, from the beginning of the summer term 2008. We will be working with the school teachers and school sports co-ordinator to conduct the study.

If I want my daughter to take part, what does she have to do?

We will be asking your daughter to join a group of no more than 15 other girls her age to talk about what they think of health, fitness and well-being. We want to find out what they think about physical activity and exercise. We are also interested in things that they feel encourage them to participate in exercise, such as the activities on offer, the surroundings and the overall benefits of the activity. We also want to know what they think could be done to improve things.



If you agree, your daughter will be asked to take part in one focus group meeting which will last between 40 to 60 minutes and will be tape recorded, with the girls' permission, so that we can make sure we have captured all the information.

We would like to reassure you that any information collected during the focus groups will be strictly confidential. Once the study has finished, we will destroy any data collected and your daughter will not be identifiable in any written report.

If you are happy for her to take part, please complete the form attached and return it in the envelope to Mrs Wendy Davey, School Sports Co-ordinator, Ursuline College/Hartsdown School.

Does my daughter have to take part?

It is entirely up to you and your daughter whether or not she takes part. If you do not want her to take part, this will not affect her in any way. If your daughter decides to take part but later changes her mind, she is free to withdraw from the research. We have included an information sheet to give you a better idea of what the research is about.

If you would like some more information about the study or there is anything that is not clear, please do not hesitate to contact us on 01227 824887 / 823666.

Yours sincerely,

**Ferhana Hashem
Research Fellow**

and

**Jan Macvarish
Research Associate**



I would like my child (please **print** name of young person)

.....

to participate in The Big Lottery Project ‘Am I Bovered?’

Signed:.....
(parent/guardian)

Please return this letter in the envelope provided to Mrs Wendy Davey (School Sports Co-ordinator)

